CHAPTER

12 Writing a Film Essay: Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis

As a critic, I thought of myself as a film-maker. Today I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them. Were the cinema to disappear, I would simply accept the inevitable and turn to television; were television to disappear, I would revert to pencil and paper. For there is a clear continuity between all forms of expression. It's all one. The important thing is to approach it from the side which suits you best. . . .

—Jean-Luc Godard, writer and critic for *Cahiers du cinéma* and director of *Breathless* (1959), *Contempt* (1963), and *New Wave* (1990)

KEY OBJECTIVES

How do you write a paper about a movie? How do you conduct and then use research on a film? For students especially, writing about films is another important experience in their relationship with them. Writing extends the complex relationship we each have with films by challenging us to articulate our feelings and ideas and to communicate convincingly the validity of our response. This chapter will explain

- how to distinguish between reviews and critical essays
- how to take notes on films
- how to organize those notes
- how to choose a topic and develop it into a thesis and argument for a paper
- how to conduct and integrate research sources
- how to turn your work into a polished essay

Writers can be found everywhere in films and film history. In modern movies alone, famous and not-so-famous writers populate and drive many kinds of stories about many kinds of experience. *Mishima* (1985) describes the intense blend of radically conservative politics and restless creativity in the life of Japanese author Yukio Mishima. In Cameron Crowe's semi-autobiographical *Almost Famous* (2000), a young music reviewer, William Miller, encounters rock journalist Lester Bangs [Figure 12.1] from whom he receives the advice that motivates his life—to always "write honestly and mercilessly." In *Central Station* (1998), a middle-aged woman, Dora,

sets up a stand in the middle of a crowded railroad station where illiterate people come to have her write letters to their friends and loved ones. Why have writers such as these been such regular and important subjects in movies? The answer is that writing is one of the most fundamental, incisive, and discriminating ways of making sense of the world and our many experiences of it.



Figure 12.1 *Almost Famous* (2000). "To write honestly and mercilessly."

Writing about films is, in turn, one of the most incisive and discriminating ways to respond to this cultural and personal experience that many of us consider central to our lives. After being entertained or annoyed or moved by a movie, most people do not naturally respond by putting their thoughts down on paper. Professional film critics might write regular columns about why particular movies succeed or fail, but most viewers are satisfied with sharing a few casual remarks about a movie with other viewers and a quick evaluation about whether they enjoyed it or not. Few experiences, however, trigger the energies and interests that promote good writing more than going to the movies does. Even a casual experience at the movies usually leads to discussion and sometimes argument, not only about whether a movie is good or bad but about what happened in the film and why. After seeing David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) **[Figure 12.2]**—about a disaffected young man, his strange bond with an odd new friend, and their creation of male "fight clubs" in the United States—two viewers might disagree vehemently about it. One might see it as an incoherent and self-indulgent celebration of macho culture, whereas the other might see a biting satire on consumerism and male identity. As they refine, develop, and muster details to support their positions, each begins to shape an argument. This same process, moving from an opinion or interpretation to a refined argument, is behind most strong essays on films.

Writing about film has been a significant part of film culture since the beginnings of movies. Almost simultaneously with the arrival of the cinema, writers debated the function and value of this new art. Film critics such as Vachel Lindsay (in his 1915 book *The Art of the Moving Picture*) and Dorothy Richardson (in the 1920s art magazine *CloseUp*) wrote passionately about movies in the first few decades of film history. Since then movie reviews, scholarly essays, and philosophical books—by writers James Agee, Pauline Kael, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Umberto Eco, for example—have debated the achievements of individual films and the cultural importance of movies in general. As with other arts and cultural activities, movies inspire a common

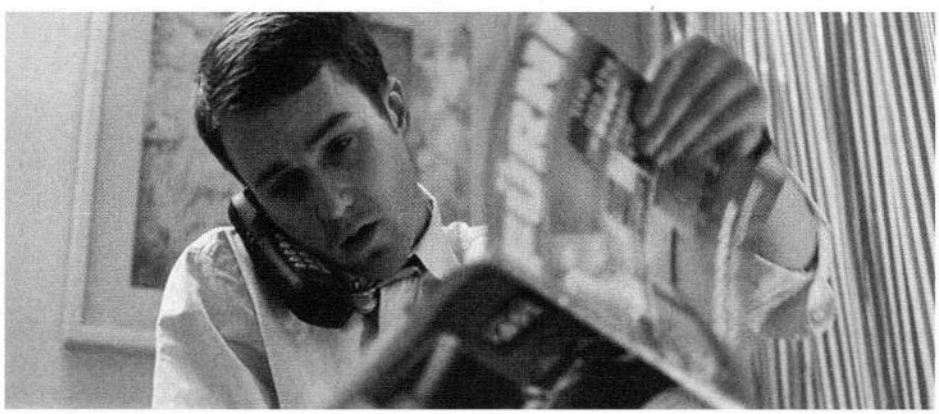


Figure 12.2 *Fight Club* (1999). Provoking critical debate.

and fundamental human need to explain one's feelings about and responses to a significant encounter, to shape, clarify, and order those reactions as an understanding. In this chapter, we will see how writing about film develops from these needs and inspirations and show how it can become a rich extension of our fundamental film experiences.

Writing an Analytical Film Essay

Ways to write about film are as diverse as the individuals doing the writing. In 1915, early reviewers and critics often focused their responses to films on the dangerous or uplifting effects that movies might have on women or children. In the 1960s, film was frequently discussed in terms of its political impact or social meaning. Today's writers focus on a range of topics—from characters, stars, and stories to new film technologies or historical questions, such as how censorship influences film content.

Personal Opinion and Objectivity

The process of writing about a film usually involves a play between subject matter and meaning. The **subject matter** of a film is the material that directly or indirectly comprises the film, whereas the **meaning** is the interpretation a writer discovers within that material. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), for instance, the subject matter includes the five main characters and their adventures in feudal China. The warrior Li Mu Bai returns to a town where he encounters his soul mate, Yu Shu Lien, the vengeful Jade Fox and her ferocious but naive companion Jen Yu, and Jen Yu's lover, the desert fighter Lo. The interaction of these characters describes a journey through China that ends in love and death. The subject matter's meaning, however, is more complicated than any simple description; the meaning will depend on the film's style and organization, the values and traditions informing it, as well as the experience and thinking of the viewer responding to it. Other films certainly use the subject matter of martial arts combat or the trials of love and honor in ancient China, but *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* creates and elicits more specific meanings for those who have seen it. For some writers, this martial arts tale of love and honor weaves subtle and often complex points about women and their desires and about the importance of love over mastery **[Figure 12.3]**. For other writers, the film transforms its Asian subject matter into a Western take on self-knowledge and sacrifice.

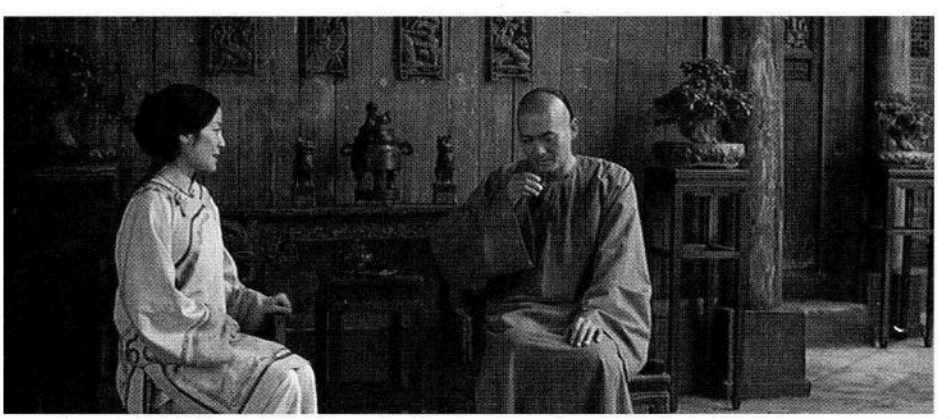


Figure 12.3 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Discovering the meaning behind the subject matter.



Figure 12.4 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). A matter of opinion: suicide or liberation?

The meanings a writer finds in a film are not simply personal and arbitrary. No film can mean whatever one chooses to make it mean, and useful and insightful writing always balances opinion and critical objectivity. **Opinion** or **subjectivity** indicates personal responses and evaluations. **Critical objectivity,** however, refers to a more detached response, one that offers judgments that others would or could agree with but that bases those conclusions on facts and evidence. Good writing about film is a balance of both: your personal views and opinions are where insights and evaluations usually begin, but for your essay to make sense to others, you must convince your readers that your insights have a larger, more objective truth.

An essay that hides behind personal opinion—constantly inserting "I feel" or "In my opinion"—will seem too personal to have any value for others. Writing about *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,* a writer may attempt to hide behind a lack of certainty about the meaning: "In my opinion, Jen's final leap off the mountain side is very ambiguous. I think her decision was probably a suicide, but it seemed to me to be a strangely beautiful act" **[Figure 12.4]**. Conversely, writing that relies only on flat, descriptive statements fails to interest readers in its argument and often misses the subtleties of a film: "Jen's leap off the mountain is a suicide. It is a liberating flight into mist." Balancing opinion and critical objectivity, as in the following passage, results in writing that engages and convinces your reader that your insights could be useful revelations for most viewers of the film:

> The conclusion of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is both shocking and uplifting, a combination that disturbs and confuses me, as it probably does for most viewers. This confusion about Jen's motives is, however, part of the strange and mysterious beauty of the film because it asks us to recognize a central theme: the possibility that love and passion can transcend any physical limitations when we have faith in that love.

