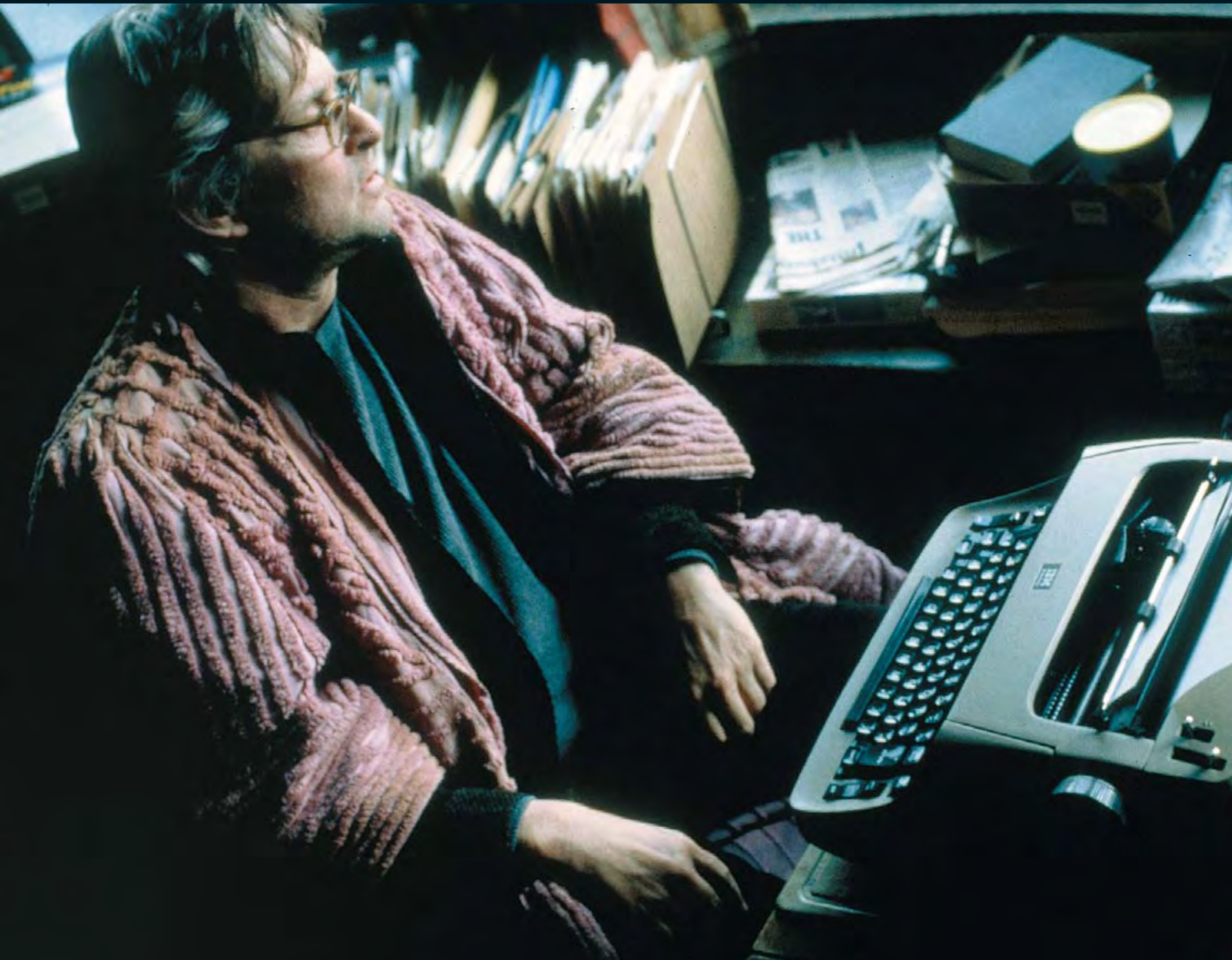
8

Writing about Movies



JOINING THE CRITICAL CONVERSATION ABOUT MOVIES

Most of us have been watching movies since childhood, enjoying them primarily as entertainment. And while movies provide us with a great deal of pleasure and occupy much of our time, we are often blind to their inner workings, their circumstances of production, and the means by which they accomplish their illusions and make their meanings. But like other popular entertainments such as music, literature, theater, and dance, movies are taught and studied in college. First-time film students often feel that their college study of film threatens their innocent enjoyment of movies. Later, most students come to feel they have gained a pleasure more involved, interactive, and challenging. This transformation is like moving from a film debate among friends that pivots around "I loved it" and "I hated it" to an ultimately more satisfying *conversation* that understands film complexly and analytically.[1] That special conversation goes on among scholars and cultural critics, filmmakers and literate moviegoers, and this chapter will help prepare you to join the conversation.

Academic conversations about movies have taken many forms through the years, but what nearly every literate student of movies has done, and what you will be asked to do in your own writing, is to peel back the curtain of invisibility, transparency, and verisimilitude to examine how movies influence our emotions and ideas, how movies are themselves influenced by the culture at large, how creativity and finance influence movie production and reception, how movies influence each other, how movies are influenced by and in turn influence other forms of art, and even how the various elements of a film can complement or contradict one another. A major part of undertaking a critical, academic conversation about film is incorporating, as this textbook does, the specialized and sophisticated vocabulary that is an integral part of—indeed, a prerequisite for entering—this more complex and satisfying understanding of movies. Taking you one step further so that you can apply the knowledge you've acquired, this chapter presents

- fundamental techniques you'll need to write about movies
- major types of writing your professor may ask you to do
- major forms of meaning within and ways of "reading" movies
- some practical tips about the writing process

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[1] The conversations with friends about movies and discussions in film reviews are much different than those that take place in academic film discussion and writing. Popular talk of movies focuses largely on what individuals enjoy. Speakers and writers are expected to state their preferences, know the latest gossip about the stars, and be ready to offer a rating or endorsement of some kind. As Thomas and Vivian C. Sobchack note in *An Introduction to Film,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987): "The opinions quickly and enthusiastically offered in casual conversation often are pitifully weak on paper. They are unsupported, inconsistent, vulnerable to attack; they reveal that the writer has not thought enough about the subject, has jumped to conclusions that have no visible means of support" (424). In academic film writing, you should be less concerned with your personal enjoyment of a film and more attentive to the cinematic, cultural, or historical significance of the film. While personal reactions to a film frequently provide the genesis of academic analysis, they are only a starting point and never stand alone as a thesis.

FUNDAMENTAL TECHNIQUES

SUMMARIZING PLOT

Nearly all assignments that center on movies themselves (as opposed to, say, the economics of the film industry) require you to summarize the plot of one or more films. A good plot summary includes details such as physical and temporal settings and the names of characters and actors. Most of us have been recounting stories to others since we were children, but summarizing a film's plot is not as easy as it first appears. It is difficult, in general, to write both economically and descriptively. If you find yourself following a this-happened-and-then-this-happened model for pages at a time, you are doing more *retelling* than *summarizing*. Below is a good student plot summary for Allison Anders's *Gas Food Lodging* (1992):

> Single mom Nora Evans (Brooke Adams) and her two daughters have man troubles; each of them, in a decidedly different stage of life, discovers her own passion, and reclaims her own past. In a crummy trailer park in New Mexico, Nora's youngest daughter, Shade (Fairuza Balk), desperately wants a "normal" family and proceeds to scout out potential husbands for her mom. Her rebellious and recklessly promiscuous sister, Trudy (Ione Skye), falls in love, but finds herself pregnant and betrayed. The three struggle with loneliness—Shade's absent father, Nora's absent husband, and Trudy's absent lover. After bringing Trudy's new baby into the world, each begins a kind of new life—Shade experiences her first love, Nora finds companionship with a neighbor, and Trudy starts a new life in Houston. (Chantelle Hougland)

Note the deft phrases "crummy trailer park" and "rebellious and recklessly promiscuous sister," which economically and vividly describe setting, character, and dramatic conflicts within the film. Like this one, plot summaries should be largely descriptive and factual. They should reserve personal opinion, yet strive to express the film's tone and treatment of characters and events. Good plot summaries will almost certainly include

- setting (place, time, tone, and treatment: "a contemporary yet gothic New York City in the film noir tradition")
- narrative conflicts (overt conflicts such as feuds, contests, divorces, rivalries, and warfare as well as psychological conflicts such as struggles with self-esteem, weaknesses and addictions, and unrequited love)
- characters (names, traits, and objectives)
- story structure (classic, three-part, with beginning, middle, and end; four-part; five-part)
- conclusion and dramatic resolution (sad, bittersweet, or happy ending; strong or weak closure; setups for sequels)

The student plot summary below suffers from numerous failings:

> Thelma and Louise is a great film that begins when Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis go on a trip and Geena Davis is almost raped by this guy and Susan Sarandon has to kill him and so they run away. Later, Geena Davis gets to meet the very cute Brad Pitt at a hotel. When they run out of money they have to rob and become outlaws. One of the best scenes is when they blow up the truck of the trucker who was making obscene gestures at them on the highway. This is kind of a woman's road trip, but with a surprising ending.

