Writing About MOVIES

FOURTH EDITION

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1

The Challenges of Writing About Movies

What's so hard about writing about movies? After all, we all "know" movies. Most of us could recite the plot of *The Hunger Games* more easily than we could recite the Gettysburg Address. We know more about the fictional characters who inhabit "Middle Earth" in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy than we know about many of the people who inhabit our own lives.

It's precisely our familiarity with film, however, that presents our greatest writing challenge. Film is so familiar and so prevalent in our lives that we are often lulled into viewing movies passively. As a result, certain aspects of films are often invisible to us. Caught up in the entertainment, we sometimes don't "see" the camera work, composition, editing, or lighting. Nor do we "hear" the sound design. Nor do we observe the production struggles that accompany every film—including the script's many rewrites, the drama of getting the project financed, the casting challenges, and the hundreds of other

decisions that were strung together to make the film reach the screen.

However, when your film professor asks you to write about film, it's precisely those "invisible" aspects that you're expected to see and hear. You need to pay attention to the way the camera moves. Observe the composition (the light, shadow, and arrangement) within the frame. Think about how the film was edited. Note the sound design. In short, consider the elements that make up the film and examine how they function, separately and together. In breaking down the film into its constituent parts, you'll be able to *analyze* what you see.

You might also think about the film in the context of when it was made, how, and by whom. Considering the context of the film's production, its reception by viewing audiences, and its relationship with the culture in which it was made and released, you'll be able to *synthesize* your analysis of the film and its context. In short, you'll be able to write a paper that transforms your thoughts and responses into writing that is appropriately academic.

Before we get into the thick of this subject, let's tackle the most general question of all.

What Is Academic Writing?

Simply put, academic writing (sometimes called "scholarship") is writing done by scholars for other scholars—and that includes you. As a college student, you are engaged in

activities that scholars have been engaged in for centuries: you read about, think about, argue about, and write about great ideas. Of course being a scholar requires that you read, think, argue, and write in certain ways. You will need to make and support your claims according to the customary expectations of the academic community.

How do you determine what these expectations are? The literary theorist Kenneth Burke has famously described scholarship as an ongoing conversation, and this metaphor may be helpful. Imagine you have just arrived at a dinner party. The discussion (which in this case is about cinema) has already been going on for quite a while when you arrive. What do you do? Do you sit down and immediately voice your opinions? Or do you listen, try to gauge the lay of the land, determine what contribution you might make, and only then venture to make it?

The etiquette that you would employ at the dinner party is precisely the strategy that you should use when you write academic papers. In short, listen to what other scholars are saying. Familiarize yourself with the scholarly conversation before jumping in. Pay attention to both *what* is said and *how* it is said. A book like the one you're reading now can be a helpful "dinner companion" that helps get you up to speed and fills you in on the conversation that preceded you. But you should make use of other resources, too. Your professor, for instance, is a living, breathing expert on what film scholars care about. Books, journals, and reputable Internet sites also offer an

opportunity to eavesdrop on the ongoing scholarly conversation about movies. Once you understand the substance of that conversation, you can begin to construct informed arguments of your own.

Getting Started

CONSIDER WHAT YOU KNOW

A short paper written in response to a viewing of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), for example, may not require you to be familiar with Hitchcock's other films or to have a broad familiarity with film's formal elements.

However, if you're asked to write an academic paper on the film, you'll want to know more. You'll want to have a firm grasp of the technical and formal elements of film so that you can explain how Hitchcock and his collaborators created the movie. You'll want to be familiar with Hitchcock's other films so that you can understand what themes are important to Hitchcock and his work. Finally, if you're watching this film in an upper-level film class, you'll want to be aware of different critical perspectives on Hitchcock's films and on films in general, so that you can "place" your argument within the ongoing critical conversation.

CONSIDER WHAT YOU THINK

The aim in thinking about your topic is to come up with fresh observations. After all, it's not enough to summarize in a paper what's obvious, what's already known and discussed. You must also add something of your own to the conversation.

Understand, however, that "adding something of your own" is not an invitation to allow your personal associations, reactions, or experiences to dominate your paper. To create an informed argument, you must first recognize that your writing should be analytical rather than personal. In other words, your writing must show that your associations, reactions, and experiences of a film have been framed in a critical, rather than a personal, way.

This is not to say that your personal responses to a movie are irrelevant. Indeed, your personal responses are often a good starting point for the academic work to come. For instance, being terrified by *The Babadook* (2014; director: Jennifer Kent) can be the first step on the way to a strong analysis. Interrogate your terror. Why are you scared? Which elements of the film contribute most to your fear? How does the film play with the horror genre in order to evoke a fear that is fresh and convincing?

Interrogating your personal responses is the first step in making sure that your argument will be appropriately academic. To help ensure that your responses are critical rather than personal, subject them to the following critical thinking processes: summary, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis.

SUMMARIZE

The first step in thinking critically about any film is to summarize what the film presents onscreen. You can construct several different summaries, depending on your goals, but beware: even the most basic of summaries—the plot summary—isn't as simple as it seems. It's difficult to write both economically and descriptively, to discern what's essential to your discussion and what's not.

Consider this: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) has a very complex plot using seven narrators and consisting of nine parts (five of which include flashback sequences). Further complicating matters is that the story duration is about seventy years, while the plot duration is one week of a reporter's research. *Citizen Kane* is a notoriously difficult film to sum up—though the following plot summary by Jesse Garon, taken from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), does an excellent job:

> Multimillionaire newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane dies alone in his extravagant mansion, Xanadu, speaking a single word: "Rosebud." In an attempt to figure out the meaning of this word, a reporter tracks down the people who worked and lived with Kane; they tell their stories in a series of flashbacks that reveal much about Kane's life but not enough to unlock the riddle of his dying breath.

What makes this summary effective? It follows the basic structure of any film: a conflict/riddle/problem is proposed;

someone tries to solve the problem, meeting obstacles along the way; finally, the problem is resolved. The writer of this summary traces the conflict without being sidetracked by the many plot complications. He sticks to the theme and to the basic conflict/resolution structure. He also makes sure that his sentences are simple and clear. In the end, he produces a summary that is faithful to the film but that doesn't overwhelm the reader with details.

