

German Cinema: A Study of 20th Century German Culture and History Through Film



GUIDELINES FOR WRITING FILM CRITICISM

Source: German Cinema website by Dr. Peter Gölz

<http://web.uvic.ca/geru/439/essay.html>

Let's start with the difference between a review and criticism. A reviewer writes for those who haven't seen the film, as a kind of consumer guide, and is usually concerned with value judgements (is the film under consideration worth the price of admission?). The critic writes for those who have seen the film, as part of a critical dialogue, and is concerned with articulating the film's thematic concerns (what meanings arise from the narrative concerns and the formal devices of the film?). Because you will be writing criticism and not reviews, your essays should not summarize the plot. When writing film criticism, assume the reader has seen the film. Criticism means developing an argument and supporting it with evidence from the film, not delivering opinion. Here's an example:

You've probably had a conversation like this:

Heh, have you seen PSYCHO?

Yeah, I hated it.

Oh...I loved it.

Oh.

On a scale from 1 - 10 (5 passes) either of these "reviews" (love/hate) would rank as -1 (and that would be generous). It is sheer opinion without any substantiation at all. Opinion must be substantiated. Let's take the "loved it" response and see how it could be improved:

"I loved the suspense."

This gets a 1 since some specificity has been added. But that's all.

"I loved the way Hitchcock got me so involved. I was really frightened a lot. He certainly is a master of suspense. His use of staircases and bathrooms was really scary."

This is still weak and would get a 2 or 3. It's very subjective and chatty. It lacks a clear thesis. Words like "really," "certainly," and "scary" are too vague. The paragraph has little coherence. Much more precision is needed.

"I loved the way the film creates suspense and involvement effectively. Hitchcock does not just scare us or show us horrible things. He involves us with his characters and shows how there is something sinister in all of us, even as viewers."

This is better. It might get a 4. Notice that by now whether you loved PSYCHO or not has little impact on the argument. The paragraph is more than a simple statement of likes and dislikes. The first sentence could begin, "PSYCHO creates suspense and involvement effectively" and not lose any of its force. Opinion, as such, has become secondary to a thesis. This is the beginning of a critical/analytical perspective. (What's lacking is further clarification of the thesis, substantiation with examples from the film to support the argument, and stronger organization of the composition.) The last sentence, for example, introduces the viewer but doesn't make it at all clear how the viewer might be "sinister."

"PSYCHO builds suspense by making us identify with characters strongly. We care about their fate and when they find themselves threatened, we want them to overcome danger successfully. Hitchcock builds this



identification carefully through point-of-view editing, acting, and dialogue. With these formal means, he not only makes us care about people, he also makes us want dangerous, frightening things to happen to them so that we have something to care about. In this way Hitchcock questions our own morality. This point is made particularly vivid by our shift in identification from Marion to Norman. We want Norman to protect his mother, and himself even though we realize he is covering up a crime. But we also want to see him faced with difficulties (like the car that may not sink, or Arbogast's curiosity). These are desires we would feel guilty about in real life but the structure of Hitchcock's film encourages us to have them. We now need to examine in greater detail how Hitchcock gets us to shift our identification from Marion to Norman and to recognize our own darker impulses."

This is better, though somewhat dense; it might earn a 6. The lead sentence introduces the theme clearly. The rest of the paragraph elaborates the point. The paragraph also reworks ideas in the earlier example and expresses them more effectively.

What remains to be seen is how well the argument can be substantiated by concrete references and specific examples involving formal devices such as editing, acting, and dialogue (without summarizing). This will develop a theme, at the expense of a general, overall impression of the film's worth (reviewing). Opinion is present (the critique implies that the film succeeds in an important task through formally appropriate means), but opinion only prompts or motivates the criticism, it does not begin and end it. A provocative, clear theme developed in relation to specific, cinematic qualities -- lighting, acting, camera angle or movement, editing, the juxtaposition of images and sound, the role of dialogue, or pace etc. -- allows an interpretation of the film to emerge that acknowledges both the actual texture of the film and your experience of it. (originally distributed by Film Studies, Queen's University)

A plot summary of who did what, when and where or a description of shots and angles (however eloquent) are NOT adequate work for this course.