Identifying Your Readers

Knowing or anticipating your readers is central to writing about film and indeed to all writing, often guiding a writer in balancing opinion and objectivity. If we think of writing about film as an extension of those conversations or arguments we may have with friends about a film, we realize that the terms and tone of our personal discussions change with different people.

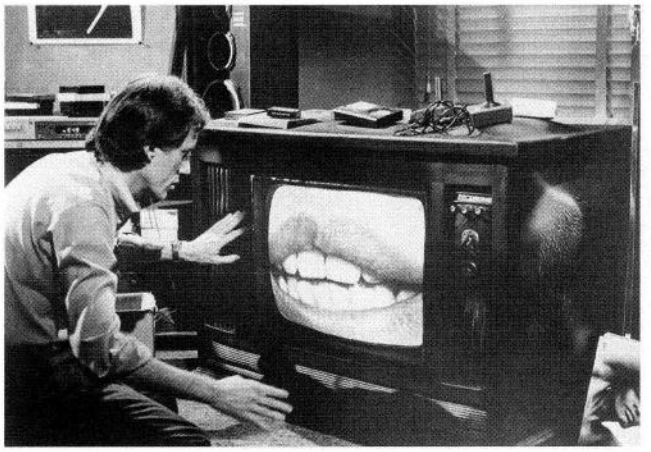


Figure 12.5 *Videodrome* (1983). The finer points of science fiction.

A conversation between two knowledgeable fans of science fiction films would likely presume that they have both seen many of the same films and know a great deal about special effects technologies; the discussion might thus get quickly to the finer points about what makes *Videodrome* (1983) and its tale of mind control through television successful—or not—within this genre [Figure 12.5]. In talking about Ken Loach's *Raining Stones* (1993) with an American film buff, a British viewer might have to provide some political and social background—about Manchester, England, where the film is set, about the government of then–Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, or about the particular cultural complications of the protagonist being a Catholic in this British industrial town. Possessing an awareness of your readers is like knowing the person you are talking with: it helps determine the amount of basic information you need to provide, the level of complexity of the discussion, and the kind of language you should use.

The following four questions are useful guidelines in gearing your essay to certain readers:

- How familiar are your readers with the specific film being discussed?
- What is your readers' level of interest in the film?
- What do your readers know about the film's historical and cultural contexts?
- How familiar are your readers with the terminology of film criticism or theory?

For most critical essays, anticipating your readers' knowledge of the film means assuming they have seen the film at least once and, consequently, do not require an extensive plot summary. In these cases, their interest in the film generally means they are not primarily concerned with whether a movie is good or bad or with other general observations. Rather, they want to be enlightened about a specific dimension of the film (such as the opening shot) or about a complicated or puzzling issue in the film (why the races of different characters in the 1987 *Lethal Weapon*, for instance, are important to understanding the action of the film). A good writer works to convince readers that their interests can be deepened and enriched by following the interests of the writer. Knowledge of historical and critical contexts refers to how much your readers may know or need to know about the place and time of the film's appearance. If the film was made in the United States in the 1920s, would information about that period help your readers better understand the film? Finally, determining your reader's familiarity with the terminology of film criticism and theory means choosing language that can efficiently and clearly communicate your argument. Can you assume that a term like *continuity editing* will be easily understood or will you need to define it? In making these decisions about language, keep in mind that overly simplistic language and jargon can equally undermine your analysis.

In most college and university film courses, you will have in mind an audience that is not only your professor but also your classroom peers: intelligent individuals who have seen the film, who share information and knowledge about film criticism, but who are not necessarily experts (to whom

you could tell little). This means you can concentrate on a particular theme or sequence that may have been overlooked by an intelligent viewer. It also means your writing style and choice of words should be more rigorous and academic than the typical movie review.

Elements of the Analytical Film Essay

Two common forms of film writing are film reviews and analytical essays. Aimed at a general audience who has not seen the film, a **film review** tends to be a short essay that describes the plot of a movie, provides useful background information (about the actors and the director, for example), and pronounces a clear evaluation of the film to guide its readers. In contrast, the **analytical essay,** distinguished by its intended audience and the level of its critical language, is the most common kind of writing done by film students and scholars. It typically focuses on a particular feature or theme of a film, provides an interpretation of that material, and then gives a careful analysis to prove or demonstrate that interpretation. Unlike the writer of a movie review for a magazine, the writer of an analytical essay presumes that readers know the film and do not require an extensive plot summary or background information. Although a clear and engaging style is the goal of any kind of writing about film, the writer of an analytical essay often chooses words and terms that can effectively communicate complex ideas and uses the language of intelligent readers of film criticism.

Consider this passage from a hypothetical essay about *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2001) [Figure 12.6], written for a college film course. Whereas a newspaper review might summarize the plot, offer some background information, and employ more casual language, note how this analytical essay concentrates on a specific and subtle argument:

> Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2001) is much more than a musical comedy loosely structured around *The Odyssey*. Woven through the distinctive soundtrack, the plot set in Depression-era America, and the comic exaggerations of its characters, the film is a sharp ideological critique of race and class in modern America. Regularly mistaken to be African Americans, the three escaped convicts, Everett, Pete, and Delmar, learn quickly that their lower-class white status binds them most importantly to the fate



Figure 12.6 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2001). The focus for a precise analysis.

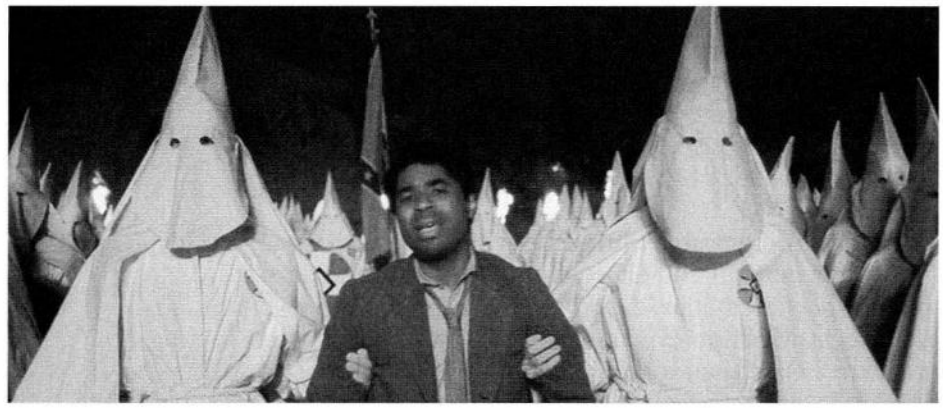


Figure 12.7 ***O Brother, Where Art Thou?*** (2001). Race, class, and the meaning of the movie.

> of the black men and women they encounter, and from this predicament the film explores the economic and political power structures that then and now make poverty color blind. Two sequences in particular dramatize this less noticed but more provocative dimension of the film: the arrival of the prisoners at a church to see a movie (a direct reference to Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels*, in which the Coens found the title for their movie) and the Ku Klux Klan rally where the fugitives rescue their black comrade Tommy.

Here, the essay's focus is relatively refined and sophisticated, assuming its readers have seen and know the film and concentrating not on general information, but on a specific thesis about race and class [Figure 12.7]. Along with its choice of a polemical thesis (an analysis directed at two particular sequences that may not have been carefully considered by many viewers), this critical essay employs terms (such as "ideological critique") suited to academic writing.



VIEWING CUES: Writing an Analytical Film Essay

- Examine a short critical essay about a film you have seen in class. What subjective versus objective claims does the author make about the film? How does the writer argue in support of his or her opinions in order to justify their validity for readers?
- Prepare to write an analytical essay about a film you have seen in class. First, consider your readers. What defines them? What are their interests? What do they need or want to know about the film?
- What is objectively true in your argument? What might be considered opinion? Write a passage arguing for the validity of your opinion while also eliciting your readers' interest.
- Examine the language of your essay (or another analytical essay). Which words and phrases best identify your intended audience? The level of your analysis? Where could your language be improved or clarified?

IN FOCUS

Analyzing *Citizen Kane* (1941)

For more than sixty years, viewers have responded to Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* with a seemingly endless variety of opinions. Some find it fascinating; others feel it is boring or confusing. The character of Susan Alexander fascinates some viewers; the final sequence in which the camera surveys a large room full of Kane's many acquisitions intrigues others. Any of these opinions about or reactions to *Citizen Kane* could be developed into an interesting and provocative essay about the film, but only if those ideas can be substantiated or proven useful, true, and important—only if, that is, they can be shown to have objective accuracy.

One such viewer decides to write a review of *Citizen Kane* for his college newspaper in anticipation of the film's upcoming appearance at the college art house. Despite the celebrity of the film, the writer presumes that many of his potential readers have not yet seen it and need both information and balanced opinions. He proceeds with a clear sense of what his readers already know, don't know, and need to know about the film:

> *Citizen Kane* is one those movies that everyone talks about but few have ever seen. When it first appeared in 1941, the film was surrounded by enormous hype about the debut of the "boy genius" Orson Welles and his ballyhooed transition from the New York stage to the Hollywood screen. Before the film even appeared, rumors also connected *Citizen Kane* to the life of William Randolph Hearst, the U.S. newspaper mogul, and this too made the movie something of a fascinating scandal. In the six decades since its release, *Citizen Kane* has appeared at the top of almost every list of the "greatest movies ever made" and appears in practically every film course in the world.
>
> Be prepared for a bit of a disappointment. The story is simple enough: played wonderfully by Welles himself, Charles Foster Kane grows, with the help of a windfall fortune, from a boy torn from his childhood home in Colorado into a lonely man obsessed with power and possessions. For me, the story is melodramatic and overblown, and Kane never becomes a very likeable character. What redeems *Citizen Kane,* however, is the construction of the story: different parts of Kane's story are told through the eyes of his friends and acquaintances, and these shifting perspectives create a kind of visual puzzle that the movie never really solves, enlivening an otherwise dull tale.