The exercise of summarizing a film in this manner is a useful one. In most student film essays, plot summary is an important touchstone for the rest of the paper's argument: it helps to ground your argument in concrete details. Summarizing a film's plot helps you to see its structure, conflicts, and themes. But if you choose to provide a plot summary in your own writing, use it judiciously—as a tool that aids your analysis, not as an excuse to avoid analysis. A common beginner's error is to hand in a paper that claims to offer an argument about a film but instead merely retells the movie's story. You can avoid this by resisting the urge to structure your paper around the movie's narrative chronology. Use the narrative events to support your argument, but don't allow those events to overwhelm it.

When thinking critically about a film, you needn't limit yourself to plot summary. Equally useful, depending on your purpose, are summaries of a film's production values (lighting, editing, sound), its production history (financing, casting, distribution), or its critical reception (reviews, scholarship,

and so on). The point is that summarizing is useful in helping you clarify what you know about a film, laying the foundation for the more complex processes to come.

EVALUATE

Evaluation is an ongoing process. You can evaluate a film the moment you encounter it, and you can continue to evaluate and to reevaluate as you go along. It's important to understand that evaluating a movie is different from reacting to it. When you evaluate for an academic purpose, you must find and articulate the reasons for your personal response. What in the film is leading you to respond a certain way? Which influences that are not in the movie might be contributing to your response? Watching *Citizen Kane*, for instance, you might find yourself caught up in the film's suspense. What in the film is making you feel this way? The editing? The acting? The script? Something else? Can you point to a moment in the film that is particularly successful in creating suspense? In asking these questions, you are straddling two intellectual processes: experiencing your own personal response, and analyzing the film.

Evaluation also encourages you to compare a film with other films that you've seen. How does the acting in *Citizen Kane* compare with the acting in other films from the same era? What about the editing? The composition and design of the images in the frame? The sound? The story? How do they

compare? Evaluating what's special about a film allows you to isolate those aspects that are most interesting—and most fruitful—to investigate further.

ANALYZE

In the analysis stage of constructing an informed argument, your first task is to consider the parts of your topic that most interest you, then examine how these parts relate to one another or to the whole. To analyze *Citizen Kane*, you will want to break the film down by examining particular scenes, point of view, camera movements, sound, and so on. In short, you'll want to ask, What are the components of Welles's film, and how do these components contribute to the film's theme? How do they contribute to Welles's work as a whole?

Films are filled with so much information that it is difficult to see even a small part of their formal and narrative arrangement in one viewing. You can learn a good deal by carefully analyzing individual shots and scenes, viewing them several times, taking notes each time. Multiple viewings enable you to recognize how the parts of a film interrelate, how some elements recall previous events and foreshadow others, how motifs and subplots function, and how actors create characters through voice, gesture, and expression. When analyzing complex scenes, you might focus on one particular formal or narrative element in each viewing: lighting, editing, camera movement, setting, costume, dialogue, music, sound effects, and so forth.

When you analyze, you break the whole into parts so that you might see the whole differently. When you analyze, you find things to say.

SYNTHESIZE

When you synthesize, you look for *connections* between ideas. Consider once again *Citizen Kane*. In analyzing this film, you might come up with elements that seem initially disparate. You might have some observations that at first don't seem to jell. Or you might have read various critical perspectives on the film, all of them in disagreement with one another. Now would be the time to consider whether these disparate elements or observations might be reconciled, or synthesized. This intellectual exercise requires that you create an *umbrella argument*—a larger argument under which several observations and perspectives might stand.

In an analysis of *Citizen Kane*, for example, an author might observe a series of elements that initially seem at odds with one another. For instance, he might note the range of conflicting emotions that the actors experience (each shifts among various feelings that include tenderness, joy, annoyance, guilt, and rage), and how the interior and exterior actions contradict our typical expectations (whereas outside in the snow the boy Charles plays gleefully, inside the house, which one would expect to be warmer, the lamps remain unlit and the action is cold and strained). The point that the author might make by

calling our attention to these conflicting aspects of the film is that Welles is constructing a scene in which appearances are deceiving. Through this scene, an author is warned that her own interpretations of the film's surface details might be mistaken. This warning leads the author to think more broadly about what Welles might be saying—about appearances, and about the secrets that we hold within. The author might then be inspired to look for other examples in which Welles seems to be commenting on appearances, and synthesize them into a broader observation of the film. In this way, the author might transform a list of observations into a powerful and intriguing argument.

Adopting a Rhetorical Stance

When writing an academic paper, you must consider not only what you want to say but also the audience to whom you're saying it. In other words, it's important to determine not only what you think about a topic but also what your audience is likely to think. What biases does your audience have? What values, expectations, and knowledge do they possess? For whom are you writing, and for what purpose?

When you begin to answer these questions, you have started to reckon with what has been called the "rhetorical stance," which refers to the position you take as a writer in terms of both the subject and the reader of your paper.

CONSIDER YOUR POSITION

Let's first consider your relationship to the topic you're writing about. When you write a paper, you take a stand on a topic. You determine whether you're for or against it, passionate or cool-headed. Because few issues can be reduced to pro and con or black and white, you'll also want to consider the nuances of your position. Finally, you may wish to consider whether or not your position takes a particular critical perspective (e.g., feminist). All of these considerations will enable you to refine your stance on a topic.

To ensure that your stance is appropriately analytical, you should ask yourself some questions. Begin by asking why you've taken this particular position. For instance, why did you find some elements of the film more important than others? Does this prioritizing reflect a bias or preconception on your part? If you dismissed part of the film as boring or unimportant, why did you do so? Do you have personal issues or experiences that might lead you to be impatient with certain elements? Might any part of your response to the movie cause readers to discount your paper as biased or uncritical? If so, you might want to reconsider your position, or, if you feel strongly about the argument you're trying to make, you will want to carefully plan how you will support that argument with evidence from the film.

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

Your position on a topic does not, by itself, determine your rhetorical stance. You must also consider your readers. In the college classroom, the audience is usually the professor or your classmates—although occasionally your professor will instruct you to write for a more particular or more general audience. No matter who your readers are, you'll want to consider them carefully before you start to write.

What do you know about your readers and their stance toward your topic? What are they likely to know about the topic? What biases are they likely to have? Moreover, what effect do you hope to have on the readers? Is your aim to be controversial? Informative? Entertaining? Will the readers appreciate or resent your intention?