This is obviously a hasty first draft. In addition to using ungraceful language to chattily discuss a fairly serious film, the writer

- fails to underline or italicize the film's title (and to provide the director's name and the release date)
- uses the names of actors rather than characters
- interjects personal opinion ("great film," "best scenes") where neutral description is required
- fails to convey the most basic flow and structure (beginning, middle, end) of the plot
- concludes with a vague reference to a "surprise ending," a strategy best used in advertisements or film reviews, not in the plot summary portion of a critical film analysis

Student writers often fail to provide any plot summary at all. In most student film essays it is key to offer a basic overview of the plot at the beginning of the essay and then to elaborate on specific details when those elaborations help develop the essay's argument. A common but very serious mistake is to hand in a paper that claims to analyze a film but actually just retells the story. If your paper consists of nothing but plot, your teacher will be greatly dissatisfied. Avoid this error by resisting the urge to structure a paper on a chronological retelling of the film's plot. Instead, quickly summarize the plot and then structure the body of the essay to develop your thesis and support your argument, returning to plot exposition only when it aids in those primary tasks. One place to review thousands of plot summaries is the Internet Movie Database—<*www.imdb.com*>—which contains information on almost every professional movie ever made, including links to plot summaries written by nonprofessional contributors to the site (including students like yourself). You will find many examples, some more reliable than others, and often multiple summaries for popular films. Notice how different summaries of the same film may employ diverse styles and tones, thereby creating different emphases. When you compose your own summary, choose the style and emphases that best support your tone and thesis. Remember, however, that while you can model your summary after the ones you see here, you cannot "borrow" other writers' work.

ANALYZING SHOTS, SCENES, AND SEQUENCES

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, scenes, and sequences. Begin by viewing the segment over and over again, 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. Not all films and scenes require such attention, but many do. Many scenes in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) sustain multiple viewings, revealing new details with each pass. For example, during the breakfast table scene that shows the deterioration of Kane's relationship with his first wife, Emily, every form of cinematic expression changes, each one conveying in its way a movement from the honeymoon time of open lovingness in youth to the failed marriage of closed contempt at maturity.

PLOT SEGMENTATION. The best method for understanding a film's narrative system is to create a *plot segmentation,* a scene-by-scene outline of the entire film. Each scene should be described briefly in a separate line, and the entire segmentation should not exceed more than a page or two. One of the first things a plot segmentation shows you is the function and boundaries of the *scene*. Aristotle held that a scene consists of a unified time, space, and action. When a film significantly shifts in time, space, or action, we recognize that a new scene has begun. The plot segmentation helps reveal a film's overall structure (e.g., three or four acts, perhaps following some thematic pattern) and its smallest details (e.g., a motif of transitions between scenes). In chapter 2, Figure 2.3, you'll find a detailed plot segmentation for John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939).

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, notetaking 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 encourages good notetaking practices. Notetaking is a highly personal activity; some may meticulously record a good deal of information in a systematic way, while others haphazardly scrawl ideas and shapes and doodles. You should do whatever works for you. Microcassette recorders and pocket PCs allow for voice recording, and might, especially in personal screenings, be a useful tool, enabling you to keep your eyes on the screen while recording an observation. But there is no substitute for learning to take notes in the dark.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF TAPE, DVD, AND THE INTERNET

Videotapes (VHS and Super VHS, an acronym for Video Home System, are the standard half-inch videotape formats for home-recording, rental, and nonprofessional use in the United States) and digital video discs (DVDs) provide not only convenient playback options for consumers but also useful tools for students of film. Rewind, fast-forward, pause, and scene selection are valuable features for anyone analyzing a film. The pause button allows you to record notes, study the composition of a shot, or view details of setting and background. Because sound and image are so carefully integrated and so compelling together, you might watch a scene with the sound off or, vice versa, turn your back to the screen and only listen to a film. The fast-forward and rewind functions may even reveal something about plotting and structure impossible to notice at regular speed, such as the repetition of cinematic elements, motifs, or themes.

Perhaps the most exciting development in film distribution is the rise of new digital technologies. Both DVDs and the Internet provide amazing amounts of information. Websites for films include cast biographies, filmmakers' commentaries, and production details. As advertising tools, websites accentuate, embellish, and even shamelessly exaggerate films' themes and conflicts, providing blueprints of sorts to the films' focuses and meanings. Independent films, short films, and art films have benefited from the low- to no-expense marketing and distribution possibilities of the Internet, and Web searches may provide information not available through local libraries. E-mail correspondence may provide access to filmmakers not possible through face-to-face interviews, phone calls, or traditional mail.

Many DVDs now provide special features once available only on laser discs. These often wonderfully convey a film's production background, the hopes and plans of its creators, and its technological underpinnings. DVDs are bringing to students of film an unprecedented wealth of material once reserved for industry insiders or academics lucky enough to visit studios, film libraries, and special collections. *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2: The Ultimate Toy Box* DVD includes both films as well as a third disc devoted to detailed explanations of Pixar's elaborate computer animation process, which has revolutionized the American animated film. The DVD for Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2000) includes all of Crowe's *Rolling Stone* articles, the original inspiration for the film; they provide a convenient means of tracing the ways in which Crowe's semiautobiographical film combines, elaborates on, and distorts parts of his own background as a teenage rock-and-roll journalist. A director's edition DVD, *Almost Famous Untitled: The Bootleg Cut* (2001), includes even more extra materials, including thirty-six minutes of previously unseen footage. Such unused or deleted scenes and shots provide interesting lessons in the decision-making process of filmmakers. Sometimes, a scene is obviously cut because of a poor performance, or an entire subplot is removed because it doesn't seem to work. At other times, very good scenes and performances are left on the cutting room floor; these, perhaps, testify to filmmakers or producers who respect shorter running times at the box office and a greater narrative or thematic unity.

Since many deleted scenes were dropped before they underwent sound editing, effects work, and color correction (that is, they are "rough cuts"), they provide dramatic lessons in the degree to which Hollywood polishes its final product—a reminder that the "realism" and naturalness of the final release is a carefully shaped and crafted construction. The bonus footage of Frank Oz's heist film *The Score* (2001) includes three takes of a scene in which Max (Marlon Brando) tries to persuade his longtime accomplice in crime, Nick (Robert De Niro), to commit to a new heist. Oz uses the common shot-reverse shot, an over-the-shoulder treatment. The three takes we see outside the context of the film focus on Brando and vividly illustrate the improvisational talents of this great actor. Viewing these takes in relation to the final scene in the film makes clear how Oz and his editor, Richard Pearson, have combined the best bits of multiple takes into a seamless whole.

WRITING DESCRIPTIVELY

Whether summarizing plot, analyzing a single scene, or mounting a sophisticated historical argument, you need to offer readers dynamic, example-laden descriptive writing. To be more descriptive, writers of all kinds often try to *show,* not merely *tell,* their readers what happens. Herman Melville, for example, could have simply *told* us that near the end of a three-day hunt at sea, a large whale rose from beneath the ocean and breached, trying to escape its human hunters. Instead, in his novel *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville *shows* us the event:

> Suddenly the waters around them slowly swelled in broad circles; then quickly upheaved, as if sideways sliding from a submerged berg of ice, swiftly rising to the surface. A low rumbling sound was heard; a subterraneous hum; and then all held their breaths; as bedraggled with trailing ropes, and harpoons, and lances, a vast form shot length-wise, but obliquely from the sea. Shrouded in a thin drooping veil of mist, it hovered for a moment in the rainbowed air; and then fell swamping back into the deep. Crushed thirty feet upwards, the waters flashed for an instant like heaps of fountains, then brokenly sank in a shower of flakes, leaving the circling surface creamed like new milk round the marble trunk of the whale.[2]

Fiction, of course, offers countless opportunities for descriptive writing. In film essays, it should be developed in passages dealing with shot composition, events of a significant scene, setting and mise-en-scène, the appearance and traits of a character, the performance of actors, evocation of music or sound effects, and the functions of editing or camera movement within a sequence. Danny Peary, a writer of short film reviews, combines a good deal of information into his fine descriptions of a character in Victor Fleming's *Gone With the Wind* (1939), the story of Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and the setting of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982):

> Vivien Leigh is the beautiful, slim-waisted, high-spirited, emotional, spoiled, indomitable, manipulative southern belle Scarlett O'Hara.

> Young children will be excited by its fairytale elements: a journey into a strange land, scary moments (how wonderfully frightening Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch is!), and a dazzling assortment of characters: a wizard (Frank Morgan), a good witch (Billie Burke), Munchkins, winged monkeys, a scarecrow without a brain (Ray Bolger), a tin man without a heart (Jack Haley), and a lion without courage (Bert Lahr). In addition, there are horses of different colors, catchy songs, a castle, talking apple trees with arms and lousy dispositions, and many spectacular occurrences provided by M-G-M's special effects department.

> Foremost no picture since *Metropolis* has presented such a compelling vision of the future. Conceptual artist Syd Mead and designer Laurence G. Paull created a crowded, hazy city full of huge, deserted, or retro-fitted buildings (they called the style "retro-deco") where acid rain falls constantly, electric advertising covers the sides of buildings, and police spinners fly about. Everything looks old and unhealthy.[3]

Your essays cannot provide images twenty feet tall and offer up enhanced surround sound as theatrical movies do. Yet readers expect you to evoke—through language—something of the film and its experience.

Let's look at three attempts to describe and discuss the opening credit sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), the first a very weak student example, the others very good examples from professional writers and academics. Notice that though the student has something to say, the writing is lifeless and offers the reader little detailed imagery:

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[2] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1979), 520–21.

[3] Danny Peary, *Guide for the Film Fanatic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 177, 474, 58.

> The theme of vertigo can be seen even in the opening credits. The close-up of the 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 a fear of heights.