This black-and-white film is a continuous series of stunning (and famous) shots, such as the opening sequence of dark shots that takes viewers past a "No Trespassing" sign to Kane's deathbed. In our age of computer technologies and new-wave television commercials, these images will probably seem less surprising and innovative than they did when the movie first appeared. Yet *Citizen Kane* remains a film to see—if only to judge for yourself whether it is among the "greatest movies ever made."

The same writer later chooses to write the following critical essay about *Citizen Kane* for a film history course. In this case, his readers are his professor and the other students in the class, readers who are familiar with the film and have even read other material about *Citizen Kane.*

Of the many critical essays on *Citizen Kane,* three different perspectives on its meaning dominate the analytical writing about the film: analyses that focus on the mythic character of Kane, discussions of the kaleidoscopic narrative structure that shapes the story, and detailed interpretations of the stylistic compositions (such as the use of deep-focus and dramatic editing techniques). Using the first two types of analysis as a background, I will examine a single, early scene in *Citizen Kane* to demonstrate the legendary visual power of the film. In this scene, *Citizen Kane* crystallizes a family drama of loss and division inseparable from a life lived in dense and complex spaces and perceived from many points of view.

In this tale of Charles Foster Kane's rise to a position as one of the richest and most powerful men in America, the episode in question sets the stage for the entire film. It succinctly describes the sudden wealth of Kane's mother, an unexpected windfall from a deed to a gold mine (mistakenly presumed useless), and her subsequent arrangement to send Charles to be educated on the East Coast. The film's setting is the rustic family cabin in Colorado, with glimpses of the snowy yard outside where the child, Charlie Kane, plays.

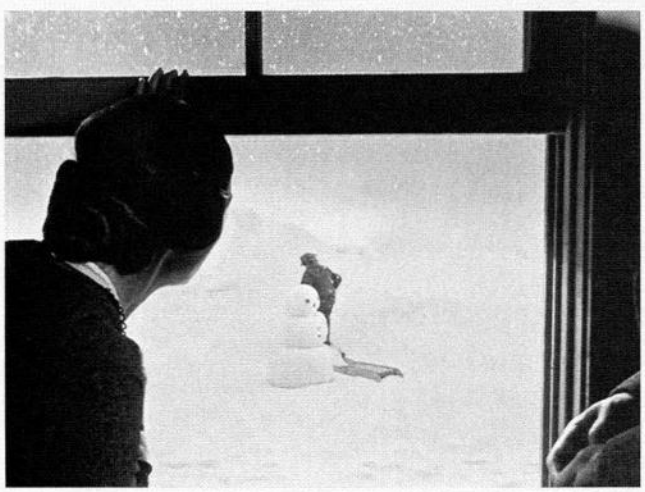


Figure 12.8 *Citizen Kane* (1941). Analytical detail.

In this scene, one shot begins by showing Charles making snowballs in the field, then moves back to show his mother in the foreground watching from inside and, through an open window, the boy building a snowman in the background **[Figure 12.8]**. Here the window frame within the film frame calls attention to how a point of view controls perspective in certain ways, specifically the point of view on the child Kane.

As the shot pulls back further, the frame then expands to include the central conversation about the boy and the money, while the original subject of the shot, Charlie, now becomes a much smaller, background figure in the action and the frame.

The shot pulls back even further, following the mother's movement away from the window, and the frame creates visible tensions and conflicts among the individuals. The stern face and upper body of the mother, Mrs. Kane, dominates the center of the image, flanked by the banker Thatcher, while Charlie's father drifts along the edges of the frame, complaining, "You seem to forget I'm the boy's father." Moments later, Thatcher and Mrs. Kane sit at a table in the foreground of the image and prepare to sign papers authorizing the child's departure, while the father protests in vain in the middle ground and Charlie remains barely visible in the far background playing outside in the snow [Figure 3.30]. The rectangular shape of the frame crowds these characters within a tight visual space, even including the ceiling on the top of the frame as a way of further drawing in the space. Positioned between the adult individuals but in the far background is the diminutive shape of Charlie, the subject of their quarreling and plans to remove him from the home. Visually it is fairly clear how power and control are being distributed through this frame: the mother and Thatcher visually overwhelm the father, and the tiny figure of Charles is the impotent object of exchange.

In *Citizen Kane*, Charles Foster Kane grows up to become obsessed with the power of images—paintings, newspaper pictures, images of himself [Figure 12.9]. This obsession perhaps acts out his semi-conscious struggle to replace the image of his lost childhood and family torn apart in this early scene in the film. Throughout the remainder of his life, Kane struggles to create, own, and control the people and things around him by imposing his perspective on them—the way the perspective of others controlled him early in his life. The film is also a narrative constructed around the multiple points of view of Kane's friends, wife, and associates, all of whom dramatize how points of view can attempt to frame a man's life as a way of understanding or interpreting that life. The irony and tragedy of Charlie Kane's life is that no one, not even Kane himself, is able to reconstruct the complete picture and harmony that were lost in that early childhood scene.



Figure 12.9 *Citizen Kane* (1941). Describing and interpreting.

Preparing to Write about a Film

Despite some common ground, an effective film essay does differ from a casual conversation or debate about a movie. Few writers can dash off a perceptive commentary on a film with little preparation or revision. Most writers gain considerably from anticipating what they will write about and later reviewing carefully what they have written. Few of us casually watch *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), a powerful documentary about fascism in France during World War II, and then immediately type a brilliant paper on Marcel Ophuls's use of documentary strategies to expose certain myths about French history or the French Resistance. Like all good writers, you must follow certain steps in preparing to write an essay.

Asking Questions

One of the most fundamental and useful first steps is to try to identify your own interests *before* you view the film. Ask yourself how you think the film might relate to your own background and experiences or what you have heard about the film. Are you drawn to technology or to questions about gender? To a particular filmmaker or period in movie history? To a certain national cinema? What direction of inquiry does your interest point toward? In Howard Hawks's 1938 *Bringing Up Baby,* Katharine Hepburn plays an audacious heiress, Susan, whose pet leopard Baby becomes the foil in her zany relationship with a bumbling paleontologist, David, played by Cary Grant **[Figure 12.10]**. If you are about to see this film, perhaps you've seen other films by Hawks, like *His Girl Friday* (1941), or other films with Hepburn, like *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Might you consider comparing the two Hawks films or Hepburn's two different roles?



Figure 12.10 *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). What to write about?

This sort of preparation is not meant to preclude your being drawn to new ideas and in unexpected directions when you view the film. Surprising discoveries are certainly one of the great values in approaching films with an open mind. While watching *In the Bedroom* (2001), one viewer might become puzzled by how the film seems suddenly to change directions: after depicting the excruciating pain of two parents who have lost a son, the last part of the movie becomes a revenge tale in which the father seeks out and murders his son's killer. For this viewer, what seems at first a slow meditation on inexpressible grief becomes a tense thriller. How do the two parts work together? Does loss always require retribution? Does violence always beget violence? By asking these kinds of questions, you can intellectually interact with a film, sharpening your responses and shaping the direction of your essay.

Taking Notes

Note taking, an essential part of writing about film, stimulates critical thinking and generates precise and productive observations about a film. Whereas most students find it natural to take notes on a biology experiment or on their reading of a Shakespeare play, annotating a film is both awkward and unnatural: it is difficult to write while watching a movie in a darkened room, and most films ask that we constantly attend to them so as not to miss information that passes quickly. Note taking is, however,

absolutely necessary to writing about film because a good analytical essay must produce concrete evidence for the argument—and precise notes provide that support.

The three general rules for annotating a film are as follows:

1. Take notes on the unusual—events or formal maneuvers that stand out in the film.
2. Take notes on events or techniques that recur with regularity.
3. Take notes on oppositions that appear in the film.

For instance, most viewers of *Bringing Up Baby* would note that the sequence involving David and Susan at the local jail stands out as one of the funniest and most unusual moments in the film, with Hepburn pretending to be a hardened gangster's moll. Equally important, however, are those actions or images whose repetitions suggest a recurring theme or pattern, such as David's repeatedly losing his clothes or glasses. Oppositions can be equally illuminating, such as the contrast among the rival women: the goofy Susan, and David's staid fiancée, his scientific assistant.

Each writer develops his or her own shorthand for taking notes on films. The trick is to jot down information about the story or characters that seems significant while also recording visual, audial, or other formal details. Some common abbreviations for visual compositions include the following:

es: establishing shot	**ha:** high angle	**ct:** cut
cu: close-up	**la:** low angle	**trs:** tracking shot
ls: long shot	**ds:** diegetic sound	**ps:** pan shot
mls: medium long shot	**nds:** nondiegetic sound	**vo:** voiceover

More specific camera movements and directions can often be re-created with arrows and lines that graph the actions or directions. The following drawings suggest the movements of the camera:

↗ low camera angle ↘ high camera angle ∿ tracking shot

For example, part of the jailhouse sequence in *Bringing Up Baby* **[Figures 12.11 and 12.12]** might be annotated as follows to indicate cuts, camera movements, or angles.

— mcu of constable and Susan through bars

— ct mcu David



Figure 12.11 *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). "Swinging Door Susie."



Figure 12.12 *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). An object of analysis.