Once you've determined who your readers are, you will want to consider how you might best reach them. If, for example, you're an authority on a particular subject and you're writing to readers who know little or nothing about that subject, you'll want to take an informative stance. If you aren't yet confident about a topic and you have more questions than answers, you might want to take an inquisitive stance.

In any case, when you're deciding on a rhetorical stance, choose one that allows you to be sincere. You don't want to take an authoritative stance on a subject if you cannot be confident about what you're saying. On the other hand, you don't want to avoid taking a position on a subject; readers are very

often frustrated by writers who refuse to take a clear stance. What if you are of two minds on a subject? Declare that to the reader. Make ambivalence your clear rhetorical stance.

Finally, don't write simply to please your professor. Though some professors find it flattering to discover that all of their students share their positions on a subject, most of us are hoping that your argument will engage us by telling us something new about your topic—even if that "something new" is simply a fresh emphasis on a minor detail. Moreover, it's impossible for you to replicate the ideal paper that exists in your professor's head. When you try, you risk having your analysis compared to your professor's own. Is that really what you want?

Considering Tone and Style

So now you understand what's required of you in an academic paper. You need to be analytical. You need to create an informed argument. You need to consider your relationship to the topic and to the reader. But what about finding an appropriate academic tone and style?

The tone and style of academic writing might at first seem intimidating. But that needn't be the case. Professors want students to write clearly and intelligently on matters that they, the students, care about. What professors don't want is imitation scholarship—that is, exalted gibberish that no one cares to read. If the student didn't care to write the paper, the

professor probably won't care to read it. The tone of an academic paper, then, must be inviting to the reader, even while it maintains an appropriate academic style.

Remember that professors are human beings, capable of boredom, laughter, irritation, and awe. They have lives outside of their duties as teachers, and they don't appreciate having their time wasted any more than you do. Understand that you're writing to a person who will be delighted when you make your point clearly, concisely, and persuasively. Understand, too, that she will be less delighted if you have inflated your prose, pumped up your page count, or tried to impress her by using terms that you didn't take the time to understand. (For more on how to craft an appropriate but engaging academic tone and style, see "Attending to Style," later in this guide.)

2

Looking at Movies

Before you start writing anything about a movie, you must first look at it—closely, with an analytical eye, and armed with the specialized vocabulary that is an integral part of serious film study. Looking closely at movies, and taking notes as you do so, is the first step to having something interesting to say about them. This chapter should help you get the process started.

Public and Private Screenings

Most film courses require attendance at public screenings, and often the movies being viewed are the ones that your professor wants you to write about. Even if public screenings aren't required by your instructor, viewing a movie with an audience in a theater is something that every student of film should experience. The reaction of your fellow audience members may, after all, be different from yours. Being alert

to their reactions could help you to notice things about the film that you might have overlooked if your only screening happened in the privacy of your own room. Use the time in a public screening to enjoy the experience along with the audience, but also to note those moments when the audience reacts strongly to what's happening onscreen. If you can manage it, take shorthand notes (as discreetly as possible) about what was happening onscreen immediately before, during, and after those moments. These notes will be valuable when you later view the movie in private.

There was a time not so long ago when scholars, critics, and students of film were forced to write about movies without the benefit of private viewings after public screenings. Relying on notes and memory, they often got the details wrong, sometimes in ways that undercut the arguments they were attempting to make. Thankfully, those days are past. Most of the movies that instructors assign in film courses are also available in digital formats for private viewing. These formats have been tremendously popular with consumers, obviously, but they are also a godsend for film scholars and film students, who can rewind, fast-forward, pause, and select specific scenes as often as they need to.

The benefits of private viewings and these simple playback options for film analysis can't be overstated. The pause button, for example, allows you to look carefully at the composition of a shot, to note details of the setting, design, lighting, and individual characters' appearance. The ability to watch a scene first

with the sound on, then with the sound off, and then to close your eyes and listen only to the sound in that scene, can help you isolate the effects of the visual and auditory elements individually, and thus understand how that scene "works" with more precision. Even fast-forwarding through a film that you've already viewed can reveal things about the movie: for instance, the repetition of certain patterns, motifs, or visual themes that might not have been obvious when viewed at regular speed.

Not only do digital formats allow you to view movies in a more accurate and productive way, but they also frequently give you access to contextual information about the film that might be difficult to find otherwise. Many DVDs, for example, provide special features that document the film's production background, the intentions and plans of its creators, and the technological innovations and techniques that made certain things happen onscreen. They also often include scenes and shots that were cut from the film. Viewing unused footage provides further insight into the decision-making process of the filmmakers. Sometimes, a scene is cut because of a poor acting performance, or an entire subplot is removed because it doesn't seem to work. Other times, very good scenes and strong performances are left on the cutting room floor. The decision to remove such scenes sometimes reflects the desires of a director to tell the story more concisely or simply, and other times is a signal that a producer or other executive has pushed for a shorter running time. Since

many deleted scenes were dropped before they underwent sound editing, effects work, and color corrections (that is, they are *rough cuts*), this unused footage also provides dramatic evidence of the degree to which film studios polish the final product—a useful reminder that the supposed "realism" of the final release is always a carefully crafted construction.

Coupled with the wealth of information on the Internet, special DVD features provide film students with an abundance of material once reserved only for industry insiders or researchers lucky enough to be granted access to studios, film libraries, and special collections. You should take advantage of this material as much as is relevant to your writing assignment.

The Importance of Taking Notes

Taking notes is an essential part of preparing to write about movies. Whether you are recording your observations during a public or personal screening, copying key points of a classroom lecture or group discussion, or jotting down stray ideas over the course of your day, note taking can capture observations, attitudes, and insights that you may otherwise not recall when it comes time to actually compose your paper. Memory is less perfect than we often assume, and realizing that "memory," especially in academic settings, exists no less in documents than between our ears should encourage you to adopt good note-taking practices. There are no rules for note taking, but here are a few useful hints to start:

Make your notes as succinct as possible.

Resist the temptation to record all of your observations at once. Focus instead on significant turning points and details. You can always return to the film for more detail later.

Make rough sketches of shots that you want to discuss. These will prove very useful when you begin to write. If you're viewing on a computer, you can also use an inexpensive software program to grab images from the movie and insert them into your paper as illustrations.

Use shorthand for describing what you see onscreen (a list of suggested shorthand notations is provided at the end of the book). This shorthand will not only speed up the process but will get you in the habit of using film terms.