This uninspired writing fails to convey confidence in the writer's knowledge and awareness of the film being discussed. The professional examples are not only more descriptive but also draw richer connections with a larger world of ideas:

> One aspect of the theme of *Vertigo* is given us by Saul Bass' 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 proper has begun, we are made aware that the vertigo of the title is to be more than a literal fear of heights.[4]

Robin Wood's analysis of the opening credit sequence works so well because he links his analysis of the theme of vertigo, an abstraction, with direct, concrete description of what is seen on screen as well as the behavior of the camera. To further our understanding of the sequence, Dan Auiler combines both descriptive language and quotations from Saul Bass, the title designer:

> Bass's sequence begins with the left side of the emotionless face of a young woman (not Novak, but an anonymous actress whose features were both specific and universal): "Here's a woman made into what a man wants her to be. She is put together piece by piece and I tried to suggest something of this as the fragmentation of the mind of Judy," Bass explained. Then it pans down to her lips, then up to her eyes, which shift in both directions before the camera finally dollies in for a close-up of the right eye. Out of this eye comes the title VERTIGO, followed by the colorful Whitney/Lissajous spirals. "I wanted to achieve that very particular state of unsettledness associated with vertigo and also a mood of mystery. I sought to do this by juxtaposing images of eyes with moving images of intense beauty. I used Lissajous figures, devised by a French mathematician in the nineteenth century to express mathematical formulae, which I had fallen in love with several years earlier. You could say I was obsessed with them for a while—so I knew a little of what Hitch was driving at. I wanted to express the mood of this film about love and obsession."
>
> As the credits continue, her eyes fade away—the viewer is now within the eye—and Whitney's images spiral in, then quickly out again, and one is back to the eye. The final title card, "Directed by Alfred Hitchcock," is followed by a fade to black.[5]

One last tip: to force your writing to become more descriptive, try to replace adjectives with nouns and verbs. Adjectives serve as a shortcut for *telling* us things, such as a character's being "interesting" and "quirky." Instead, work a bit harder and *show* us: "Edward Scissorhands (Johnny Depp), true to his name, has long, gleaming scissors for hands; resembles a punk rocker with his pasty complexion, leather outfit, and spiked hair; and can skillfully style both hair and hedges with his intimidating appendages."

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

[5] Dan Auiler, *Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 155.

MAKING AN ARGUMENT

In the analytical portion of a writing assignment, your teacher expects you to express opinions, make claims, present evidence, and build arguments. That is, you need to make an argument (something debatable, as opposed to a commonly accepted fact) and then support it. People argue all the time in their daily lives without doing more than express their feelings and opinions, but in academic contexts you must support your arguments with ideas, evidence, and references to authorities. Whether you write a single paragraph or a twenty-page essay, your teacher expects you to follow that accepted practice. Note the difference between merely making an assertion, such as

> *Memento* is a contemporary film noir.

and supporting an assertion with ideas and evidence:

> In using flashback, black-and-white cinematography, a murderous woman, and a doomed and flawed protagonist, *Memento* adapts key elements of the film noir tradition into a contemporary psychological narrative.

The latter provides the reader with details regarding genre and film form and history; the former offers no insight into the writer's reasons for making the given claim.

DEVELOPING A THESIS.

Students sometimes go beyond neglecting to support an argument, and forget to even make one. An argument is something that is debatable. In Figure 8.1, the column on the left holds five unarguable and unimpressive statements, most either facts or descriptions of a subject area; the column on the right offers five debatable theses, which include not only facts and topics but also elaborations on those topics.

As you can see, a topic alone does not make a thesis; additionally, a thesis requires not only an opinion about a topic but also, typically, ideas about the origin, function, cause-and-effect relationships, value, or future development of a topic. For example, a paper that set out to demonstrate that *Star Wars* was an important science fiction film would have little to prove. Almost anyone would agree that the box-office and popular success of *Star Wars* guarantee the label "important science fiction film." While building a paper around an easily winnable point might seem like a safe bet, readers and teachers recognize this as a meaningless exercise and are not impressed. Some topics are more debatable and controversial than others, but even the question of *Star Wars* and its place in the science fiction film canon provides any number of interesting and debatable theses. We might start by improving on the vague phrase "an important science fiction film":

> *Star Wars* became one of the most important science fiction films of the last century by offering an imitable and profitable alternative to Hollywood's dependence on science fiction literary classics (Byron Haskin's *The War of the Worlds,* 1953) or pulp narratives and "B" movies (Christian Nyby's *The Thing from Another World*, 1951). By simultaneously emphasizing special effects, large-scale spectacle,

FIG. 8.1 STATEMENT VERSUS THESIS

Statement	**Thesis**
Statistics show a rise in suicides during the holiday season.	The rise in holiday-season suicides results, in part, from the greater expectations of personal happiness, family bonding, and financial freedom that the season encourages, ideals that starkly contrast with the interior state of the morbidly depressed.
The 1960s were a time of social upheaval.	The social upheavals of the 1960s were seen either as threats to the social order or as opportunities for social change, depending on one's political orientation; to this day, the left and right continue to view the '60s in this polarized way.
Many comic teams utilize a "straight" man and a more "wacky" partner.	Analysis of the film roles of Jim Carrey reveals a performer who combines the traditional comic team's wacky partner and straight partner into a single person, with some roles maintaining a greater split and others a greater synthesis of these two types of comic performer.
Toy Story was the first feature-length, all-digital animated film.	The subject of the first feature-length, all-digital animated film, *Toy Story,* was mass-produced toys, a choice that helped the filmmakers achieve realism in the new medium, as the plastic and universal appearance of toys was mimicked with relative ease by the computer animation processes then in use.
Alfred Hitchcock's films were suspenseful.	Alfred Hitchcock generates suspense by providing the viewer with more information about and knowledge of possible danger than he provides his unsuspecting characters, who remain blindingly unaware of impending harm because they are preoccupied with other, often trivial matters; the type of frustration for viewers that results accentuates and characterizes what we call "Hitchcockian suspense."

> and the fundamentals of the action/adventure genre, *Star Wars* opened up science fiction to a mass, demographically diverse audience, whose members were greatly expanded beyond the genre's traditional fans (dedicated enthusiasts and youth).

To defend this thesis, you might use box-office records, observations from film historians and producers, and a quick survey of the types of science fiction films in the decades before and after *Star Wars*. The point, of course, is that the passage above makes claims that are debatable at their core. Another writer might argue that, say, *Star Wars* was *not* an important science fiction film, since it didn't offer the kind of original story ideas or formal or stylistic innovations found in a film such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). A third writer might argue that *Star Wars* was important primarily because of its commercial success, which resulted from innovative and elaborate marketing, orchestrated with a wide variety of merchandise (posters, books, toys) in such a way as to develop what is now commonly known as a "franchise." A fourth writer might extend mythologist Joseph Campbell's famous arguments that *Star Wars* utilized ancient and fundamental myth structures and relate these ties to the movie's success and importance.[6] At this point, we have a lively and revealing debate in four completely distinct arguments regarding the "importance" of *Star Wars*. The exchange of such diverse viewpoints perfectly characterizes academic study; students who join these discussions with curiosity and fresh ideas will develop papers both they and their teachers will enjoy.

INCORPORATING SOURCES

Sometimes, you'll find another writer's opinion so well put, or so supportive of your own point, that you'll want to use it in your own writing. There are three basic ways of enhancing and supporting your own writing with the work of others: summary, paraphrase, and quotation.[7] Summary and paraphrase are useful when you want to employ the ideas of another writer but not their exact expression. Summary condenses a good deal of information into a shorter passage, while a paraphrase might equal or even exceed the original source in length. Use quotation when the dynamic language of the original source can enhance your writing. Paraphrase quotations only when they are especially difficult to understand, making a simplified interpretation possibly helpful to readers.

Each time you employ any of these methods, you must also employ a system of citation and documentation that credits the source author and enables readers to continue the research process. One place to find good summaries of academic film articles is in the brief descriptions and abstracts used in journals and reference sources to describe their content for readers. Here, for example, is a summary used in *Cinema Journal:*

> Some film scholars charge that director John Ford was complicit in the savage racism of *The Searchers'* central character, Ethan Ed-

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[6] See Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth,* ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 29–30.

[7] A good source of information on these practices is Brenda Spatt, *Writing from Sources,* 5th ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1999).

> wards. This essay demonstrates that Ford viewed Ethan as a negative, psychologically damaged, and tragic figure. By comparing the changes made from the source novel to the shooting script to the final film, a constant darkening of Ethan's personality is revealed—most of it directly attributable to director John Ford.[8]

Notice how film scholar David Bordwell uses paraphrase and quotation seamlessly and economically:

> According to Pudovkin, the camera lens should represent the eyes of an implicit observer taking in the action. By framing the shot a certain way, and by concentrating on the most significant details of the action, the director compels the audience "to see as the attentive observer saw." The change of shot will then correspond to "the natural transference of attention of an imaginary observer."[9]

Quotations should exactly replicate their sources. You may add or remove words, phrases, or punctuation marks from within quotations by carefully signaling your changes via ellipses (three periods) or via square brackets. (Some style guides recommend that you place ellipses *within* square brackets.) Use ellipses to tighten up a quotation or to remove unwanted material. Use square brackets to add words, phrases, or punctuation marks in order to clarify or correct sentence meaning, grammar, or tense. If you use square brackets, you may emphasize words with italics as long as you note this change: "This film [*Raiders of the Lost Ark*] combines a *Saturday matinee 'B' movie style* with big-budget special effects and 'A' film plotting" (emphasis mine).

Just as you shouldn't include too much plot summary in a film essay, so, too, you shouldn't become dependent on quotations. Be sure to break up strings of quotations with summary, paraphrase, and your own thoughts and writing. Similarly, be sure to introduce each quotation, not by merely repeating the exact meaning of the quotation but by providing information about the author, the larger context of the source, or some discussion of how the quotation serves your thesis, like so:

> Although for the most part the present study has sidestepped that issue of crossed boundaries in favor of a limited but critically *useful* vantage—we also need to acknowledge and explore the extent to which the science fiction film does connect with other formulas, to which it follows the dictum offered by Rick Altman, that "Hollywood's stock-in-trade is the romantic combination of genres, not the classical practice of generic purity."[10]

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM. Every year, thousands of students underestimate both their most significant reader—their teacher—and themselves by trying to turn in the work of others as their own. *Plagiarism* (passing off the words and ideas of others as one's own) is one of the more pathetic of crimes, as its greatest victim is ultimately the perpetrator: plagiarizing curtails one's chance to learn and develop as a writer and thinker. Unlike many crimes, plagiarism actually leaves behind all the necessary evidence at its scene: that is, the writing itself. Teachers, who have spent years teaching students to write and have read countless student essays, are keenly aware of the great difference between professional and student writing. They also notice when wonderful student-level writing arrives out of the blue, with no apparent development or context. Additionally, the same Internet technologies that make online plagiarism possible also empower teachers, who can utilize sophisticated search programs to scan literally millions of documents for suspect phrases and sentences. The greatest irony is that properly citing and incorporating sources is a much-respected and academically rewarded ideal. You can do the right thing and receive good grades. Or you can do the wrong thing and gamble with your entire academic career.