Later, these notes would be filled in, perhaps by again reviewing the sequence for more details—such as pieces of the hilarious monologue of "Swinging Door Susie." Drawings of shots can supplement such details. Critical comments or observations might also be added—about, for instance, how the organization of the shot composition and editing provides the contrast between the officious and tongue-tied authority figure of the sheriff and the zany and loquacious Susan.

Selecting a Topic

After taking and reviewing your notes on the film, you need to choose the topic for the paper. Because a film offers so many dimensions to write about—characters, story, music, editing—selecting a manageable topic for an essay can prove daunting. Even a lengthy essay will suffer if it attempts to accomplish too much and address too many issues in a limited amount of space. Narrowing your topic in order to allow your argument to investigate the issues fully and carefully always produces better writing. In a five- or six-page essay, a topic such as "fast-talking comedy in *Bringing Up Baby*" would most likely need to rely on generalities and large claims, whereas "gender, order, and disorder in the jailhouse" is a more focused and manageable topic for a short essay.

Although good critical analysis tends to move among different features of a film, we can distinguish two sets of topics for writing about film—formal and contextual topics. **Formal topics,** which concentrate on forms and ideas within a film, include character analysis, narrative analysis, and stylistic analysis. **Contextual topics,** which relate the film to other films or to surrounding issues, include comparative analysis and historical or cultural analysis. As a formal topic, **character analysis** concentrates its argument on a single character or on the interactions between more than one character, while **narrative analysis** chooses a topic that relates to the story and its construction. **Stylistic analysis** offers a wide variety of topics that engage the formal arrangements of image and sound, such as shot composition, editing, and the use of sound.

Although character analysis appears more available and perhaps easier than other kinds of analyses, a good essay about a character requires subtlety and eloquence. Rather than write about a central character, like Susan in *Bringing Up Baby* or the schizophrenic genius John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), a less predictable topic might concentrate on a minor character, such as Susan's aristocratic aunt or Nash's wife Alicia, respectively. Similarly, a topic that involves narrative should usually be refined so that the paper addresses, for instance, the relation of the beginning and end of the film or the way a voiceover comments on and directs the story. A paper that deals with a stylistic topic will be more controllable and incisive if, for instance, it isolates a particular group of shots or identifies a single sound motif that recurs in the film. Therefore, one student may find a topic for a paper by examining the role of the various narrators of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Another student may choose to look more carefully at repeated editing patterns in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or at the use of framing in Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953). Any one of these topics will grow more interesting and insightful if you continue to ask questions during the entire writing process: How is the character David in *Bringing Up Baby* a product of costuming or shot composition? How do the various narrators in *The Thin Red Line* reflect different attitudes about war?

A **comparative analysis** develops a contextual topic by evaluating features or elements of two or more different films or perhaps a film and its literary source. A comparative analysis might thus contrast Susan in *Bringing Up Baby* with one or more heroines in more recent films, such as Julia Roberts's character Vivian in *Pretty Woman* (1990) [Figure 12.13]. A comparative analysis always allows for some common ground in order to link what you are comparing and contrasting (in the above example, heroines). Conversely, **historical or cultural analysis** investigates topics that relate a film to its place in history, society, or culture. Such a topic might examine historical contexts or debates that surround the film and help explain it—for example, the social status of women or the importance of class in 1938 America. With historical or cultural analysis, the pertinence of the topic to understanding the film is crucial (in our example, the role of women is obviously important; the historical status of leopards probably is not).



Figure 12.13 *Pretty Woman* (1990). Vivian or Susan: comparing images of cinematic women.

Once a topic has been selected (the more specific, the better), the writer should view the film again. This second viewing allows the writer to refine and build on those initial notes, precisely in terms of the topic he or she now has in mind. The writer who comes to *Bringing Up Baby* with a vague interest in how this film portrays the battle of the sexes might, after seeing the film again, find that she wishes to refocus her topic on how the leopard becomes a metaphor for that battle.



VIEWING CUES: Preparing to Write about a Film

- In preparation for the film you will view next in class, jot down three or four specific questions you want to direct at the film. While viewing the film, ask three or four additional questions about specific shots or scenes. Then, later on, attempt to answer all of your questions as precisely as possible.
- Which events, sounds, or shots in the film stand out as unusual? As most important? As examples of a pattern of repetition? Describe clearly and concretely one or two events, sounds, or shots from the film.
- Select one key scene or sequence to annotate as precisely as possible. Where are the characters positioned? How are the camera and frame positioned? If the frame moves or cuts occur, describe that movement or the exact location of the cuts. How would you describe the sound, including the dialogue? Support your description with a rough sketch, if applicable.
- Review your notes for possible topics to write about. Look for different categories of topics: character analysis, narrative, stylistics, and historical or comparative issues, for example. Do your notes point you in one of these directions? Make a list of possible topics.

IN FOCUS

Analyzing Character and Style in Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993)

Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993) surprises many first-time viewers. Perhaps most unsettling, the film follows the character Orlando time-traveling through numerous periods of British history. From court life in 1610 and 1650 to the political and social drawing rooms of 1700 and 1750, Orlando, without aging, appears again in the romantic landscapes of 1850 and in the twentieth century from World War I to the 1990s. Complicating this time travel, Orlando, at first a man, unexpectedly becomes a woman. More than in other films, questions come fast and furious: How does one account for the jumps between historical periods and the sexual transformation of the main character? What is the movie saying about gender and identity?

Sketching the story might be the writer's first note-taking task for *Orlando*. After that, the film features so many unusual shots and actions that the writer would need to choose carefully which ones are most important or suggestive. Among the most powerful moments in the film, for example, is Orlando's discovery, as she sees herself in a mirror, that she has transformed from a man into a woman; she casually comments, "Same person, different sex." In addition, the brilliant red hair and alabaster face of actress Tilda Swinton as Orlando stand out as more and more significant through many repeated close-ups, creating a series of images whose radiant beauty seems to supercede the changing historical place and gender. One writer immediately notes the dramatic beginning of the film [Figure 12.14]:

- mls: centered tree, Orlan. reading/track back and forth/vo: "There could be no doubt about his sex . . . ."
- cu: Orlan. staring right/vo: "but when he . . . "/quick glance a camera—"That is I"

Later, the writer fills in these annotations—from memory and from another viewing—and formulates a succinct description of the scene:

> The opening shot of Sally Potter's *Orlando* shows Orlando reading in a field beneath a single oak tree; as Orlando walks back and forth, the medium long shot tracks back and forth in the opposite direction. After the Elizabethan youth sits down to continue his reading, a close-up shows his profile staring off to the right, while a commentary describes his situation in life. As the female voice-over continues, "But when he . . . ," the luminously pale and red-haired Orlando suddenly turns and looks directly into the camera and corrects the commentator, "That is, I."

During this process, the writer begins to consider topics for her paper. "The meaning of history in *Orlando*" seems far too grand and would most likely need to rely on generalities and large claims. She also considers "the image of the oak tree in *Orlando*" and a comparison of the film with the Virginia Woolf novel on which it is based. Her personal interests lead her to questions about gender, politics, and history, and she is struck by how Orlando's passionate self-expression seems to complicate those issues in fascinating ways. In the end, she gathers her notes and thoughts around a sophisticated character analysis of gender and expression in *Orlando*.

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Professor Corrigan
Film 102
3 November 2003

Expression, Gender, and Character
in Sally Potter's *Orlando*

In the opening shot of Sally Potter's *Orlando*, the title character reads in a field beneath a single oak tree. As Orlando (Tilda Swinton) walks back and forth, the medium long shot tracks back and forth in the opposite direction of his movements. He sits down under the tree, and a close-up shows his profile staring off to the right, while the commentary describes his current situation in life as a privileged member of the Elizabethan aristocracy. As the female voiceover continues, "But when he . . . ," the luminously pale and red-haired Orlando suddenly turns and looks directly into the camera and corrects the commentator, "That is, I." The film then shifts to a series of shots describing a grand court ceremony: a medium long shot shows Queen Elizabeth (Quentin Crisp) arriving by torch light in a regal barge, while close-ups focus on small, expressive details, such as the queen washing her hands in a silver finger bowl [Figure 12.15]. In later historical eras, similar rich and dynamic shots, created through erratically tracking shots and shifting



Figure 12.14 *Orlando* (1993). Dramatic beginnings.



Figure 12.15 *Orlando* (1993). Expressive details.

angles, re-create Orlando's perspective on a British history and culture moving through rapid changes. History becomes a pageant of images, and, stylistically, both the narrative and specific shots and edits describe this pageant as an abundant and luxurious activity through which the character of Orlando becomes a carnival of changing identities. Unlike a documentary or a more conventional fiction film, the pageant of this history is the drama of a character relentlessly looking for self-expression in every moment.

Certainly the most remarkable feature of the film's plot, Orlando's character radically changes identities many times throughout the film—and even changes gender. In the beginning, Orlando lives as a male youth in Elizabethan England, but by the eighteenth century, he has become a glamorous "she." In the nineteenth century, Orlando transforms into a romantic heroine, and with the twentieth century, she flies through the horrors of World War I to survive as a single mother with a daughter of her own.

Through the course of this history, social and cultural formulas continually threaten to define and reduce the character of Orlando or to re-create him or her within the strict framework of a single time and place. After his father dies, for example, a medium shot shows Orlando from behind, looking at a large portrait of that man on the wall, an austere and traditional image of the father that displays his dignity, wealth, and aristocratic stature [Figure 12.16]. When Orlando turns toward the camera and assumes the same pose as his father, the figure in this painted picture becomes re-created in the stance and look of Orlando, suggesting how generational history might re-create Orlando in the social image of his father. This image is so important because the remaining film acknowledges power of heritage and history to capture and control an individual—in terms of class, gender, or other social positions—while at the same time working to liberate Orlando from those defining powers (and this original patriarchal power). The power of social and historical perspectives to frame and determine the character of Orlando is thus at the heart of this cultural drama, but in situation after situation, Orlando's identity rejects or overcomes those historical images of what he/she *should* be.