If you're viewing the movie on a player of some sort, make note of the timing of each shot that you want to discuss—for instance, 09:43—so that you can easily find it again if you need to. If you're watching in a theater, note the approximate timing (e.g., "approx. 10:00").

Review and organize your notes according to any patterns or categories that may appear. Do this while the viewing is still fresh in your mind. Many students come up with ideas for their papers when they reorganize the observations in their notes.

Taking notes is a highly personal activity. Some people meticulously record information in a systematic way, while others

haphazardly scrawl ideas and doodles. You should adopt whatever method works for you. That said, there are a few strategies for note taking that have proven useful to film scholars and students that you might consider using or adapting to your own purposes:

ASKING WHY

When viewing a film for the first time all the way through, the most important thing to do is to be alert to things about the film that strike you as different, memorable, or puzzling at the moment. Taking note of these things, and framing your notes about them in the form of questions, will prompt you during your viewing(s) to return to those moments to see if you can answer that question, and thus perhaps discover something about the movie that is interesting enough to write about. Here are some concrete examples of questions about specific films that a student might ask:

Why are the first ten minutes or so [of Lars von Trier's *The Antichrist*] in black-and-white and in slow motion?
Why do the credits run at the beginning [of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*] rather than at the end?
Why is the last shot [in François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*] a freeze-frame?
Why is the first running sequence [in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*] partly done in animated cartoon form?

Why does the camera "look away" at the moment that Vic Vega cuts off Marvin Nash's ear [in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*]?
Why is the dialogue so hard to hear [in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*]?
Why are there two actresses playing the same role in the same scene [in Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*]?

Questions such as these will plant the seeds for productive re-viewing, analysis, and writing.

PLOT SEGMENTATION

If you suspect, after your first question-generating note-taking session, that you will need to understand the structure of the movie's narrative system in order to write your paper, then you may want to create a *plot segmentation*—a scene-by-scene outline of the entire film—during your first re-viewing. In a plot segmentation, each scene should be described briefly in a separate line, with whatever details strike you as worth noting (for example, the nature of the transition from one scene to another, the setting in time and place, any significant difference in this scene's mood, etc.). How will you know when you've gone from one scene to another? When a film significantly shifts in time, space, or action, a new scene has begun.

Once you've mapped out the individual scenes, you should have a document that is no longer than a few pages. If you find

yourself on a pace to produce a ten-page document, stop—you have probably confused individual *shots* for *scenes*. Here's an excerpt from a plot segmentation of John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939):

> {Title, cast names, and principal production credits}
>
> I. MORNING OF THE FIRST DAY IN TONTO IN THE 1870s
>
> A. The U.S. cavalry office receives telegraph warning that Apache warriors, under the command of Geronimo, are cutting telegraph wires, a sign that they're preparing to attack the white settlers.
>
> B. Six passengers, the driver, and the sheriff board the stagecoach, which is accompanied by a cavalry escort.
>
> FIRST STAGE OF THE JOURNEY TO LORDSBURG
>
> Conversations establish the passengers' basic antipathy toward one another.
>
> A rifle shot announces the appearance of the Ringo Kid; he surrenders his rifle, and the sheriff arrests him as an escaped convict.
>
> Ringo enters the coach.
>
> The journey resumes without interruption.

One of the first things a plot segmentation shows you is the boundaries of each scene. Seeing these boundaries laid out in

one document helps reveal the movie's overall structure (e.g., the number of "acts," the presence of a thematic pattern) and its smallest details (e.g., a consistent use of a certain type of transition between scenes). A plot segmentation is best done during a re-viewing of the film, and with the assistance of the fast-forward button.

SHOT-ANALYSIS CHARTS

Sometimes, your instructor will tell you to pay special attention to a particular scene in the movie you're writing about. Or, if the topic of your paper is yours to determine, you may realize after a few viewings that a particular scene in a movie may be critically important to your paper. Either way, a useful note-taking strategy when you want to analyze a specific scene is the *shot-analysis chart*. A shot-analysis chart, like the plot segmentation, is a "map" of sorts that allows you to see the shot-by-shot structure of a scene, and thus to understand better how the scene works.

The simplest version of a shot-analysis chart would offer four columns and as many rows as there are discrete shots. The columns would be as you see in the sample chart that follows of the beginning of the "assassination" scene in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915): one column for numbering each shot, one that describes each shot in enough detail that you'll be able to recall its details when you later write about it, one that specifies the duration of the shot, and finally, one that

Shot number	Description	Length (sec.)	Type of shot
1	Lincoln's party enter their viewing box.	7	MS *
2	Members of Lincoln's party appear inside the box.	4	MS
3	Lincoln tips his hat to an attendant.	5	MS
4	Lincoln's party in the box; Lincoln appears in it.	4	MS
5	Elsie Stoneman and Ben Cameron sitting in auditorium; they see Lincoln, clap, and rise from their seats.	7	MS
6	View from the back of the auditorium toward the stage. The audience is standing, clapping, and cheering Lincoln.	3	LS **
7	The president's box (as in shot 4); Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln bow to the audience.	3	MS
8	As in shot 6.	3	LS
9	The president's box (as in shot 7); Lincoln enters the box and sits down.	5	MS

* Medium shot
** Long shot

specifies the type of shot (using a shorthand notation). While the shot-analysis chart might initially seem too technical and detailed for your work as a novice film analyst, you'll find that taking the time to create this chart will actually save you time when you start putting together your analysis—you won't have to keep returning to the film to note the shot sequence, duration, and so on.

You might choose to get into more detail by adding other columns. To chart a particularly kinetic scene, for example, you might want to describe the movement of the camera and the movement of figures within the frame. If you suspect that the setting of each shot in a scene is somehow crucial to the argument that you'll want to make, then you probably should add a column specifically dedicated to a description of the setting. If the sound in the film seems to be playing a crucial role in the scenes you're analyzing, then you will want to add a column that allows you to specify the types and sources of sound in each shot. Whether spare or detailed, the main purpose of a shot-analysis chart is to accurately map the progress from one shot to another in the scene. This sort of note taking will help you be precise in your descriptive analysis when you finally write your paper.

USING SHORTHAND NOTATION

No matter what sort of note-taking system or strategy you adopt, it's helpful to have a list of shorthand notations you can use to quickly describe what you are seeing and hearing onscreen. The list included at the back of this book, "Shorthand Notation for Screenings," can get you started, but of course any set of shorthand notations, as long as you apply them consistently, can do the trick.