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[8] Arthur Eckstein, "Darkening Ethan: John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) from Novel to Screenplay to Screen," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 1 (fall 1998): 3.

[9] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 9.

[10] J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 179.

Of course, you don't have to cite everything you read. The basic rule is to place between quotations and cite any literal phrase, sentence, or passage you transcribe. Our language makes possible billions of different sentences, and even a dull, straightforward sentence created by someone else needs to be placed in quotations and its source cited. Deciding whether you need to give credit for an idea is a bit more difficult. Facts that can be found in multiple sources (e.g., the director of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, or the release date of Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*) need not be cited. Anything more debatable (such as the idea that hardly any two sentences on the planet are identical) may be traceable to another source (linguist Noam Chomsky frequently receives attribution for his thoughts on the uniqueness of language and sentence structure). Moreover, a unique structure or sequence of ideas should be cited.

ASSIGNMENTS AND STRATEGIES

It's impossible to discuss here all the possible writing assignments you might encounter and paper strategies you might employ in a film course, but we can address the more common ones. Some teachers like to begin the semester by having students write short pieces that require them to practice, in isolation, some of the fundamental techniques set forth above, such as summarizing plot, writing descriptively, making an argument, and incorporating sources. Most teachers, of course, expect students' major essays to demonstrate competence in all such techniques.

Respect length requirements that teachers impose on assignments. Short assignments (250 to 1,000 words—one to four pages) force you to condense a good deal of information into a limited format. Longer assignments (four to fifteen pages) provide ample room for you to develop a fuller argument, to compare multiple films or scenes or styles, and to include extensive details, examples, and research sources.

A common complaint from undergraduate writers is that they don't know what their teachers expect from particular assignments. When asking a teacher for clarification and direction, offer a few ideas you would like to develop. If you don't yet have a thesis, at least mention an aspect of a film or the course you are interested in and share this enthusiasm with your teacher.

Some teachers help by providing examples of "A" papers, but teachers and students may still have quite different ideas about what constitutes excellent work. In part, this disparity has to do with the distinct models of outstanding film analysis that teachers and students have in mind. Students perhaps think of movie reviews and the writing they find in textbooks like this one, meant for introductory students. While teachers are aware of these forms of film writing, they also appreciate the more sophisticated analyses they know from graduate work and professional books and journals. Teachers don't expect undergraduates to deliver publishable essays, but they may think of undergraduate writing assignments as exercises toward developing general competence in critical writing and specific competence in writing about film. To further that development you should seek out excellent writing about film by students, academics, and others, whether you find them on your own (e.g., the journals of student writing on the movies and prize-winning essays published in academic publications) or ask your teacher or librarian to suggest examples of high-quality academic film writing. (The leading academic journals are *Cinema Journal,* produced by the Society for Cinema Studies; *Journal of Film and Video,* produced by the University Film and Video Association; and *Film Quarterly,* an independent journal published by the University of California Press.)

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Perhaps the most frequent assignment type is the critical analysis of a single film. The critical analysis challenges you to take your subjective observations and feelings about a topic and to develop these into your own argument that incorporates objective facts within a framework that displays awareness of specialized knowledge and vocabulary. Some teachers leave their assignments fairly wide open, while others provide detailed instructions, in effect telling writers exactly which topic to cover, which elements to discuss, possibly even which scene or shot to analyze. No matter how detailed the assignment instructions, most teachers still look for originality and strong, debatable assertions from their students. Even at the beginning of a course, any writing assignment typically has a larger context: textbook, readings, lectures, online materials, and so forth. Students who carefully relate the ideas and terms being discussed in the course to the film they are writing about demonstrate their learning and development within the course.

When writing about a single film, it is crucial to get the details correct: title, date, director, character and actor names, plot events, and so on. Remember that focusing on a particular film, even a particular shot, does not mean that you cannot mention other films—indeed, other artworks—that might help explain the function and role of the work in question.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST. "Comparison and contrast" is one of the most common forms of analytical writing. Within film studies, the method can be used in myriad ways, involving one movie or a number of movies; the titles below show how the comparative approach seems inherently suited to forceful, debatable, and revealing theses:

Domestic Ideals and Film Noir Dysfunction in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Horror Film Violence Before and After Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)

French and American Style and Sensibility in Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990) and John Badham's *Point of No Return* (1993)

The first example promises to compare ideology and genre across two seemingly diverse films, both of which include film noir elements though they are usually categorized in other genres. The second example makes a historical contrast, a before-and-after argument. The third example compares national cinemas, as it considers the same story told in two different countries: *Nikita* in France and *Point of No Return,* the remake, in the United States.

In such essays, the writer seeks those similarities and dissimilarities that are significant—that is, when presented together, they can help deepen our knowledge of a topic. When using this approach, you should carefully consider how you organize your paper. If you want to stress the similarities of two things, you should begin by describing the dissimilarities. More frequently, you want to stress the differences, so your paper will end with them, saving the most significant and surprising for the later pages. The format works very well if you either take two things assumed to be very similar and show important differences (say, contrasting Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* [1972] with his *The Godfather: Part II* [1974]) or take two things assumed to be very dissimilar and show important similarities (as in the suggested comparison between *Blade Runner* and *It's a Wonderful Life* above). You can use a long list of elements (say, all the major formal elements: cinematography, editing, acting, and so forth) to order the comparisons, but an effective paper requires an argument as well. A compare-and-contrast paper that offers nothing more than widely known similarities and differences and no broader, enlightening framework will be mediocre at best.

MOVIE REVIEW VERSUS CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Writing about film in college is made difficult by the strong desire of most teachers that students *not* mimic the one type of film writing everyone has had some experience of: the movie review. While many film reviewers are excellent writers and are well aware of the style and methods of academic film writing, the popular and public form of the film review contrasts starkly with the academic film analysis. Simply put, film reviews

- present a brief critique of the film's basic stylistic systems
- mention unusual human interest stories about the film's cast, crew, and production
- offer the writer's personal response to the film

but don't

- assume the reader has seen the film
- recount the film's complete plot
- give away endings and key transitions by discussing "spoilers"

An academic film essay, however, could violate all six of these conventions without drawing criticism. Indeed, most of the conventions of the film review are actually discouraged in academic film analysis.

A few film courses are devoted to teaching film reviewing and criticism, and many courses assign readings in the genre. Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert, and a number of others provide excellent models of the form. James Agee, author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *A Death in the Family* and film critic for *Time* and *The Nation,* is considered one of film reviewing's greats. Consider the excerpts below from the reviews of Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Agee wrote the first for the general readership of *Time:*

> The solidest single achievement of the movie, in fact, is to give the Smiths something to be sorry about: the real love story is between a happy family and a way of living. Technicolor has seldom been more affectionately used than in its registrations of the sober mahoganies and tender muslins and benign gaslights of the period. Now and then, too, the film gets well beyond the charm of mere tableau for short flights in the empyrean of genuine domestic poetry. These triumphs are creditable mainly to the intensity and grace of Margaret O'Brien and to the ability of Director Minnelli and Co. to get the best out of her. Her song ("Drunk Last Night") and her cakewalk, done in a nightgown at a grown-up party, are entrancing little acts. Her self-terrified Halloween adventures, richly set against firelight, dark streets and the rusty confabulations of fallen leaves, bring this section of the film very near the first-rate. To the degree that this exciting little episode fails, it is because the Halloween setup, like the film as a whole, is too sumptuously, calculatedly handsome to be quite mistakable for the truth.

For his review in *The Nation,* Agee employed a witty, sophisticated style and tone well suited for that magazine's select, highly educated, politically and culturally engaged audience:

> Her annihilation of the snowmen she [Tootie, played by Margaret O'Brien] can't take to New York would have been terrifying if only she had had adequate support from the snowmen and if only the camera could have had the right to dare to move in close. Being only the well-meant best that adult professionals could design out of cornflakes or pulverized mothballs or heroin or whatever they are making snow out of just now, these statues were embarrassingly handicapped from their birth, and couldn't even reach you deeply by falling apart.[11]

Articles found in film-specific magazines like *Sight and Sound* and *Film Comment* are often similar to these reviews. Notice the informal, witty tone of this paragraph from critic David Thomson:

> But with *Meet Me in St. Louis* just about everyone involved reckoned it was an unlikely project from the start. The only way you could have faith in it was to tell yourself that Arthur Freed was a man of immense taste and refinement. End of joke. Arthur Freed might have been the production chief of Metro musicals, with more talent at his disposal than any executive had ever seen. But he was the proverbial slob and arse-kisser. So trust Arthur! Except that Arthur was always asking Mr. Mayer, "Whaddya you think, boss?" And LB didn't think this one would fly.[12]

Most teachers would not appreciate the informal, playful tone and style common in magazine pieces. Ultimately, your topic, thesis, and audience determine the tone and style you should employ. Occasionally, a freer, witty style can fit an academic paper, but you should check with your teacher early in the writing process if you wish to attempt this personable tone.

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[11] James Agee, *Agee on Film* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 356–57, 127.

[12] David Thomson, "A Blind Date in Culver City," *Sight and Sound* 11, no. 12 (December 2001): 12.