Figure 12.16 *Orlando* (1993). Against the image of the patriarch.

Orlando's character wrestles with those social forces of history primarily through the force of passionate self-expression. Early in the film the male Orlando falls deeply in love with the young Russian woman Sasha, despite the clear disapproval by British society

and despite the language barrier. As a determined poet and incurable romantic, Orlando reenacts this kind of rebellious encounter in many forms and with many people, writing poems, seeking exotic adventures, and leaping fully into different romantic trysts. Whether in eighteenth-century Turkey or nineteenth-century England, Orlando is a character who passionately loves life and who seeks passionately to express an identity through love.

In *Orlando,* character is thus a combination of historical conditions and the passionate resistance of the self to those conditions. Out of this conflict arises perhaps the most important quality of character in this film: self-consciousness or self-awareness. From the beginning of the film, Orlando continually reflects on her/his own character and its place in the cultures through which he/she passes, as he/she comments on the relation between identity and its social place and creates an ironic distance between the expression of his/her character in its historical situation. During one conversation in the eighteenth century, a medium shot pans back and forth behind Lady Orlando while a group of famous writers (Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, among others) demean the importance of women, so that Orlando's perspective both reveals and debunks the mean-spirited interrogation by the celebrated wits. Indeed, this kind of distance and analysis of Orlando's self and its social context occurs most clearly when Orlando, usually in close-up, turns and directly addresses the camera [Figure 12.17]. When Orlando examines the mirror image of herself as a man suddenly turned into a woman, she turns and wryly comments, "Same person. . . . different sex." Later, amidst her ecstatic embrace with the Byronic Shelmerdine, she self-consciously claims the romantic force of this moment by turning to the camera and saying, "I think I'm going to faint. I've never felt better in my life." Orlando's identity and character appear and evolve, consequently, through the complementary activities of both perceiving and reflecting, demonstrating how an individual's passion and love for life can and should engage self-consciously with values and choices about how to live that life.

Whether as a man or a woman, a sixteenth-century nobleman or a rebellious twentieth-century mother, Orlando champions the vibrancy of human presence, moving above and beyond all those historical and cultural differences, beyond all those defining frames. In the last sequence of the film, Orlando, now a modern



Figure 12.17 *Orlando* (1993). Close-ups brimming with expression and confrontation.

woman lounging under the aged oak that opens the film, becomes the object of her own daughter's video recorder. As the child runs toward her mother, we see Orlando now in a bouncing handheld shot that closes in on her face as a tilted out-of-focus image. As the culmination of so many images of Orlando across four centuries, the framed image now seems to deny its own ability to control and capture this character, freeing Orlando as a presence that will not be constricted even by her own daughter and even by the most technologically modern images of her or him.

Although *Orlando* is based on a novel by Virginia Woolf, Potter's stunning adaptation re-creates the essence of the novel as a drama of perception, visual and social frames, and passionate self-assertion. Like other Woolf novels, *Orlando* presents individual character and historical change embracing each other in the changing intensities of human expression. Like other Woolf characters, Orlando is defined not by his/her social or sexual status but rather by the quality of the consciousness through which Orlando perceives and lives those experiences.

Writing a Film Essay

With notes in hand and a topic clearly in mind, writing a film essay becomes a less daunting task. The next step, composing a first draft, will also be less cumbersome because the writer has prepared for the task with a topic and notes. Ideally, the writer should view the film again while working through the following stages of the writing process, in order to sharpen the analysis and confirm details from the film. When a topic leads to a clearly defined thesis, focus, and argument, another viewing of the film inevitably reveals other useful details and leads to new or better formulated ideas and interpretations.

Interpretation, Argument, and Evidence

Whether your topic is a formal analysis of a sequence or a comparison of the narrative point of view of a novel and its filmic adaptation, it needs to be honed and shaped into a precise interpretation and argument. Your **interpretation** is your explanation of what the film or a part of it means. In addition, a good essay must construct a logical **argument**—the presentation and analysis of **evidence** from the film—that convinces readers of the validity of your interpretation. Although different audiences interpret the meaning of all or part of a movie in somewhat different ways, a valid and interesting argument distinguishes itself by the extent to which the analysis of evidence supports the interpretation. Without good evidence, precise analysis, and logical argument, an essay will appear to be simply one viewer's impression or opinion.

Perhaps the single most important element in a good analytical essay is the **thesis statement,** a short statement (often a single sentence) that suc-

cinctly describes the interpretation and argument to be presented and proven, with evidence, in the pages that follow. As a significantly refined and focused version of the topic, the thesis statement identifies clearly the writer's critical perspective on the film and should indicate what is at stake in the argument and perhaps how that argument is important to an understanding of the film. Many excellent theses succinctly anticipate each stage of the argument that will follow in the paper. Usually this statement, which appears in the first paragraph of the essay, undergoes various revisions throughout the writing process. Having a **working thesis,** a rough version of a thesis, in mind as you begin your first draft, however, will help anchor your argument. In its final form, a precise and assertive thesis statement is likely to engage readers' interest in the essay.

As with most films, Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) and Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) both offer a wide variety of topics that could be developed into specific arguments and thesis statements. For *Traffic,* a film about the drug trade that flows from Mexico into various U.S. communities, one student writer considers analyzing either the cinéma-vérité camera movements used in the Mexican settings or the transformation of the central character, a U.S. drug czar who sees his daughter destroyed by heroin [Figure 12.18]. For *My Beautiful Laundrette,* a contemporary romance between a young Pakistani man and a male friend involved with right-wing British gangs, the writer weighs the advantages of two possible topics—the developing sexual relationship of the two main characters or the mise-en-scène of the laundrette where the climactic scenes take place. After reflecting on these topics and seeing the films again, the student opts for the second film and develops a thesis statement that demonstrates clear and specific direction: "*My Beautiful Laundrette* looks at contemporary British politics from numerous angles: family politics, sexual politics, racial politics, and economic politics. In the end these various political motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic, the mise-en-scène of the laundrette" [Figure 12.19]. As clear and intelligent as it is, this proposed thesis statement will no doubt be revised for the final draft of the paper, as the writing will certainly generate new insights and possibly new issues.



Figure 12.18 *Traffic* (2000). An abundance of topics.



Figure 12.19 *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). The climactic mise-en-scène of the laundrette.

Although some writers prefer other methods of organization, preparing an **outline** results in an indispensable blueprint of the essay, allowing the writer to see and examine the different parts and overall development of the argument as it proceeds out of a strong thesis. An outline can be a simple list of ideas to address or shots and scenes to highlight—such as "weak father figures," "house squatting as metaphor for identity," and "description of the laundrette"—or a more complete (and more useful) list that includes subheadings and perhaps full sentences, which can be used as topic sentences (see p. 494) in the essay.

Here is the detailed outline prepared by the student working on the essay about *My Beautiful Laundrette:*

The Politics of Laundry in *My Beautiful Laundrette*

I. Family politics: the most immediate and complicated type
   A. Fathers and authority
   B. Family traditions and repression
II. Sexual politics: underpins family situations in way that exposes hypocrisy
   A. Heterosexual politics: Nasser, his wife, and his mistress Rachel
   B. Feminist politics: Tania, Nasser's daughter
   C. Gay politics: Johnny and Omar
III. Racial politics: nearly lost in this drama is the way they permeate all other relationships
   A. Johnny, race, and right-wing politics (National Front)
   B. Papa, race, and left-wing politics
IV. Economic politics: where the other confrontations are—presumably and ironically—resolved
   A. Papa as businessman
   B. Salim as drug dealer
   C. Johnny and Omar as laundry entrepreneurs
V. These political motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic: the mise-en-scène of the laundrette
   A. Detailed description of mise-en-scène of laundrette
   B. Pragmatics meet fantasy
   C. Analysis of climactic gathering

As this example illustrates, a detailed outline allows the writer to review the structure of the essay and note any problems with the scope or logic of the argument or with the transitions from one section to another. At this stage the topic should be focused on a specific thesis whose parts develop as logical steps in the body of the paper.

Whether you work from an outline or not, a clear organization and structure are paramount for an effective essay, most notably coherent paragraphs introduced and linked by topic sentences. Well-developed paragraphs, which tend to be four to six sentences long, demand coherence and evidence. The most critical part of a good paragraph is the **topic sentence,** the sentence, usually the first, that announces the central idea around which all other sentences within the paragraph cohere. The remainder of the paragraph then develops the idea stated in the topic sentence and provides evidence from the film as support. In the example from the essay on *My Beautiful Laundrette,* note how the strong and lucid topic sentence that opens the paragraph is then supported by evidence:

> In *My Beautiful Laundrette,* the drama of the characters is invariably about space, territory, and, most importantly, home. In the first sequence of the film, Salim and a henchman evict Johnny and another squatter from an abandoned tene-

CULTURAL SPOTLIGHT

From Viewing a Film to Writing a Film Essay

As you grow more confident and practiced as a writer, you will be able to write about films in a fluid motion: watching the film, taking some notes, sketching an outline, and writing the first draft and final essay. Even the most competent writers, however, pause to reflect on their work by consulting a checklist like this one:

1. Review your notes, filling in details where you can. Ideally, view the film one more time.
2. Try to summarize the most important themes or motifs in the film.
3. Formulate a working thesis and argument for the essay.
4. Outline the argument. If possible, use full sentences for headings because they can then become your topic sentences.
5. Develop the central idea of each paragraph with details from the film that support that paragraph's topic sentence.
6. Rewrite your thesis statement to reflect any changes or refinements in your thinking that occurred while writing your first draft.
7. If you are writing a research essay, be sure to use the correct documentation format for in-text citations and the Works Cited list (see pp. 504–6).
8. Revise your essay, checking for large problems such as vague or illogical organization, and proofread for surface errors in spelling and grammar.
9. Select a title that reflects the main argument of your paper.
10. Print out the essay and correct any remaining typographical errors.