What Are You Looking For?

You may wonder at this point just what all these tools and tips amount to. What, exactly, are you *looking for*? What's the *point*?

To answer these questions, first we need to recognize that every movie is a complex synthesis—a combination of many separate, interrelated elements that form a coherent whole. Anyone attempting to comprehend a complex synthesis must rely on analysis—the act of taking something complicated apart to figure out what it is made of and how it all fits together.

A chemist, for example, breaks down a compound substance into its constituent parts to learn more than just a list of ingredients. The goal usually extends to determining how the identified individual components work together toward some sort of outcome: What is it about this particular mixture that makes it taste like strawberries, or grow hair, or kill cockroaches? Likewise, film analysis involves more than breaking down a sequence, a scene, or an entire movie to identify the tools and techniques that are used to create it. The investigation is also concerned with the function and potential effect of that combination: Why does it make you laugh, or prompt you to tell your friend to see it, or incite you to join the Peace Corps? The search for answers to these sorts of questions boils down to one essential inquiry: What does it mean?

Intriguingly, movies have a way of hiding their methods and meanings. When movies are consumed the way they

were designed to be consumed (i.e., as entertainment, in one uninterrupted sitting), then their methods, and even their underlying meanings, fade into the background—they become "invisible" to the viewer.

The moving aspect of moving pictures is one reason for this invisibility. Movies simply move too fast for even the most diligent viewers to consider everything they've seen. When we read a book, we can pause to ponder the meaning of any word, sentence, or passage. Our eyes often flit back to review something we've already read. Similarly, we can stand and study a painting or sculpture for as long as we require in order to absorb whatever meaning we need or want from it. But up until very recently, our relationship with movies has been transitory. We experience movie shots—each of which is capable of delivering multiple layers of visual and auditory information—for the briefest of moments before they are taken away and replaced with another, and another, and another. If you're watching a movie the way it's designed to be experienced, you're absorbed in what you're seeing. There's no time (and perhaps no desire) to contemplate the layers of meanings that a single movie moment might present.

Recognizing a spectator's tendency to identify with the camera's viewpoint (which may be omniscient or that of an individual or group), early filmmakers created a film grammar (or cinematic language) that draws upon the way we interpret visual or audio information in our real lives, thus allowing audiences to absorb movie meaning intuitively and instantly.

Cinematic language is a verbal and nonverbal method of communication that uses formal elements to express a movie's thoughts and feelings. These elements are narrative, mise-en-scène (the sum of everything the audience sees, hears, and experiences while viewing), cinematography, acting, editing, and sound.

In the hands of film artists, the flexibility of this language is what makes movies some of the most visceral experiences that art has to offer. For example, the more you learn about the properties of the movie camera, the more you will understand how rich its potential is, not only to record, but also to manipulate the world we see on the screen. And this is why we say that everything you see (or hear) has been put there for a reason, whether it's the way an actor performs, an editor creates rhythm in a sequence, or the sound technicians enhance emotion with tone or volume. The film artist commands cinematic language with a power equal to that of an author writing a novel. Indeed, it is a greater power, for the director works with many artistic and technical collaborators, while the author ordinarily works alone.

So, what are you looking for? In short, you are looking for specific examples of cinematic language that will support the principal idea of your paper. Let's say that you have chosen to write about how Spike Lee develops the theme of power in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), a classic film about racial and ethnic tensions in a New York City neighborhood. Lee made a film rather than a novel because sight and sound seemed to him to be the

most realistic ways to capture the vigorous movement and energy of a large city and colorful cast of characters. He tells his story using cinematic language (or film grammar), meaning that instead of telling us, as a novelist does, he shows us with such expressive elements as cinematography, acting, editing, and sound that create not only shots, but also meaning.

Let's say that from your classroom discussions and background preparation, you have reached two hypotheses: that each of Lee's characters have their own ideas about power, and that their individual ideas play out in larger conflicts between a range of opposing forces of race, ethnicity, family, gender, culture, and philosophy. So, in your first analytical screening, you will be looking for examples of how ideas of power are expressed in cinematography, editing, or sound. As you watch the film, you find that the camera is almost always moving as it records the characters' continuous activity; the editing maintains that pace; and the sound, which is realistic and diegetic, often from a boom box, is loud and vibrant. There is *power* in this movement and volume.

This is just a start. Although these examples demonstrate the interdependent relationship of cinematic form and content, *Do the Right Thing* is not a film that should be evaluated strictly on just formal standards. Its meanings are also a product of social contexts bigger than what's on the screen. Remember that your examples must not only support your position but also consider your readers—what sort of context would they bring to a reading of *Do the Right Thing*?

Armed with some tips and techniques to analyze the formal elements that make up a movie's cinematic language, you will be better able to appreciate the complex way in which they blend to convey meaning. There's no way of knowing what your instructor will require in a writing assignment, but chances are that it will involve analyzing the interaction of form and content—for example, how editing helps to create meaning in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963).

3

Formal Analysis

In the previous chapter, we focused on the elements of movies that are there on the screen for us to see. Analyzing those elements—a process sometimes referred to as *formal analysis*—is an important part (in many cases even the *dominant* part) of the process of writing about movies. But it isn't the only approach you'll want to consider. In this chapter, we will briefly describe the various analytical approaches—starting with formal analysis—that serious students of film are asked to employ in their writing.

What Is Formal Analysis?

Careful analysis of a film's form is an essential skill for any student of cinema. Nearly every essay about movies will employ formal analysis, even ones that are written primarily from another perspective.

So what is formal analysis? Formal analysis dissects the complex synthesis of cinematography, sound, composition,

design, movement, performance, and editing as they are orchestrated by screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, actors, editors, sound designers, and art directors, as well as the many craftspeople who implement their vision. This synthesis seems complex because it is: the meaning of a movie is expressed through the complicated interplay of its many formal elements. These elements range from matters as straightforward as where and when a particular scene takes place, to the subtler issues of mood, tone, and what a character is thinking or feeling.

While it is certainly possible for the overeager analyst to read more meaning into a particular visual or audio component than the filmmaker intended, you should consider that cinematic storytellers exploit every tool at their disposal. Every element in every frame exists for a reason. Your task, as a formal analyst, is to carefully consider the narrative intent of each of these elements. You'll want to consider how the parts of a film interrelate; how some elements recall previous events and foreshadow others; how motifs and subplots function; how actors create characters through voice, gesture, and expression; and how directors, cinematographers, sound technicians, and editors create mood and convey meaning.