Now let's look at some academic analyses of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Note how film scholar J. P. Telotte, here writing for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, maintains a formal tone, goes into greater detail, and spends more time on a single scene than would most film reviews and magazine articles—in other words, he *analyzes* the film:

> What finally consoles her [Tootie] and the rest of the family, though, is another musical inspiration. Mr. Smith suddenly proclaims that they will stay in St. Louis after all, that their happiness as a family—and analogously, as part of a larger society—is more important than his individual advancement; and that announcement seems engendered by a gradual swelling of the "Meet Me in St. Louis" theme, as if it were playing inside his head, inspiring his awakening to the true needs of the family. It recalls the film's opening when that soundtrack music signaled a society at one with itself, happy in the unifying prospect of the fair, while it reminds us as well of Mr. Smith's prior rejection of that theme when he quieted Rose and Esther's duet. Clearly, it was not so much the song as its spirit which, in his self-assertive way, Mr. Smith had earlier denied. Its embrace here signals not simply a change of mind, but a reconsideration of the person's place in society; it thus heralds a rebirth of the family, issuing almost paradoxically from a redefining of the ego.[13]

Telotte's analysis serves his larger thesis: an exploration of Vincente Minnelli's unique reconciliation of the musical genre's competing thematic concerns with self and society. To support such an expansive thesis, the writer needs more room, evidence, and analysis than we commonly find in film reviews and articles in popular magazines.

Thus when Scott Higgins focuses on Minnelli's use of color in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, his formal analysis runs twenty-one pages, space that makes possible great attention to detail:

> Each section of the film begins with a black and white still of the Smith house surrounded by colorful filigree illustrations of seasonal motifs. Minnelli explained that he intended these illustrations, resembling turn-of-the-century greeting cards, to help set the film's nostalgic tone. . . . But beyond this, they present a device for highlighting the power and presence of color. For example, the art-card for "Summer" features a band of pale yellow on a beige background with white daisies and red roses accenting the upper corner of the frame. Some green accents, and gold gilt around the photo of the house, complete the palette. . . . The camera dollies forward until the monochrome image entirely dominates the frame. Then color bursts onto the screen, and the frozen image begins to move. . . . The red and white striped awnings and rust colored roof of the Smith house contrast with the light blue sky. A beer wagon with a green and yellow canopy moves leftward across the frame, only to be passed by a bright red automobile. As the camera cranes toward the house, extras passing along the sidewalk offer more pink, green, and blue accents. The image is organized as a parade of color, demonstrating Technicolor's then unique capacity for simultaneously rendering sharply defined reds, yellows and blues.[14]

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[13] J. P. Telotte, "Self and Society: Vincente Minnelli and Musical Formula," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9, no. 4 (winter 1982): 186.

[14] Scott Higgins, "Color at the Center: Minnelli's Technicolor Style in *Meet Me in St. Louis,*" Style 32, no. 3 (fall 1998): 449–70; quotations, 458.

If a teacher asks you to do formal analysis in an essay, at least part of your essay should offer the kind of detailed description and analysis that you see in the two examples above. Here are two more good examples of formal analysis, both by critic Gerald Kaufman:

> One extraordinary moment, in which acting was combined with action to provide a remarkable cinematic effect, comes when an unnoticed Mr. Smith has seen, through an upstairs window, Tootie's smashing of the snowmen. He walks downstairs, sits in his usual armchair, and gets out a match to light his usual cigar. The lighting of the match illuminates the whole screen, and its flame is simultaneous with, and symbolic of, Smith's change of mind: the family will stay in St. Louis.
>
> Just as the opening shot of each of the seasonal segments was framed like a greetings card, so, over and over again, Garland herself was framed as in a greetings card. In the Trolley Song she was framed by a circle composed of the decorated hats of the other young women of the trolley-car. At other times she was framed in windows, in mirrors, in a doorframe, by a trellis, by artfully cast shadows. She was shown to superb advantage in luminous close-ups, and she was given freer reign to act, both humorously and dramatically, than ever before. She was the focal point of a lovely succession of patterns which were constantly shifting and re-forming.[15]

In the first passage, Kaufman ties acting, staging, and lighting to a thematic, symbolic, idea expressed in the film. In the second passage, he describes a consistent, filmwide pattern of composition centered on Judy Garland; Kaufman offers this as an example of how Minnelli had "turned *Meet Me in St. Louis* into a love letter to Judy Garland" (60).

RESEARCH PAPER

More is expected of a college research paper than a high school research paper: a greater number of more sophisticated references, more careful writing and argument. Some college teachers like to end a course with the research paper as a major assignment. Writing such a paper requires serious choice, consultation, and use of outside sources, a process that takes considerabile time. The quality of your sources will determine the quality of your paper; one journal article or one book is never enough. Teachers look to not just the number but also the variety of sources consulted, which might include reviews, scripts (and, where appropriate, the stories and novels from which they were adapted), historical and cultural treatments, essays on film theory, and industry trade papers and journals such as *Variety* and *American Cinematographer*. If you were writing a paper on Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), for example, you might consult a number of film sources; but you also might draw from the mountain of official and unofficial documents concerning Kennedy and his assassination. In addressing other paper topics, you might act like a journalist, e-mailing or phoning filmmakers or other experts for information and commentary. Don't bother anyone if you don't have a clue what you want to write about; but if you have specific questions and interests, experts may be happy to help (especially via e-mail).

While the amount of online information continues to grow, nearly all teachers require and expect hard-copy sources and trips to the campus library. Most undergraduate writers of research papers face one of two problems: they are unable to find enough resources or they find so much material that they feel overwhelmed by the ideas and arguments. If you run into either of these difficulties, you may need help honing your research skills or expanding or focusing your research questions and thesis. Speak with your teacher, a librarian, or, if your campus has one, a consultant in a writing center. Always remember two crucial points about the process of writing a research paper. First, the research must be driven by a goal: there must be a hypothesis or a question or series of questions you want answered. Second, the research itself will frequently alter that initial goal. Students often make the mistake of conducting research without any real agenda or, conversely, of clinging to their original agenda despite new information and ideas arising out of the research process. It is best to think of your hypothesis and research work as evolving together. Many writers expect to revise their essay titles and thesis statements as they work.

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[15] Gerald Kaufman, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 49, 60.

Nearly any film essay might use historical facts and references, but the typical film paper is primarily designed as a vehicle for understanding film form or theory, or for exploring cultural issues through films. Most pure film histories are written by experts—graduate students working on their Ph.D.'s, professors, and professional historians. However, students should not neglect the opportunity to do original historical research in film if their course and instructor encourage such approaches. Unlike, say, ancient Roman history, film history is everywhere and can frequently be uncovered by those willing to ask some questions. Any North American community, whether small town or big city, has probably been showing films since the days of the nickelodeon. There may have been (or might still be) an old theater in town worth researching. Check for historical landmarks and historical societies, which might know of experts or hold a cache of old press clippings regarding theaters and films in your town. Perhaps visit the town's local library, not just the campus library. Back copies of the local newspaper might reveal a storied past for a local theater, celebrity, or filmmaker. It's possible your campus once hosted film societies or screenings of note. In the sleepy college town of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, a regal old theater continues to show film classics in the same space that once hosted the Marx Brothers, the Engineering Department holds information and records regarding a local professor who helped develop an early technology for sound film, and any number of award-winning independent filmmakers have gone to school.[16]

EXPLICIT, IMPLICIT, AND IDEOLOGICAL MEANINGS

Sometimes we are happy to be entertained by a movie without delving deeper into its meaning. But more often than not we leave a movie theater thinking about what the movie seems to be saying, or implying, or hinting at. We wonder what, ultimately, the movie means. And we often find that other viewers have different ideas about the movie's meanings. Although any one movie can mean a great number of things, and there is plenty of room for argument about those meanings, movies suggest and viewers create three basic kinds of meaning: explicit, implicit, and ideological.

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[16] Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery do an exemplary job of explaining and promoting this type of grass-roots film history in *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

Explicit meaning, which is closest to our everyday understanding of the word *meaning,* is a statement that is a little more sophisticated than plot summary but not overly interpretive. Widely popular movies succeed because they express such meanings, visions of life, with which most of the general public agrees. George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) is explicitly about many things: the training of a Jedi knight; the conflict between the Galactic Empire and the Rebel Alliance; the interactions among robots, humanoids, and nonhumanoid life forms; the belief that good will eventually triumph over evil. While explicit meaning is on the surface of a film for all to observe, it is unlikely that every viewer or writer will remember and acknowledge every part of that meaning. Because movies are rich in plot and detail, good analyses or "readings" of movies must begin by taking into account the breadth and diversity of what has been explicitly presented. A viewer who recalls how Luke Skywalker's (Mark Hamill) childhood experience shooting womp rats prepares him for the amazing shot that destroys the Death Star at the end of *Star Wars* will be organizing and associating just two of the thousands of pieces of information in the film. Taking good notes, crafting good plot summaries, studying reviews and critical essays, and reviewing tape and DVD copies of films can help you remember and describe such information.