Your essays should advance an argument about what the sequence or film under consideration is saying thematically -- this argument (your thesis) must be clearly stated in the introduction. Consider what meanings (thematic implications) are constructed by the use of certain cinematic features (such as lighting, editing, sound, dialogue, characterization, narrative structure, setting). The theme may be thought of as what the film is "saying" about what it depicts -- remember, no film is neutral. One word is not a theme. For example, to say that EASY RIDER is about freedom is not enough. To say, however, that EASY RIDER is about the impossibility of finding freedom gets at the thematic concerns. It is also not enough to say that some device progresses the plot -- remember, you need to advance an argument about the meanings created. Suspense itself is not a theme. It is a device that can carry thematic significance, but you must state how suspense is used and to what thematic end. Your argument is constructed by seeing and analyzing relationships among the parts. For example, consider contrasts (what oppositions does the film set up?), and similarities (pay attention to recurring features -- "running motifs"). It is also important to account for the juxtapositioning of shots -- a shot may be read in relation to what comes after or before. Cause and effect relationships are also important (if the film depicts a disaster, who and/or what does it blame?). You should also pay attention to changes in narrative progression and/or the characters.

You don't have to talk about everything in the sequence/film, but you do need to support your argument about the thematic concerns with sufficient evidence. Concrete examples are a central feature of an analysis since they provide the justification for your argument. An analysis should not only provide evidence, it should also demonstrate how that evidence supports the argument/thesis being advanced. While you need to invoke aspects of the film for your examples, avoid excessive description. For example, if you are arguing that a character is constructed in a certain way, only cite the evidence that supports your analysis -- avoid details that don't add anything to your argument -- if a character's clothing is not important for your analysis, don't bother describing it. If you're not making a thematic point about your observations you're likely being overly descriptive.

A weak paper is simply descriptive with no attempt to pull out the possible implications of what the writer observes. In order to transform the descriptive into the analytical, ask your self "So what?", "What are the thematic implications of what I've observed?". It is not enough, for example, to say something is contrasted with something else -- consider what is being said about the contrast. The point is not to write something with which you think the reader will agree, but to convince him or her that your thesis is solid because you can



justify your assertions with examples. You must end your essays with a conclusion that re-states and ties up your argument.

Don't organize your papers according to the narrative progression -- i.e. starting with the first scene and ending with the last. Organize according to thematic concerns. Aim for an organization that logically develops/builds your argument. There should be a smooth flow from one idea to the next. It is usually a good idea to begin a paragraph with the point you are making (the thematic implication), and then supply the evidence that supports your analysis. The introduction should include not only your thesis statement, but also an indication of how you will develop your argument -- think of it as an orientation or guide for your reader. By the end of your first (or second) paragraph the reader should know what you are going to argue and how you will go about doing it.

There is no one right interpretation, there are, however, better interpretations than others. Make sure the film supports your reading of it. If, for example, there is evidence that contradicts your interpretation, you must account for it.

FORMAT

If secondary sources are used you must cite them in a bibliography. If you use someone's idea (whether it is a direct quotation or not) you must give credit. Use parenthetical references, i.e. (Rentschler 234), not footnotes or endnotes. Footnotes should only be used for information that exceeds bibliographical references.

- A film entry usually begins with the title, in italics, and includes the director and the year. You may include other data that seem pertinent - such as the names of the writer, performers, and producer - between the title and the distributor.

The Marriage of Maria Braun. Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder. 1978.

The Marriage of Maria Braun. Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Perf. Hanna Schygulla, Klaus Löwitsch, Ivan Desny. 1978.

- If you are citing the contribution of a particular individual, begin with that person's name.

Kinski, Klaus, perf. *Aguirre - Der Zorn Gottes*. Dir. Werner Herzog, 1981.

(based on Joseph Garibaldi, ed. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 4th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995. 172.)

- Type and double space. Length is calculated according to the number of words (250) on a standard typed page. Don't increase or decrease the font size to meet the page requirement; use Times, font size 12.
- Use the present tense. Whatever happens in the film happens every time it is run.
- Choose your words carefully. Avoid superlatives ("fascinating," "genius") and vague terms ("interesting"). Be specific. Aim for a clear style -- try reading your work out loud -- if it doesn't make sense to the ear, it won't make sense to the eye. This is also a good way to eliminate convoluted sentences -- any sentence that causes you to gasp for breath is too long.
- Secure your assignments with a paperclip or a staple.
- Number your pages and proof read them.