When analyzing complex scenes, you might focus on one particular element: lighting or editing, camera movement or costume, music or sound effects, and so forth. While not all scenes will reward such close attention, most films contain segments that are layered with meaning and significance. If

you take the time to examine the way that form and content work together to create meaning, you'll certainly find interesting ideas that can serve as the foundation for your paper.

DESCRIBING FILM FORM

Whatever formal element or elements you choose to write about, you need to offer your reader dynamic, detailed, descriptive writing. In other words, you need to *show*, not merely *tell*, your readers what happens. While your essays cannot provide your reader images twenty feet tall or offer up enhanced surround sound, they can evoke—through language—something of the film's form and your experience of it. Also important to note is that a good description can be analytical: the way you *describe* a scene or shot can convey your *analysis* of that scene or shot. For these reasons it's important to craft your descriptions with great care.

Let's look at a few descriptions of the opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). In the first example, notice that although the writer has something to say, the writing offers very little detailed imagery:

> The theme of vertigo can be seen even in the opening credits. The close-up of a woman's face and the music make one think of psychological problems. The circles that begin to appear seem like a vertigo of some kind. The opening makes it clear that the movie *Vertigo* will be about more than just the fear of heights.

This writing doesn't offer a vivid description of the opening of the film. We don't get a sense of what the woman's face looks like. Nor do we know what sort of music might be playing that would make us understand that we are looking at a woman who is unstable. Moreover, this description doesn't connect the descriptive details to the analysis: the writer *tells* us what we should be thinking, but doesn't *show* us why we should be thinking that way. In sum, the writer has squandered an opportunity to write a description that also shapes her analysis.

The next example, by the film critic and scholar Robin Wood, is more descriptive. Note that Wood not only practices the principle of *Show, don't tell*; he also shapes his description in order to make his analytical points:

> One aspect of the theme of *Vertigo* is given to us by Saul Bass's credit designs. We see a woman's face; the camera moves in first to lips, then to eyes. The face is blank, mask-like, representing the inscrutability of appearances: the impossibility of knowing what goes on behind the mask. But the eyes dart nervously from side to side: beneath the mask are imprisoned unknown emotions, fears, desperation. Then a vertiginous, spiraling movement begins in the depths of the eye, moving outward as if to involve the spectator. Before the film has begun, we are made aware that the vertigo of the title is to be more than a literal fear of heights.[1]

[1] Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 110.

Wood's analysis of the opening credit sequence works both because he helps us to *see* the opening sequence, and because he illustrates the theme of vertigo—an abstraction—via his concrete description of what is projected onscreen.

Whatever formal element or elements you focus on when you analyze a film, make sure that you use language that is as vivid and descriptive as possible. Tie the concrete details and the carefully constructed observations to larger themes and ideas as you see fit, but always make sure that the particulars within the film back you up. Getting the details right is the heart and soul of formal analysis.

DOING FORMAL ANALYSIS: A SCREENING CHECKLIST

As you examine a movie's formal elements, keep in mind the following questions and considerations. For your convenience, we've crafted this list according to the primary categories of film form: narrative, mise-en-scène, cinematography, acting, editing, and sound. If you are uncertain about the meaning of any of the terms used in the following pages, you should consult the "Illustrated Glossary of Film Terms" at the end of this book. If you're eager for more complete discussions of these terms, you should consult a more comprehensive text, such as *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film*.

In general

Whenever you prepare a formal analysis of a scene's use of film grammar, start by considering the filmmakers' intent. Remember that filmmakers use every cinematic tool at their disposal. Very little in any movie moment is left to chance. So before analyzing any scene, first ask yourself some basic questions:

What is this scene about?
After watching this scene, what do I understand about the character's thoughts and emotions?
How did the scene make me feel?
What tools and techniques did the filmmakers use in order to communicate these feelings?
Are there elements of the film that I might not have picked up on in the first viewing?
Did I have any expectations of the movie before I watched it? What were these expectations? Where did they come from? How did they shape my reaction to the movie?
What can I learn from the movie's title? What did the title suggest to me before I saw the movie? What does it suggest now that I've seen it? Has my understanding of the title (or the movie) changed?

Narrative

Narrative is not only the story being told on the screen but also the cinematic and other devices that help tell that story.

Analyzing narrative means examining the effect of a narrator, the relationships of characters, heroes pursuing goals and villains thwarting their progress; it means taking stock of individual scenes and how they fit into the overall plot, and the sequence in which plot points are arranged in cause-and-effect relationships. Questions that can help you examine narrative elements closely include:

Do I see any narrative or visual patterns recurring? If so, what are these patterns, and why is the director repeating them?
Who is the movie's protagonist? What motivates or complicates that character's actions?
What might I learn from categorizing the movie's characters according to their depth (round characters versus flat characters) and motivation?
Is the camera the only narrator of the film (in other words, is the camera the vehicle by which viewers are "told" the story of the movie)? Or is there another narrator, provided to the viewer by voice-over or direct address?
Does the movie use restricted narration to limit the viewer's perspective? If so, what is the effect on the viewer's understanding?
What is the movie's narrative structure? What is the inciting incident? What goal does the protagonist pursue? What obstacles does the protagonist encounter,

and how does she handle them? How is the problem resolved?

Are the plot events presented in chronological order? If not, how are events ordered? Why were they ordered this way?

What can I learn from the movie's subplot? What does this subplot add to the movie? Why is it there?

What nondiegetic elements (voice-overs, for example) are essential to the movie's plot? Do they seem natural and appropriate to the film, or do they appear to be "tacked on" to make up for a shortcoming in the narrative?

Are there scenes that create a noticeable summary relationship between story duration and screen duration? How do these scenes complement or detract from the overall narrative?

Is any major plot event presented onscreen more than once? If so, why do you think the filmmaker has chosen to repeat the event?

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène ("staging or putting on an action or scene" in French) refers to the complete look and feel of a movie—the sum of everything the audience sees, hears, and experiences while viewing it. Aspects of mise-en-scène include the design of sets, costumes, makeup, and props, as well as the composition of shots (i.e., how characters and objects are framed

and their organization, balance, distribution, and movement within that frame). The interplay of design and composition, and the relative emphasis of some elements of both, help create meaning in each shot and scene. The following questions can help you deduce which elements of the mise-en-scène help create this overall feel and thus your response to a movie:

How am I responding emotionally to the movie's design and mise-en-scène? Am I comforted or made anxious by what I see onscreen?