Implicit meaning, which lies below the surface of explicit meaning, is an association or connection or inference that a viewer makes based on the given (explicit) story and form of a film. To recognize Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) as a *father figure* to Luke Skywalker is to make a simple inference, a type of implicit meaning. To compare Han Solo (Harrison Ford) to a western outlaw hero, or to compare the silly bickering of R2-D2 (Kenny Baker) and C-3PO (Anthony Daniels) to comic buddy teams such as Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello, is to make an implicit association, to *read between the lines.* Another common type of implicit meaning occurs at the thematic level of narrative. Themes are shared, public ideas—metaphors, adages, myths, and familiar conflicts and personality types; thematic structures may or may not be made explicit over the course of the narrative, but perceptive viewers will recognize them. For instance, the Camelot legend runs throughout *Star Wars,* but the film's closest explicit reference to this world of ideas is merely the term Jedi *knight.*

When a movie communicates beliefs—whether belonging to the filmmakers, to one or more characters in the movie, or to the time and place in which the movie was made—it expresses *ideological meaning:* a person's or group's worldview. Such meaning is the product of specific social, political, economic, religious, philosophical, psychological, and sexual forces that shape the filmmakers' perspectives; it may be symptomatic of a group, time, place, and so on. A movie's own worldview, its belief system—its ideology—may be highly personal, may be at odds with others' views, and may lead viewers to interpretations that don't agree with all of the movie's explicit and implicit meanings. For instance, an ideological reading of *Star Wars* might note how the film's galactic politics echo a particular American historical perspective, with the Empire evoking both the British Empire (through actors' English accents) and Nazi Germany (through Darth Vader's helmet and other costume features) and its heroic depiction of the

Rebel Alliance (Han Solo as cowboy hero and Luke Skywalker as all-American boy next door) working within a familiar celebration of American revolutionary democracy as leading a free and diverse galactic (international) coalition—a traditional American historical (*ideological*) view of the nation's role in the Revolutionary and First and Second World Wars.[17]

GENRE STUDY

Filmmakers and marketers depend greatly on the major Hollywood genres to ensure that a particular film has a decent chance of finding an appropriate audience. Genres offer familiar story formulas, conventions, themes, conflicts, and immediately recognizable visual icons, all of which together provide a blueprint for creating and marketing a type of film that has proven successful in the past. Whether or not a paper assignment focuses on genre, nearly any kind of film writing will benefit from an awareness of it. Understanding some basic ways in which genre functions will help you develop interesting critiques of genre films.

Music offers the notion of *variations on a theme,* the idea that multiple composers can take a melody and compose endless variations on it, in which it remains recognizable. Some compositions will be more interesting and expert than others. In poetry, strict adherence to a prescribed form, such as the sonnet or haiku, allows for endless variation. The most fundamental film-genre analysis thus consists of asking how a film, scene, or image varies or conforms to the genre's standard. For the genre filmmaker, the challenge is to offer enough original variation on the theme or genre to satisfy viewers who want both the familiar and the unfamiliar, who expect both *convention* and *invention*. A focus on genre involves asking where—in what plot developments, scenes, stylistic systems—the film attempts to invent and where it is following convention or, even, as is frequently the case, paying homage to a classic forerunner of its genre.

One simple but very effective way of analyzing genre convention and a particular film's place within a genre is to break down a movie into three discrete temporal aspects: *story formula, scene convention,* and *iconic shot.*[18] This three-part breakdown helps you isolate the basic conventions of every genre. Story formula refers to the overall plot structure found in a genre. In science fiction, one of the many types is that of *the alien visitor,* the structure of which follows a set pattern: status quo, arrival, discovery by an enlightened local, discovery by fearful members of the local populace, conflict with the local authorities, and resolution by death or departure. We recognize the formula in films as diverse as John Carpenter's *Starman* (1984), Iain Softley's *K-PAX* (2001), and Steven Spielberg's *E.T: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). We notice, too, familiar scene types in science fiction films of alien visitors: the point at which the visitor displays otherworldly powers to an appreciative audience, the moment in which fearful locals mistake alien overtures of peace for aggression, and so on. Lastly, individual shots within a genre film offer iconic images (an *icon* being an immediately recognizable visual symbol, such as the Stetson cowboy hat or Colt six-shooter of the western). Some icons of the alien visitor story formula include lingering, "homesick" views of the night sky; the shiny metals and kaleidoscopic lights of the alien's mode of travel; and arrays of local police and military squared off against the invader.

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[17] This celebration of American ideology was even more forcefully developed in Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), another blockbuster science fiction film, which ultimately drew criticism for its jingoistic plot, in which America saved the world from alien invasion.

[18] This breakdown of genre into formula, scene, and icon is borrowed from the chapter "Genre Films" in Sobchack and Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film,* 227–34.

Lately, as the major film genres have evolved, the filmmakers working within them have begun to display greater self-consciousness of genre history and conventions. This development is visible in such simple touches as a brief reference or homage to a previous film and in such complex endeavors as Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), which self-consciously echoes and recasts Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), and the horror genre itself. While remakes, parodies, and sequels have long played with self-consciousness, the past decades have brought this approach into the main works of a number of genres. Closely related is another recent development that could be termed *hybridization*—a tendency to combine genres (sometimes genres not often associated) within a single film with a free hand. *Blade Runner* is a classic example, but more recent films such as Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) and Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson's *Shrek* (2001) revel in this combinatory approach.

In her study of the family in the action-thriller genre published in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Karen Schneider discusses Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) as a hybrid of action and comic elements. Although it substitutes actors' names for characters, the following passage illustrates good genre analysis, descriptive writing, and use of supporting examples drawn from the film:

> *Independence Day* is packed with such a variety of comic elements that its "generic dominant" is left in question. Consider: the satirical treatment of the alien groupies; the hackneyed saving of the dog; Jeff Goldblum's droll demeanor; exaggerated characters such as the Jewish father (Judd Hirsch), the loony scientist (Brent Spiner, an icon of the sci-fi constructs), the drunken crop duster become hero (Quaid), and the sniveling homosexual (Harvey Fierstein); the boys-with-toys gags (putting the alien spacecraft in the wrong gear); the mock fight scene between the macho Will Smith character and an unconscious alien; and the parodically huge cigars. Another feature of the film, its intertextuality or penchant for "raiding, reference, and allusion" (Tasker 57), is also given a comic spin—for example, its wholesale borrowing from *War of the Worlds,* the radio version of which was a hoax; its use of Area 51 folklore; and its allusions to *2001* ("Good morning, Dave"). This "raiding" suggests a humorous self-reflexivity about the fictive quality of the film that the audience can share, and that the other films lack.[19]

When studying any genre film, be sensitive to its ratio of inventiveness to conventionality; its expression of genre convention through formula, scene, and icon; its historical and cultural inflections; and the degree to which it self-consciously asserts its status *as* genre.

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[19] Karen Schneider, "With Violence If Necessary: Rearticulating the Family in the Contemporary Action-Thriller," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 1 (spring 1999): 9.

Remakes, sequels, and parodies, like genre films, provide good topics for papers. They offer illustrative comparisons and thus what we might call a built-in thesis, if you can find the most interesting and dramatic difference between them and the original films. As when musicians or singers cover other people's compositions, remakes frequently inspire artists to recast originals in provocative ways. Comparing a sequel (even a poor one) to an original can help expose the formulas, themes, motifs, and stylistic approaches integral to the original film. Remember, poor and even bad films can teach us a good deal, both about film form and about other films' historical and cultural contexts. Even more than remakes, sequels seem obliged to repeat, but in new ways, many of the first films' best bits. And parodies may be better at exposing narrative and stylistic conventions than any other type of film. When one of the *Naked Gun* movies exaggerates the conventions of the detective film, it explicitly draws attention to them—in effect, breaking the illusions of reality, representation, and invisible editing that a "straight" treatment of the conventions does not.

CRITICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Traditional criticism attempts to place a value on a work of art, a genre, or an artist; to establish hierarchies of good and bad, high and low; and to distinguish between timeless "classics" and forgettable pulp. Cultivating an appreciation and understanding of art, as practiced for thousands of years, is also the work of criticism. *Formalism* is a traditional type of criticism; when applied to film, it entails seeing cinematic form as the most important source of a movie's meanings, concentrating on the filmmakers' handling of the elements of cinematic form, and attempting to explain how the filmmakers' techniques create (or imply) the movie's layered meanings. As a method, it can be applied by those espousing a wide range of theories, old and new. It does not require making value judgments on artworks.

Critical theories—Freudianism, feminism, Marxism, and others—represent loosely aligned ideas that attempt to explain the way people and societies function. We might contrast formalism, which looks inward at a film, with their *contextualism,* which is outward looking. At their most basic and practical, theories offer specific worldviews that make expansive claims to explain the place of works of art within a larger context. They also represent attitudes toward the activity of interpretation. They are not rules, and the various -isms overlap a great deal in ideas and methodology. Most writing about movies, especially most professional writing about movies, takes a formalist's approach to some aspects of a film and a contextualist's approach to others, balancing them as appropriate. The more you learn about film theory, history, production, and criticism, the better able you will be to choose critical and theoretical perspectives that suit your interpretive goals.

Because you are using this textbook, your teacher likely encourages formal analysis to some degree; but the specific approach you adopt will grow out of the unique context of your particular film course and your own interests. Some film teachers are generalists who see value in, and draw from, a variety of theories; some see themselves as specialists, advocating one theory over, and often against, others. Contemporary theory is highly politicized. Much of it assumes that sexism, racism, economic injustice, and other wrongs are perpetuated by film through stereotypes, themes, stylistic systems, and narrative patterns that serve the dominant ideology. Thus your teacher may hope to teach you about film for various reasons: to help you develop an appreciation for great filmmaking, to prepare you for a career in media, or to reveal how Hollywood films reinforce certain attitudes and feelings that affect society as a whole. Recognizing your teacher's academic interests and background will obviously help you navigate your course work. One of the virtues of college-level education is that it encourages difference and debate. If you find yourself at odds with your teacher's beliefs, take this as an opportunity to develop your own arguments before a strong critic. You may find that your writing becomes much better as you engage in genuine disagreement.

Whatever your critical perspective, your sources for constructing a film's meaning are on the screen. In practice, you should view a film carefully (and as many times as necessary), concentrating on what you think are the most important cues to meaning; take notes appropriate to the assignment, jotting down as many examples as you can; think about the systematic interaction of its form and content; research it as thoroughly as you think is necessary for your objective (e.g., casual discussion, class assignment, senior thesis); and write about it intelligently and persuasively. If your approach is contextual, you might consider such subjects as the director's style and overall body of accomplishment; works by other filmmakers in the same period or genre; information about the politics, economics, social attitudes, and culture of the period in which the director lived and worked; the ideas and influences that shaped the director's style; the conventions of filmmaking at the time the film was made; a study of the director's life as it might help you understand the work; and the director's reasons for making the film in particular ways if, and only if, he or she discussed such intentions. In delving further into the context in which the director lived and worked, you could read interpretive essays, reviews, and books; attend a lecture in which a critic explains the work; or take a course devoted to the director. In this way, you could gain further insight into the director's handling of form, content, and meaning.