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ment building, and for the rest of the film the metaphor of "squatting" describes the characters' unstable and temporary relations to the places they live and interact. Although most of the characters are driven by the idea that, as one character puts it, "people should make up their minds where they want to live," places and homes are never more than shifting locations that always seem to be foreign territory where one lives uncomfortably. In this sense, "home" is at best a dream and usually just a temporary convenience. Nasser's daughter Tania wants to be anywhere but with her family and is willing to have either Johnny or Omar as a lover, depending on who will take her away from her home. In the end, Nasser watches from a window as a medium shot shows Tania being visually swept off the platform by a series of trains that rush off the screen, on her way to another home that she will define for herself.

Revision, Manuscript Format, and Proofreading

A completed first draft of an essay is not a completed essay. The final stage in writing about film requires at least one revision of the paper, with special attention to manuscript format and proofreading. Last-minute corrections should be kept to a minimum and should be clear and simple changes.

A good revision begins by reading the essay with fresh eyes, achieved best by allowing time away from the first draft before returning to work on the revision. In addition, carefully check **manuscript format,** including margins, title position, footnotes, and other mechanical arrangements on the pages. Typically, the manuscript format for a film essay should follow these guidelines, which are based on recommendations by the Modern Language Association (for more information, consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers,* Sixth Edition, 2003):

- Your name should appear in the top left-hand corner of the first page, along with your instructor's name, the course title and number, and the date of submission. Your title should be centered on the next line.
- The entire essay should be double-spaced, including any quotations running more than four lines, which are indented ten spaces at the left margin and reproduced without quotation marks.
- Leave one-inch margins at the top, bottom, and sides of each page. Indent paragraphs five character spaces or one-half inch.
- Number each page (including the first) with your last name and the page number in the upper right-hand corner.
- Be certain quotations and documentation are in the proper format.

Once your final revision is completed, **proofreading**—checking deliberately for errors or omissions that can be easily corrected on a hard copy—is essential. With any kind of writing, your presentation determines much of how your reader views your work, and an accurate, professional look to your writing can promote an accurate, professional reading of it. Typographical mistakes and other small goofs do not ruin a good essay, but they do undermine it by creating an impression of carelessness.



VIEWING CUES: Interpretation, Argument, and Evidence in a Film Essay

- Try to formulate the specific core of your interpretation for the film you are writing about. Why is that interpretation important? What new light does it shed on the film for your readers?
- Sketch an argument for your paper. What is the logic of its development? What conclusions do you foresee making?
- Write a precise thesis statement, one that describes your interpretation and anticipates each stage of your argument. Is your thesis specific enough, or does it need refinement? Is it sufficiently interesting or polemical so to encourage readers to continue reading your essay?
- Create a detailed outline of your essay. Try to begin each section with a topic sentence that summarizes the issues you will address. Do your topic sentences relate to each other? Do they accurately describe the logic of the essay? Does your outline also include subsections that develop and support each topic sentence with details and evidence?
- After writing your first draft, revise your thesis statement to reflect changes in your thinking. How can you sharpen your thesis to better describe how your argument develops?
- In your draft, look for consistent errors and trouble spots that you need to pay special attention to during revision.

IN FOCUS

Interpretation, Argument, and Evidence in *Rashomon* (1950)

After a reviewing his notes on Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon,* a student writer considers some possible topics. He begins by thinking about the film's unusual narrative structure: as three men, including a priest, seek shelter from a rainstorm under an ancient city gate, they hear the tale of a murder and rape through four different points of view—those of the bandit, the woman, the ghost of the dead man, and the woodcutter. The narrative tension in the film, the writer realizes, develops around the discrepancies in these competing narrative points of view, the result of which is a dark ambiguity about the truth of this violent and tragic event. After seeing the film again and trying to refine his thinking about it, the writer develops a thesis, a clear interpretation of the film:

> In Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon,* four different perspectives contrast four different versions of the truth about a violent attack. At the conclusion of the film, after we have been presented with these various narrative perspectives and the evidence in them, the opening confusion of the three men is even more pervasive, setting the stage for the only possible response to a world defined by egotism and uncertainty: compassion.

The student's next step is to sketch an outline, one in which he uses topic sentences to mark the development of the argument and the places where key evidence will appear:

Rashomon: Beyond Understanding and Evidence

Thesis statement

I. Central to this film is the drama of interpretation and evidence.
   A. Four accounts of same horrifying event
   B. The opening focus on evidence

II. Although more evidence appears through the perspective of the different witnesses, that evidence does not always agree and seems to befuddle a clear interpretation.
   A. Overlaps and inconsistencies in describing the facts
   B. The dagger as key piece of evidence

III. The heart of the fragmented narratives of *Rashomon* is the egotism that fashions those various perspectives.
   A. The bandit's violent sexual desire and the crime
   B. His story of conquest and surrender

IV. Both the wife's and the husband's perspectives are likewise mostly about themselves
   A. The wife's tale of a helpless woman
   B. The husband's tale of honor and self-sacrifice
V. The woodcutter's narrative is more problematic, but equally locked into its own needs for self-justification and protection.
   A. His revised vision: a base and cowardly world
   B. His acknowledging stealing the evidence of the dagger
VI. That each of these perspectives is distorted by different degrees of ethical failures of the individuals telling them indicates both the horrifying indeterminacy of a world determined by isolated egos and the corruption of these perspectives by human egotism.
   A. Natural disaster and moral depravity
   B. Editing and shot compositions add considerably to this sense of confusion, disorientation, and failure to see facts and events clearly.
VII. Although the humane conclusion of the film seems unexpected (and somewhat sentimental), its unexpectedness is what makes the film so engaged with modern times.

After writing his first draft, the writer sets the paper aside for three days before undertaking a careful revision. He proofreads a printed version of the essay and then submits this final copy:

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Professor White
Film 101
10 October 2003

Beyond Understanding and Evidence:
The Surprise of Compassion in *Rashomon*

The setting that opens and closes Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is the collapsed Rashomon gate in the ancient city of Kyoto. Amidst a torrential rainstorm, a woodcutter, a commoner and a priest huddle together, and the first recounts a horrifying tale of rape, murder, and possibly suicide told through four different perspectives that structure the narrative of the film. Seen respectively through the eyes of a criminal, the female victim, the dead husband, and the woodcutter, each of these four perspectives offers a contrasting version of events and the truth of what happened, and each introduces pieces of evidence to support that particular version. Despite having heard these witnesses, however, the priest can only murmur, "I don't understand." At the film's

conclusion, moreover, that opening confusion of the men is more pervasive than ever, setting the stage for the only possible response to a world defined by egotism and uncertainty: compassion.

Rashomon is a drama of evidence and interpretation. As the priest and woodcutter explain to the commoner, the original staging of the different testimonies was a police court trying to gather evidence to determine the truth behind a horrible crime in which a noble woman and her husband were attacked in the wilderness—she was raped and he was killed. Appropriately, the first point of view presented is that of the woodcutter, who follows a trail of evidence through the woods—a woman's hat, a man's hat, a belt, and an amulet case—to the sudden discovery of the dead body of the samurai nobleman, his stiffened arms and hands stretched grotesquely toward the horrified woodcutter in a low-angle shot [Figure 12.20]. Shortly thereafter, a man describes how he captured the bandit Tajomaru, emphasizing the discovered evidence of the samurai's horse as well as "17 arrows" and a "Korean sword" found on the criminal. Yet even the seemingly incontestable claim and evidence immediately become subject to doubt when the bandit suddenly denounces and denies the man's interpretation of certain details.

Although more evidence appears through the perspective of the other witnesses, that evidence does not always agree and seems to befuddle a clear interpretation. Most importantly, the significance of a pearl-handled dagger, the weapon that supposedly killed the husband, changes dramatically in the different narratives, acting as an evidential marker to distinguish the interpretations of events.

Focused on the shifting place of this dagger, the heart of the fragmented narratives of *Rashomon* becomes the egotism that informs each perspective. Or, more exactly, each version becomes more about the personal desire and greed of the person explaining what happened than about the factual events and evidence. Appropriately, what initiates the horrendous crime is the violent sexual desire of the bandit, who happens to witness, in a sharp shot/reverse-shot exchange beginning with his awakening eyes, the exposed face and feet of the wife. After that, his entire account emphasizes greed and desire: he deceives and entraps the nobleman by suggesting he will sell him riches



Figure 12.20 ***Rashomon*** (1950). The mystery of a horrifying death.

from an old tomb, and his leering gaze at the young woman turns quickly to a brutal sexual attack. Not surprisingly, in his version, his desires and demands fulfill the woman, she becoming the mirror image of his greed and lust when she ecstatically surrenders to his sexual assault. At this moment, the critical object, the dagger, drops passively from her hand, according to the bandit, who claims to then kill the husband "honestly."