What elements contribute to my emotional response?

Does the movie's design feel coherent to me? Do the various elements of the design (the sets, props, costumes, makeup, hairstyles, etc.) work together, or do some elements work against others? What is the effect either way?

Do the design and mise-en-scène evoke the correct times, spaces, and moods? Or is there something not quite "right" that distracts me?

Does it seem as though the filmmakers were attempting to achieve a "realistic" look with the design and mise-en-scène of this film? If so, have the filmmakers succeeded in that goal?

If making the mise-en-scène seem "realistic" doesn't seem to be important in this movie, what were the filmmakers attempting to accomplish with their design?

How are the individual shots framed? What is the composition within the frame? Where are the figures placed? What is the relationship among the figures in the foreground, middle ground, and background?

Does the film employ an open frame or a closed frame? What visual clues suggest that the framing is open or closed? What is the effect of this framing on the viewer's understanding?

Does the use of light call attention to itself? What effect does the lighting have on the overall meaning of the scene? On the overall meaning of the movie?

Does the shot or scene employ lots of movement? Very little movement? How does this movement complement or detract from the narrative?

Cinematography

Broadly speaking, cinematography is the process of capturing moving images on film. Movies have their own language, and cinematography could be called film's grammar—how that language works to make meaning. Cinematography consists of a filmmaker's choices about the types of shots, quality of lighting, camera angles, and special effects to create the language of cinema, in much the same way a writer picks her nouns, verbs, and adjectives to create meaning on a page. And just as specific words have different connotations, different choices in the cinematography of a film create different meanings and associations on the screen. When analyzing a film's cinematography, consider some of the following questions:

Is the film shot so that I identify with the camera lens? If so, what does the director compel me to see? What is left to my imagination? In sum, how does the director's use of the camera help to create the movie's meaning?

Do the cinematographic aspects of the film—the qualities of the film stock, lighting, lenses, framing, camera angles, camera movement, and use of long takes—add up to an overall look? How can I describe that look?

Which moments in the film convey information that is not reflected in characters' action and dialogue? How do these scenes convey that information?

Are special effects used in the film? To what extent? Are they appropriate to, and effective in, telling the story? Are they effective in making something look real when it isn't?

What kinds of shots am I noticing? Is the cinematographer employing shots other than the medium shot—for instance, extreme close-ups or extreme long shots? What role are these shots playing in the film?

Is the cinematographer deviating from eye-level shots? If there are high-angle shots or low-angle shots, are these shots meant to represent a particular point of view (i.e., are they *POV shots*)? If so, what does the angle convey about that character's state of mind? If not, what does it convey about the person or thing in the frame?

What can I note about the composition of shots within a scene? Are the compositions balanced in a way that conforms to the so-called "rule of thirds," or are the

elements within the frame arranged in a less "painterly" composition? How does the composition contribute to the scene overall?

Have the colors of a shot or scene been artificially manipulated through the use of color filters, different film stocks, or chemical or digital manipulation in order to create a mood or indicate a state of mind? What effect is achieved?

Does the cinematography ever call attention to itself? Is this a mistake or misjudgment on the filmmaker's part, or is it intentional? If intentional, what purpose is served by making the cinematography so noticeable?

Acting

Acting can encompass everything from an actor's performance in a movie to the aura of a movie star's persona in a film. The look, voice, gestures, and interpretation of a character by an actor can contribute enormously to a film's effect on the viewer. And as styles of acting have evolved over more than a century since the movies began, the analysis of acting is dependent on when a film was made, too. The following questions can help guide your response to the acting in a movie:

Why was this actor, and not another, cast for the role?

Does the actor's performance create a coherent, unified character? If so, how?

Does the actor look the part? Is it necessary for the actor to look the part? Why or why not?

What elements are most distinctive in how the actor conveys the character's thoughts and internal complexities: body language, gestures, facial expressions, language? Did the actor use these elements successfully?

Does the actor seem to work well with fellow actors in this film? Put another way, is there chemistry? How do the actors make us feel that chemistry? Conversely, do any of the actors detract from the lead actor's performance?

Does the actor's performance have the expressive power to make me forget that he or she is acting? If so, how did the actor achieve this effect? If the actor is a movie star like Tom Cruise, do I forget that I am watching Tom Cruise, or am I acutely aware that this is a Tom Cruise movie? What are the implications either way?

Editing

Editing is the process of selecting, arranging, and assembling the essential components of a movie—visual, sound, and special effects—to tell a film's story. It creates relationships between different shots and between the components of a shot, and from these relationships emerges a film's meaning. The different types and pacing of edits a filmmaker can make, from flashbacks, montages, rapid cuts or long tracking shots, jump cuts, cross-cutting, and more, contribute enormously to how

we perceive a movie and its story. By asking some of the following questions, you can assess the effectiveness of editing in a film:

Does the movie's editing manipulate my experience of time? Is this condensing, slowing, speeding, repeating, or reordering of time simply practical (as in removing insignificant events), or is it expressive (in that it creates another layer of meaning)? If the play with time is expressive, just what is being expressed?

Does the editing overall seem to create continuity or discontinuity? If the editing is mostly creating continuity, are there nonetheless moments when the editing creates discontinuity? What is the significance of those moments?

What kind of transitions am I seeing from shot to shot (e.g., types of cuts, dissolves, wipes, etc.)? Does the editor use one transitional effect more than others? Are the transitions seamless and nearly unnoticeable, or do they call attention to themselves? Why does the editor use these techniques? What is their effect?

As each shot cuts to the next shot, I'll tap my finger on a tabletop or other surface to get a feeling for the rhythm of the editing. How might I describe that rhythm? Does it stay constant, or does it speed up or slow down? How does the rhythm affect my emotional response to the movie?

Considering the different types of match cuts in the film, what visual or narrative information is each match cut conveying?

Do I see any moments in the movie in which the traditional conventions of Hollywood continuity editing—including use of the master shot, the 180-degree system, shot/reverse shot, match cuts, and parallel editing—are violated in some way? Where and how do these moments appear onscreen? What is the significance of these moments?