The following pages will introduce some of the most common critical movements in film studies (auteurism, Freudianism, cognitive psychology, Marxism, feminism, and cultural studies) and a few concepts that we'll call *interpretive frameworks* (mimicry and catharsis, binary oppositions)—ideas so fundamental and resonant that they underlie most theoretical camps and disciplines. Learning about these forms of thought will help you better appreciate many of the debates surrounding film and media as well as offer productive strategies of analysis that can help with any film. Each will be illustrated with short applied readings of specific movies.

INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

MIMICRY AND CATHARSIS. In the Western tradition, the debate over the effect of art on people and society begins with Greek philosophers and dramatists, who were sharply split. On one side were those—most prominently, Plato—who viewed the arts as dangerous in their potential influence. Plato argued that art was at least two removes from reality: artists copied the ephemeral things around them, which were themselves imperfect copies of the eternal and unchanging Ideas of those things. He was particularly concerned that poets, by representing bad behavior and bad people, would weaken society. His fear that people will imitate the baser behaviors and emotions they see depicted in art continues to this day. It drives ratings and censorship policies around the world, criticism and campaigns by groups across the political spectrum, and studies and debates on television viewing (in particular, the influence of television violence on children). Since its birth, Hollywood has remained a key target in these debates. Incidents of "copycat" violence, in which individuals commit acts very similar to fictional events they have seen, are highly publicized and widely known, though uncommon.

On the other side among the Greeks were the defenders of art, who found its influence beneficial. In the *Poetics,* Aristotle argued that humans acquire knowledge through imitation. More famously, he used the Greek medical term *katharsis* (purgation, purification) to describe a therapeutic by-product of watching tragedy, which through fear and pity purged viewers of such emotions. This metaphor was taken up by later philosophers, art critics, psychologists, theorists, and social advocates to explain and justify the paradoxical presence of negative content (violence, criminality, and hatred) in art. Today, a cathartic defense of art is commonly offered in nearly all arguments concerning its moral and social status. In film studies, particular genres (horror, thrillers, slapstick comedy, pornography) and especially violent films (Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* [1995], Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* [1994], David Fincher's *Se7en* [1995]) are sometimes seen as case studies demonstrating a cathartic or, instead, detrimental effect on society. While most film essays may not directly explore the issue, many will assume either a general positive or negative influence of the medium on the viewer; you therefore should begin to recognize your own stance in this old dilemma.

BINARY OPPOSITIONS (DUALISM). According to structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908), human cultures share an underlying dualism, which began with distinctions between the raw/the cooked, nature/culture, man/woman, and darkness/light. These binary oppositions are so much a part of the worldview of all cultures that they can be seen in their language, myths, and art. Binary thinking is a universal human condition, yet expressed differently in each culture and individual. Additionally, each binary opposition reveals an underlying tension, a potential conflict that myth or art tries to reconcile. Of course, the form of such resolutions reflects the prevailing culture and its ideological paradigms. Other theorists have applied this approach to the works of popular culture. For example, James Cameron's *Terminator* films exploit an opposition between machine and humanity, frequently challenging our more simplistic binary distinctions so that by the end of the second film, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), we have come to recognize the T-800 Terminator (Arnold Schwarz-enegger) as akin to "human" while we continue to categorize the T-1000 Terminator (Robert Patrick) as a machine. This opposition becomes even more interesting (and productive for a paper thesis) when we note that both films explore it through the traits of their human characters (notice the emotionless intensity and physical prowess of Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton, in the second film) as well as through their form—the costumes, lighting, sound effects, and so forth.

If we assume that Hollywood narratives are our culture's primary system of myths, we begin to understand something of the incredible success and generational resonance of films such as Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), as each film addresses recurring cultural tensions. Both movies treat similar oppositions between rural/small-town and urban lifestyles, and both do so in the context of coming-of-age tales that exploit the more narrow tension arising when youthful idealism and wanderlust are set against traditional respect for family and home ("There's no place like home").[20] *The Wizard of Oz* and *It's a Wonderful Life* treat and ameliorate the fears and frustrations that develop out of evolving conceptions of American ideology. Because storytellers and scriptwriters design stories around dramatic conflict, it is almost impossible to find a film that is not structured around a number of traditional and specific cultural oppositions.

AUTEURISM

The auteur theory postulates the film director as the *auteur* (author) of a film. It has roots in France of the 1920s; its popularity peaked there in the 1950s with the influential film journal *Cahiers du cinéma,* founded and edited by André Bazin. Contributors to this journal and early proponents of the theory (both as critics and directors) included the New Wave filmmakers François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and Claude Chabrol. Bazin is most closely associated with the auteur theory. Very influential, widely interpreted, and often misunderstood, the auteurist approach is not a theory per se but rather an attitude. As such, it is personal, idiosyncratic, and flexible. Its application frequently takes two forms: a judgment of the whole body of a film director's work (not individual films) based on style and a classification of great directors based on a hierarchy of directorial styles. A director must have made a significant body of films to be considered an auteur. Auteurists believe, to varying degrees, that a film director's style can (and should, according to Alexander Astruc, one of Bazin's followers) be as distinctive as a novelist's. If the director is the visionary, the one person who makes a film what it is, then cinematic style is the "DNA" by which that "author" can be identified.

In the early 1960s, the concept of director-as-author was introduced and popularized in the United States by Andrew Sarris, who was for twenty-nine years the influential film critic for New York's *Village Voice.* His pioneering work, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (1968)—one of the most provocative books ever published about American movies—employs the auteur theory to create a comprehensive "ranking" of American directors in terms of their personal visions of the world. Sarris's "pantheon" of fourteen directors has probably inspired more arguments among film enthusiasts than any other single list, and his overall theory so enraged Pauline Kael, a longtime critic for the *New Yorker* and one of this country's most influential voices on the movies in the twentieth century, that it ignited a long critical war between them and their followers.

Although its weaknesses—for example, its rigidity, its stress on artistic vision over technical competence, its tendency to view all movies by a single director as equally valuable—limit its application, the auteurist approach to film criticism can be very useful in identifying and appreciating those directors whose body of work displays ideological and stylistic consistency. Because the directors who shaped and influenced film history are often great innovators or stylists, we may refer to them as auteurs.

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[20] A major demographic transformation of twentieth-century America was the tremendous shift of population from rural areas and small towns to urban areas and big cities, accompanied by a decline in extended families and a rise in nuclear and single-parent families.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

FREUDIANISM. Sigmund Freud, the German founder of psychoanalysis, believed that each person had an unconscious that, while utterly beyond conscious reach, could manifest itself through "accidents," slips of the tongue, dreams, and art. The unconscious holds one's darkest fears and desires, including one's desire for and aggression against one's own parents, thoughts so taboo that they resist conscious expression yet so compelling that they are expressed indirectly, as through art. For Freud, *Hamlet* reflected Shakespeare's own oedipal desires and aggressions, projected, without the author's awareness, onto the characters of the play. Freudian theory holds that just as a therapist can uncover the causes of a patient's hysteria, so a critic can uncover the implicit psychological meaning within a work of art. At the societal level, Freudianism holds that a good deal of individual and collective desire and aggression is "vented" through art, narratives, and entertainment. From the Freudian perspective, this venting of the unconscious is generally therapeutic, cathartic, and good for individuals and society. As noted earlier, in almost every debate about the influence of art and film on individuals and society, a defense pointing to the utility of such catharsis will be used to counter the accusation that people will imitate the attitudes and behaviors presented in art and films.

Freudian theory not only is a major influence on film theory but has been explicitly incorporated into the stories of numerous films, from the psychological dramas of Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942; remade by Paul Schrader in 1982) to science fiction films such as Fred M. Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980). Though traditional Freudian theory has lost influence in film studies as elsewhere, much of the film analysis and interpretation we read and create is still informed by its most fundamental ideas:

- Art may reveal emotional dynamics not deliberately fashioned by the artist (a significant counterpoint to the more traditional formalist and literary assumption that art reflects the artist's conscious choices).
- Expressions of sexual desire in art are intertwined with incompletely suppressed aggression, fear, and guilt.
- A critic can link an artwork and an artist's biographical background within an interpretation that reveals unconscious manifestations of desire, aggression, fear, and guilt.

COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY. While Freudianism has had strong adherents over the years, others have reacted against it, preferring psychological explanations that deal with more practical perceptual, emotional, and conscious responses of viewers. Cognitive psychology—drawing on work in perceptual psychology, aesthetic studies, and artificial intelligence, among many other fields—seeks to explain how we recognize objects, fit disparate elements into orderly patterns, experience joy and sadness through art, simultaneously understand multiple meanings, and so forth. In recent decades, film scholars such as Richard Allen, Joseph Anderson, Gregory Currie, Carl Plantinga, Murray Smith, and especially David Bordwell and Noël Carroll have written articles and books that apply the ideas and findings of traditional cognitive psychology to questions of film reception. In practice, this cognitive approach shifts the critical emphasis from artist, artwork, or context to an emphasis on the viewer—a viewer seen as an active participant in the creation of a film's effects and meaning.