Both the wife's and the husband's perspectives are likewise mostly about themselves. From the beginning, she appears discreet and demure, partly hidden by veils and white make-up and barely moving as she rides her horse through the forest. In her account, she becomes a "poor helpless woman" whose husband turns viciously on her after the assault. Unable to bear his hateful stare, she claims to have fainted—only to later discover her dagger in her husband's chest. The husband's narrative, in contrast, paints a picture of his suffering devotion and lost honor, weeping from the grave as he recounts killing himself with the controversial dagger. Light and shadow fill the images of this account, suggesting an ambiguity and lack of certainty even in this testimony by a dead man.

Finally, the woodcutter's narrative is more problematic, but equally locked into its own needs for self-justification and protection. After introducing the story at the beginning of the film, he returns to offer a final version that reveals deceptions and lies in his first account. Now, he admits to having witnessed the entire scene, and his subsequent description of the part-clownish, part-terrified fighting of the two men shows a world that is fundamentally base and cowardly, a reflection of his own base and cowardly position in failing to intervene or fully disclose the truth of what he saw. Most disturbing perhaps, he tacitly acknowledges stealing the crucial piece of evidence, the dagger, in order to sell it for personal gain.



Figure 12.21 *Rashomon* (1950). Trying to make meaning in a chaotic world.

That each of these perspectives is distorted by different degrees of ethical failures on the part of the individual behind it indicates the source of the horrifying indeterminacy and chaos of this world [Figure 12.21]. This is a world described by the priest in the opening as full of "war, earthquake, wind, fire, famine, plague . . . each

year full of disaster . . . hundreds of men dying like animals." Stylistically, the stunning editing and shot compositions of *Rashomon* dramatize this world of confusion and disorientation, in which seeing and understanding seem constantly to combat each other. Witnesses are introduced with a wipe that crosses the screen in one direction or the other, almost violently wiping out the perspective of the preceding account. Within the different accounts, rapid tracks and flash pans re-create the desperately unsettled struggle to discover facts through perspectives that dart across surfaces blocked by branches and leaves.

Within all this moral darkness and despair, however, the conclusion of *Rashomon* suggests a possible way out of the terror and blindness that results from so much visual and narrative ambiguity. In this final sequence, the threesome who tell and hear that tale of violence discover an abandoned baby in the ruins of the gate. The commoner urges them to steal the baby's blankets and clothing because "you can't live unless you're what you call selfish." At this point, a dramatic turn occurs when, in a head-to-head confrontation in the rain, the commoner accuses the woodcutter of hiding his theft of that crucial piece of evidence, the dagger. In dazed silence, the priest and woodcutter stand against a wall. As the rain stops, the commoner suddenly insists on taking the child home with him to his already crowded family. Despite his shame about his selfishness and despite the missing evidence of the stolen dagger, a glimmer of human value returns to the world. Compassion overcomes the evidence of mistakes, and as they all depart, the sun gleams through the clouds and the saved child becomes the emblem of a new future. During this sequence, the priest shouts the fundamental truth so often lost in this violent courtroom, "if men don't trust each other, then the world becomes a hell."

Although this conclusion seems unexpected (and somewhat sentimental), its unexpectedness is what makes the film so engaged with modern times. Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard uses the term "leap of faith" to describe the only possibility for a spiritual faith in modern times. What his term implies is that both spiritual and human faith—the grounds for ethical behavior—often occur *despite* the evidence before our eyes and *despite* the failure of human reason to understand it. As in *Rashomon,* truth and morality may need to leap over the confusion of facts and logic in order simply to do what is right.

While not all writers about film precisely follow all of these guidelines for outlining, formulating a thesis statement, revising, proofreading, and so on, experienced writers almost always do so unconsciously or in abbreviated ways. Keeping a checklist of these mechanics in mind can alleviate much of the anxiety about writing, providing working frameworks that lead to stronger and more interesting essays.

Researching the Movies

While in some critical film essays the writer aims simply to convey a personal response to a film based on critical distance and careful reflection, in other essays the writer wants or needs to use research in order to sharpen and develop his or her interpretation of a film. Research enables the writer to identify significant issues surrounding a film and to contribute his or her opinions and ideas to the ongoing critical dialogue about it. A student intending to write about Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950), for example, may be intrigued by the film but uncertain about her specific argument. With some reading and research about Cocteau, his relation to the surrealist movement, and his work as a poet and painter, she discovers a more specific argument about the complicated role of poetry in the film and the relevance of the Orpheus myth to Cocteau's vision of the modern artist [Figure 12.22]. Whether limited or extensive, research helps determine why your essay is important and what critical questions are at stake in writing the essay.

Distinguishing Research Materials

Primary and Secondary Sources There are various kinds of materials that qualify as research sources for a film essay. **Primary research sources**—such as films on videotape or DVD and film scripts—have a direct and close relationship with the original film. **Secondary research sources**—including books, critical articles, Internet sites, supplementary DVD materials, and newspaper reviews—contain ideas or information from outside sources such as film critics or scholars. A student planning to write a research essay on Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) might first view a 16mm projection of that film and then access other primary sources, such as a videotape and script, as follow-ups to the first screening [Figure 12.23]. Later research via secondary sources might include film reviews published at the time of release, scholarly essays on Siegel's work, and perhaps a book on 1950s American cinema.



Figure 12.22 *Orpheus* (1950). Researching the complexities of a film.

Various primary sources are an indispensable asset because they allow the writer to review specific scenes on a videotape or DVD or to check the exact dialogue in a published script. With primary sources, however, it is important to keep in mind that they may approximate, but not duplicate exactly, the look of a film when seen in a theater (see pp. 30–33). Videotapes may format images differently from the format used in theatrical screenings, while scripts may represent a simple blueprint from which the actual film dialogue deviates.

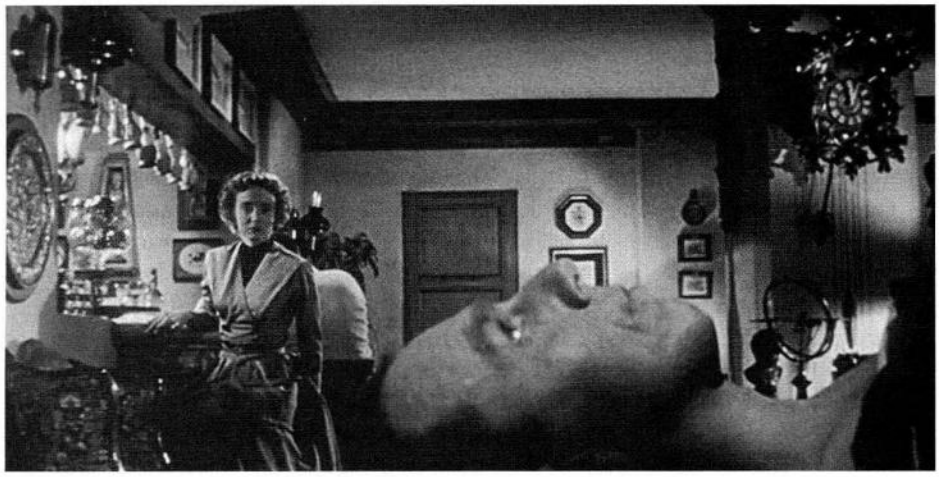


Figure 12.23 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Following a film from 16mm to videotape to scholarly essays.

Even in our electronic age, libraries and their databases remain the most reliable places to find solid secondary materials. Check such databases as the *Humanities Index, Lexis/Nexis,* and *Comindex* for essays and books on your subject, and don't underestimate the more conventional approach of exploring the library's shelves. Annual bibliographic indexes, for example, identify journal articles and books that may support and broaden your thinking, including especially *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature,* the *MLA International Bibliography,* and the *Film/Literature Index.* Once you have a topic and a working thesis, you can search for sources relevant to your topic and argument. After checking general categories like "film," "cinema," and "movies," a more precise topic, such as "contemporary Australian cinema" or "sound technology and the movies" will lead you more quickly to pertinent research materials.

In addition to databases and bibliographic indexes, specialized encyclopedias, which identify important topics and figures in film studies, are useful resources for initiating research on a film. Examples include Ephraim Katz's *The Film Encyclopedia,* Pam Cook's *The Cinema Book,* Leonard Maltin's *The Whole Film Sourcebook,* Ginette Vincendeau's *Encyclopedia of European Cinema,* and Amy Unterburger's *The St. James Women Filmmakers Encyclopedia.* Film guides such as these provide factual information about and short introductions to a subject. The entries typically do not offer the sort of detailed analysis or arguments required for a good research paper, but they can suggest pertinent information and issues that can lead to more research and a refined argument.

Internet Sources For students with Internet access, the Web offers useful discussion groups, access to various library and media catalogs, and numerous other information sites. However, with so many Web sites available, the writer must be careful to distinguish among the three kinds of reputable **Internet sources** for film studies:

- sites and databases that provide basic facts about a film and the individuals involved with that film—such as biographical facts about the director, the different running times of a film, and the like
- sites that offer reviews or essays from academic film journals—such as *Film Comment, Jump Cut,* and *Sight and Sound*
- film-specific sites (almost every major film released in recent years has its own Web site, as do the studios and distributors) that provide information ranging from production facts to gossip as well as reviews and interviews

While the Internet is fast becoming an important source for accessing information of all kinds, film researchers and writers must be cautious about the quality of the material found there. One obvious reason for this caution is the difficulty in determining the authenticity and authority of Internet-based information. Unlike material published in academic journals or books, Internet essays and articles may not have been through a review process to determine their value. Virtually anyone can post on a Web site any opinion or any set of facts—often without substantial evidence. When using the Internet for research, therefore, writers need to differentiate substantial and useful material from chat and frivolous commentary. Especially with Internet sources, there are three important rules to follow:

- Determine the quality of the Internet source: Does it provide reliable information and a carefully evaluated argument supported by research? Is the source a refereed publication (one whose material is evaluated by experts) or a reputable institution? Is its information supported by references to other research? What are the credentials of the authors?
- Define your search as precisely as possible. Beyond just the title of a film, focus your search on, for example, "lighting in *Double Indemnity*" or "politics and Iranian cinema." Pursue your topic through the advanced-search option.
- Explore links to other sites. Does your research link you to sites on other films by the same director or to such related issues as the film genre or the country in which the film was made?