Sound

The sound we hear in a film—its music, dialogue, and sound effects—creates meaning just as much as what we see. Sound helps the filmmaker tell a movie's story by reproducing and intensifying the world that has been partially created by the film's visual elements. The choices made for dialogue, music, ambient sounds, and even silence can alter our impression of a scene completely, even if the visuals we see remain the same. Elements to consider when analyzing a film's sound include:

Which sounds are diegetic sounds? Which are nondiegetic? Which are onscreen sounds and which are offscreen sounds?

What types of sound (vocal sounds, ambient sounds, sound effects, music, silence) are used in this shot or scene? To what effect?

Are there moments when the sound creates emphasis by accentuating and strengthening the visual image? What is the purpose of this use of sound?
How does the sound develop characterization?
How is music used? In a complementary way? Ironically? Is the music nondiegetic, or are the characters within the shot or scene able to hear it?
Do image and sound complement one another in this movie, or does one dominate the other?
Does this film use silence expressively? How so?
In this movie, do I hear evidence of a comprehensive approach to sound—one, specifically, in which the film's sound is as expressive as its images? If so, what's going on?

Exploring Meaning

FORM AND CONTENT

Even though we've been spending a great deal of time asking you to consider a movie's formal elements, it's important for us to acknowledge that there is another aspect of any movie that goes hand in hand with its form, a component that shapes and is shaped by form: namely, the movie's *content*.

The terms *form* and *content* crop up in almost any scholarly discussion of the arts. But what do they mean, and why are they so often paired? At the most basic level, we can define

content as the subject of an artwork (what the work is about), and form as the means by which that subject is expressed and experienced. The two terms are often paired because works of art need them both. Content provides something to express; form supplies the methods and techniques necessary to present content to the audience.

However, form doesn't just allow us to *see* the subject/content; it lets us see that content *in a particular way*. Form enables the artist to shape both our experience and our interpretation of that content. As we try to understand how the movie we're analyzing *works*, we thus become more aware of how form and content interplay to make *meaning*. In other words, we come to see *form as content*, in that formal elements convey something important about content. We come to see *content as form*, in that content is shaped by the form it takes.

Complicating the matter futher is that, in addition to the story that any movie tells, there are cultural values, shared ideals, and other ideas that lie just below the surface of that movie. These cultural contents—the story, the assumptions, the values, the ideas—as well as the particular form they take, create various layers of meaning within the movie. These layers of meaning overlap, intersect, and inform one another. The notion that any movie contains layers upon layers of meaning may make the process of looking at movies seem intimidating. But you'll find that the process of observing, identifying, and interpreting a movie's meanings will become

considerably less mysterious once you grow accustomed to actively looking at movies rather than just watching them. It might also help to keep in mind that, no matter how many different layers of meaning there may be in a movie, each layer is either *explicit* or *implicit*.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MEANING

By explicit meaning, we mean a message that the movie presents right on its surface. The central facts of a story, for instance, are explicit. An implicit meaning, by contrast, lies below the surface of a movie's story and presentation, and is closest to our everyday sense of the word *meaning*. In this sense, implicit meaning is an association, connection, or inference that a viewer makes on the basis of the explicit meanings available on the surface of the film.

To tease out the difference between these two levels of meaning, let's look at two statements about *Juno* (2007). First, let's imagine that a friend who hasn't seen the movie asks us what the film is about. Our friend doesn't want a detailed plot summary; she simply wants to know what she'll see if she decides to watch the film. In other words, she is asking us for a statement about *Juno*'s explicit meaning. We might respond to her question by explaining: "The movie's about a rebellious but smart sixteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant and resolves to tackle the problem head-on. At first, she decides to get an abortion. But after she backs off that choice, she gets the idea to find a couple to adopt the kid after it's born. She

spends the rest of the movie dealing with the implications of that choice."

Now what if our friend hears this statement of explicit meaning and asks, "Okay, sure, but what do you think the movie is trying to say? What does it *mean*?" In a case like this, when someone is asking about the meaning of an entire film, he or she is seeking something like the film's overall message or "point." In essence, our friend is asking us to *interpret* the movie—to say something arguable about it—not simply to make a statement of obvious surface meaning that everyone can agree on. In other words, she is asking us for our sense of the movie's implicit meaning. One possible response might be: "A teenager faced with a difficult decision makes a bold leap toward adulthood but, in doing so, discovers that the world of adults is no less uncertain or overwhelming than adolescence."

At first glance, this statement might seem to have a lot in common with our summary of the movie's explicit meaning—as, of course, it does. After all, even though a meaning is under the surface, it nonetheless has to relate to the surface. Our interpretation of the film's implicit meaning therefore needs to be grounded in the surface's explicitly presented details. Nevertheless, if you compare the two statements closely, you can see that the second one is more interpretive than the first, more concerned with what the movie "means."

Explicit and implicit meanings need not pertain to the movie as a whole, and not all implicit meaning is tied to broad messages or themes. Smaller doses of both kinds of meaning

are present in virtually every scene. For example, Juno's application of lipstick before she visits the adoptive father, Mark, is explicit information. The meaning of this action—that her admiration for Mark is beginning to develop into something approaching a crush—is implicit. Later, Mark's announcement that he is leaving his wife and does not want to be a father sends Juno into a panicked retreat. On her drive home, a crying jag forces the disillusioned Juno to pull off the highway. She skids to a stop beside a rotting boat abandoned in a ditch. The discarded boat's decayed condition and the incongruity of a watercraft adrift in an expanse of grass are explicit details that convey implicit meaning about Juno's isolation and alienation. In the end, our ability to understand and appreciate the film depends on our ability to make the associations between its explicit and implicit messages.

4

Cultural Analysis

As we've already said, filmmakers use the conventions of cinematic language to make the inner workings of a movie "invisible" to us as viewers. They want us to be immersed in the imaginative world they've created, not distracted by the technical mechanisms that they've employed to create that world.

The same commercial instinct that inspires filmmakers to hide their methods and mechanisms from our view also compels them to favor stories and themes that reinforce viewers' shared belief systems. For the most part, the mainstream film industry seeks to entertain, not to provoke, its customers. A key to entertaining one's customers is to "give them what they want"—to tap into and reinforce their most fundamental desires and beliefs. Even movies deemed "controversial" or "provocative" can be popular if they trigger emotional responses from their viewers that reinforce yearnings or beliefs that lie deep within. Because so much of this response