Here is a list of Web sites useful for film research:

- *Internet Movie Database* (<www.IMDb.com>): provides detailed information on films
- *ScreenSite* (<www.tcf.ua.edu/ScreenSite/contents.htm>): provides data on films, film conferences, archives, and useful links to other academic cinema sites
- *History on/and/in Film* (<www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/Reading Room/hfilm/contenth.html>): contains conference papers and scholarly essays on a range of film history topics
- *American Film Institute* (<www.afi.com>): offers recent industry news, events, educational seminars, and reviews
- *Library of Congress Motion Picture & Television Reading Room* (<lcweb.loc.gov/rr/mopic/>): provides access to the library's catalogue, the national Film Registry preservation list, and the American Memory Collection of online early films.

Using and Documenting Sources

Writers gather research material in a wide variety of ways: some record paragraphs and phrases on handwritten note cards, while others prefer to type that material directly into their computers, allowing them to sort, move, and insert it easily. In either case, the bibliographic information for quotations should be double-checked for accuracy and should include all of the publication data required for the Works Cited list (and sometimes the Works Consulted section) of your research paper. Just as sloppy technical errors in making a movie (such as a boom microphone appearing in a frame) can undermine the look and effect of that film, inaccurate or careless source documentation will make the research paper look amateurish.

Integrating research material into the text of your paper requires both logic and rhetoric. Sometimes research can be used to locate and describe

how your argument differs from prevailing positions on a film or issue. In this case, the writer frequently identifies one or more opposing positions as a way of highlighting how the essay will distinguish itself: "While Annette Michelson has claimed that Kuleshov's films are best understood as part of a debate with Eisenstein, this paper argues that the French films of Jean Epstein are equally important to Kuleshov's development." Conversely, research can be used to support and validate a point or a part of the overall argument: "Both Patrice Petro and Judith Mayne have produced complex feminist readings of silent-era German films that support my interpretation of *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931)." Yet another possibility is to use research sources to back up the validity of facts or critical frameworks necessary for introducing an argument: "In *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition,* Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky convincingly show that Russian cinema after 1985 returned to the center of the world stage, an argument that will provide the background for my claims about the importance of *Little Vera* (1988) in Europe and America."

Once research material has been gathered, selected, and integrated into an essay, all of the research sources used must be properly documented. There are two kinds of research material that require documentation: **direct quotation** from a secondary source and **paraphrasing** in which the writer puts the idea or observation from another source in his or her own words. When the information is considered common knowledge and is well known to most people, there is no need to document where you found that information. If, however, there is any doubt about whether the observation is common knowledge, always document the source so as to avoid any potential suspicion of plagiarism. For example, a critic's remark that Ousmane Sembène is one of Africa's premier filmmakers and that his films work in a realist tradition would be considered common knowledge by many seasoned filmgoers. But a writer new to Sembène's work may feel more comfortable documenting the source of that information, and, like all writers, should *never risk the charge of plagiarism.* Quotations of dialogue from a film usually does not require documentation.

There are various **documentation formats** for listing authors, titles, and publication data. Here, we will describe the format that is advocated by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and widely used in the humanities. (See the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers,* Sixth Edition, 2003.) The primary components of the MLA format are in-text citations and the Works Cited list. An **in-text citation** is required wherever the writer refers to or quotes from a research source within the essay's text. The in-text citation includes the author's name and the page number. When the author's name appears in the discussion that introduces the quotation, only the page numbers are enclosed in parentheses. Note that p. and pp. are not used:

```
As Patricia Zimmerman has noted, filmmakers such as Stan
Brakhage and Jonas Mekas "appropriated home-movie style as
a formal manifestation of a spontaneous, untampered form of
filmmaking" (146).
```

However, when the author is not named in the introductory text, enclose both the author's last name and the page number, without any intervening punctuation, within the parentheses:

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Filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas "appropriated
home-movie style as a formal manifestation of a spontaneous,
untampered form of filmmaking" (Zimmerman 146).
```

The same citation formats are used whether the material is quoted directly or paraphrased:

> Much of the American avant-garde movement experimented not so much with the techniques of modern art but with the spontaneous actions associated with home movies (Zimmerman 146).

When you use two or more sources by the same author in your essay, you must distinguish among them by also including an abbreviated version of the title in either the introductory text or the parenthetical citation: as in "Zimmerman writes in *Reel Families . . .*" or "(Zimmerman, *Reel Families* 146)", respectively. Each source cited in the text must also appear in the Works Cited section with full bibliographic detail.

Another type of annotation is the **content,** or **explanatory, note** which may or may not include secondary sources. These notes offer background information on the topic being discussed or on related issues, suggest related readings, or offer an aside. They should be placed on a separate page after the text (but before the Works Cited list) or as footnotes at the bottom of the page. Thus a writer discussing horror films and Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) might include this text and content note:

> Although *Carrie* focuses on female anxiety and violence, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific audience for this film.[1]
>
> [1]Especially since *Psycho,* horror films seem fixated on violence against women, but there is good reason to consider how both female and male audiences identify with these films. An important discussion of this issue is Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain-Saws* (3-21).

Full documentation for every source cited in your essay should be included in the **Works Cited** section, positioned on a separate page immediately after the last page of the essay text. Sources that have been consulted but not cited in the text or notes of the essay can be included in an optional **Works Consulted** section, which appears on a separate page after the Works Cited list. (Note, however, that for reasons of space, we do *not* show the Works Cited and Works Consulted sections as separate pages in the essay on p. 513 in this chapter.) Punctuation and other mechanics of the different entries must be absolutely correct. Titles should be typed either in italics or underlined, according to your instructor's preference. Some of the most common types of Works Cited entries include the following:

Book by One Author

Zimmerman, Patricia. *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

Book by More Than One Author

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960.* New York: Columbia UP, 1985.

Edited Book

Cook, Pam, and Mieke Bernink, eds. *The Cinema Book.* 2nd ed. London: British Film Institute, 1999.

hindsight, this violence should not be relegated merely to the unconscious and the psychological distortions of dark fantasies, but should be recognized as the shadow of a historical and social reality. In its original historical context, the melodramatic violence in the relationship of Alan, Francis, and Jane maps a frustrating and often desperate problem with heterosexual romance in a fatherless Germany, while the troubled, anxious, and repressive interactions at town halls, carnivals, and hospitals refer to a real political and structural crisis in the social arenas of post-World War I Germany. If the social violence of *Dr. Caligari* seems tame (to modern eyes accustomed to Technicolor blood baths), there is no doubt that such violence reverberates with more extensive, if less intensive, implications for the state of German society in 1920.

The assertive conclusion restates the central thesis.

Many viewers without a precise sense of German history and *Caligari*'s original cultural context can still appreciate its dark tale, striking visual effects, and unsettling frame tale. The psychological dimension that permeates this murder mystery is, moreover, an undeniable and critical component to its disturbing plot and expressionistic mise-en-scène. Yet, in the wake of World War I, the nightmarish violence of the film resonates with particular historical and social meaning that cannot be explained as fantasy. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* will always be a specific cultural space whose violence remains historically tangible.

[According to MLA, begin new page here]

Article in an Anthology of Film Criticism

Gaines, Jane. "Dream/Factory." *Reinventing Film Studies.* Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000. 100–13.

Journal Article

Spivak, Gayatri. "In Praise of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*." *Critical Quarterly* 31.2 (Summer 1989): 80–88.

Articles in Daily or Weekly Periodical

Corliss, Richard. "Suddenly Shakespeare." *Time* 4 Nov. 1996: 88–90.

Interview (Published)

Seberg, Jean. Interview with Mark Rappaport. "I, Jean Seberg." *Film Quarterly* 55.1 (Fall 2001): 2–13.

Works Cited

The Works Cited list starts on a new page at the end of the research essay.

Budd, Michael. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: *Texts, Contexts, Histories*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.

Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film. 4th ed.* New York: Norton, 2003.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Social Mobility and the Fantastic: German Silent Cinema." The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: *Texts, Contexts, Histories*. Ed. Mike Budd. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990. 171-90.

Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of German Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947.

Prince, Stephen. "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects." *Screening Violence*. Ed. Stephen Prince. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000. 1-46. 7 Dec. 2001 <www.filmgeschichte.de>.

[According to MLA, begin new page here]

Works Consulted

The optional Works Consulted list when included starts on a new page following Works Cited.

Eisner, Lotte. *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973.

Elsaesser, Thomas. *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Carroll, Noel. "The Cabinet of Dr. Kracauer." *Millienium Film Journal* 1.2 (Spring/Summer 1978): 77-85.

Article in an Online Journal (Including Access Date)

Firshing, Robert. "Italian Horror in the Seventies." *Images Journal* 8 Nov. 2001. 23 July 2003 <www.imagesjournal.com>.

Information from an Online Site (Including Access Date)

Magnolia: The Official Movie Page. 1999. New Line Productions. 23 March 2003. Accessed 14 Nov. 2003 <www.magnoliamovie.com>.

For information on the formats for other types of sources, consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.* Always keep in mind that plagiarism—using sources without giving proper credit to them—is one of the most serious offenses in writing and research.