A foundational idea of cognitive psychology is that people use *schemas* to make sense of an always perceptually incomplete world. Schemas are mental concepts that filter our experience. When movie villains enter a dark bedroom and strike out at sleeping figures, we are as surprised as the villains when the covers are pulled back to reveal the old pillows-as-decoy ruse. This trick works again and again because both villains and spectators maintain a schema for the human body shape and "sleeping" that a few pillows and darkness can evoke. In film studies, cognitive approaches join nicely with formalist analysis, enabling us to explore how "cues" in a film activate schemas in viewers to help generate effects and meanings. Cognitive psychology helps explain how the storyteller's plot (what we see and hear) works with the viewer's understanding to create the story (something much larger than what is merely presented to us; for more on the distinction between plot and story, see chapter 2). By focusing on the viewer's minute-by-minute comprehension and experience of a film—of what is literally given to us perceptually—the cognitive approach helps counterbalance the traditional emphasis on the artist as the sole, active contributor to the effects and meanings of a film. Thrillers, horror movies, and mysteries like M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999)—films that leave as much offscreen as they place onscreen—offer countless examples of forcing the viewer to play an active role in making sense of limited information.

IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Many forms of contemporary criticism focus on ideological concerns. While ideological criticism is complex, diverse, and wide-ranging, some underlying general tendencies are worth recognizing. Marxism, socialism, and capitalism are known as ideologies, but the absence of a label does not mean that *ideology* is absent. The term refers to the formal and informal beliefs, feelings, and habits of individuals, groups, and nations. When looking at art from an ideological critical stance, we assume that art reflects the ideologies from which it comes. In practice, this simple assumption—that films reflect ideology—can lead to sophisticated analyses and intense debate, largely because societies and art are so complex, diverse, and frequently contradictory, with theorists divided on the particularities of ideology's relation to art and on the methodology best suited to exploring this relation. Overt examples of ideological expression can be seen in World War II–era propaganda films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens,* 1934) and Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1943–45), but contemporary ideological analysis holds that all films are a product of their ideological context, including those in genres such as romance, comedy, and horror. Unlike propaganda films or those treating overtly political subjects, genre films, even romantic comedies, may indirectly endorse ideological beliefs or obscure more radical solutions to social problems. No matter how drastic the problems exposed in a Hollywood film, the familiar everything-works-out endings betray a tradition of finding resolutions and solutions from within *the system*. Like the Freudian approach and so much contemporary critical analysis, the ideological approach assumes a substructure of meaning that critics decode and reveal in their writing.

MARXISM. Marxism is a body of doctrine developed by Karl Marx and, to a lesser extent, by Friedrich Engels in the mid–nineteenth century. It originally consisted of three interrelated ideas: a philosophical (quasi-religious) view of humanity, a theory of history, and an economic and political program. Marxism has perhaps had its most significant influence in its philosophy. It inspired people to rebel against tyranny and to seek the fulfillment of their hopes within a communal (sometimes communist) society. Its ideology fired up revolutions in many countries in the twentieth century, most notably in Russia and in China. Marxism can be called a quasi-religion in that it requires of its followers fervent commitment and devotion to an ideal. Its view of history is that human and social progress occurs when a thesis and an antithesis yield a synthesis—specifically, it postulates that the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat will lead to the emergence of a classless society without a government. Ultimately, Marx predicted a revolution in advanced capitalist states, as the proletariat would dissolve all class distinctions and inaugurate a new era of harmony, peace, and prosperity for all humanity: communism.

During the twentieth century, the various socialist movements around the world have adapted Marx and Engels's original ideas to meet their needs. In the West, neither of the two basic forms of Marxism—that of the traditional communist parties and the more diffuse "New Left" form, which has come to be known as "Western Marxism"—has resulted in the revolutionary change advocated by Marx. Even though orthodox Marxism has taken hold in developing nations, it has not proven particularly relevant in modern Western society, in which capitalism appears to have triumphed decisively. However, in the intellectual and academic world, Marxism remains very influential.

Many attempts have been made to incorporate Marxian doctrines into theoretical principles and analytical methods that could be used to relate cinema to the theory and practice of revolution. Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, the party-state paid special attention to the development of visual and sound materials that disseminated their ideas to the mainly illiterate populace. The result in the 1920s and early 1930s was a period of imaginative, ideological filmmaking by such innovators as V. I. Pudovkin, Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, Esther Shub, and Dziga Vertov. Starting in the 1930s, led by such European thinkers as Walter Benjamin and György Lukács, writers have produced a large body of Marxist aesthetic theory, which (despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s) remains relevant today because of its concern with power and class.

The history of the American film industry, particularly the studio system, offers abundant opportunities for studying the interaction of the power relations of the production process. Some of the most influential Marxist criticism has focused on the portrayal of politics and the mass media in American films, past and present. However, the emphasis of Marxism on communal rather than individual life means that Marxist critics today are more likely to write about the class struggle as depicted in films from developing countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America than they are to discuss films from the industrialized United States or European countries, where these subjects are treated less frequently. Yet, American fiction and nonfiction films concerned with social, economic, and political issues are the subject of lively debates in such periodicals as *Jump Cut* and *Cinéaste*. Other critical perspectives, such as those concentrating on gender, race, feminism, and psychoanalysis, also benefit from incorporating the economically aware, class-conscious Marxist approach.

FEMINISM. Feminist film theory brings to the study and criticism of the movies the same overall concerns that mark the feminist movement as a whole: a desire for equality with men, in society as well as in the arts that represent it; the roles that women have traditionally been expected to fulfill in society; the patriarchal structure of society; stereotyped representations of women; and gender discrimination against women. Feminist critics have particularly focused on calling attention to the media's representation of women as passive, dependent on men, or objects of desire. Influential since the 1960s, feminism has incorporated a variety of other critical perspectives, including psychoanalytic, semiotic, gender, and Marxist theories. The journals *Wide Angle, Cinema Journal, Women and Film,* and *Camera Obscura* frequently publish feminist film theory, and they are good places to chart how it has changed. Two of the many contentious issues in feminist film theory are worth briefly addressing here.

First, many feminist critiques focus on whether women and men can challenge or escape patriarchy, a social system in which men dominate. Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) takes the position that patriarchy is a systemic condition that neither film artists nor viewers can change, for the conventions of classic narrative cinema portray women in films as objects to be looked at, first by male protagonists in films and then by spectators forced to identify with the protagonists. Other writers advocate raising the consciousness of all women, protest negative portrayals of women on the screen, and insist that women be given an equal opportunity to take positions both in the film industry and in independent filmmaking. In one of the first influential feminist film studies, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974), Molly Haskell surveys the unrealistic depictions of women throughout the history of the movies. She concludes that they are, essentially, stereotypes of what men want to believe about women and argues that these stereotypes of women as virgins, victims, and sex goddesses should be replaced with depictions that are more diverse, faithful to women's actual lives, and positive. But in "Feminist Politics and Film History" (1975), British theorist Claire Johnston disagrees with Haskell's view on female stereotyping in the movies, asserting that by concentrating solely on the image of women, we ignore the larger contexts through which the image functions—the text (that is, the movie), psychic structures, and historical and institutional frameworks. That is, for Johnston, film is a language and the image of women is a sign within that language. In any case, the balance between these two views—what we might call *deterministic* feminist theory and *liberal-progressive* theory—differs according to the historical period being considered. During the 1960s and early 1970s, feminist film theory leaned toward the former stance; today, it tends to lean more toward the latter.

Second, some feminist critics seek to determine whether particular characters, stories, filmmakers, or film practices are pro- or antifeminist, attempts that naturally lead to disagreements. Although no one set of criteria exists for making such judgments, feminist film critics are more likely to find demeaning characterizations of women in films made before than after the 1960s.

CULTURAL STUDIES. An important legacy of Marxist criticism has been its influence on cultural studies, which began in the mid-1920s at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in Germany. There scholars attempted to incorporate politics, culture, psychology, and sociology into one discipline. During the next four decades, the work of such intellectuals as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Siegfried Kracauer, and Herbert Marcuse had a major impact on social and cultural thinking in the United States, to which many of them fled in the 1930s.

Thanks to such influential works as Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) and Kracauer's book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), cultural studies has opened a new perspective on the movies, one in which the movies are regarded more as a popular art or a cultural artifact than as a traditional art form. As a result, movies are increasingly being studied outside of film studies departments. Cultural studies has even made inroads on such critical perspectives as formalism as it has become the broadest theoretical and critical approach to movie criticism. It is concerned with the movies' function within popular culture, as well as with the influence of popular culture on the movies. Labels such as "high" and "low" have no place here; all products of culture play a role within culture and all are relevant to how members of a society respond to those products. In this light, the hierarchies of the auteurist critics appear to be relics of an outmoded elitist undertaking. Thus "B" movies of the 1940s suddenly become cultural touchstones that enable us to understand wartime America. Cultural studies goes deep beneath the surface of a movie to explore the implicit and hidden meanings. Furthermore, it analyzes the period in which the film was made, especially the dominant social issues—politics, race, ethnicity, class, sexual identity, gender—and their relation to the period in which the analysis is being made.

APPLIED READINGS

Let's now look at a number of films that are well suited to specific critical and theoretical approaches. While all are broadly applicable to almost any film, and while critics often combine various approaches to enrich their analyses, some movies yield more interesting answers to particular kinds of questions.

DIE HARD: MIMICRY AND CATHARSIS

Like most successful action films, John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988) presents violence in a form that can both horrify and entertain. Thus the movie provides fuel for the age-old debate about mimicry and catharsis. In the film, John McClane (Bruce Willis), a New York

City cop, has flown to Los Angeles to attend the Christmas party of the Nakitomi Corporation with his estranged wife, Holly (Bonnie Bedelia), a company executive. The party takes place in the firm's beautiful, modern high-rise. Early in the festivities, international criminals arrive and seal off the nearly deserted building to crack a safe containing hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of negotiable bonds. McClane escapes the hostage roundup and battles the villains in an elaborate game of cat and mouse that smartly exploits the various spaces of the tower. As in many action films, much of the hero's violence is justified as self-defense, protection of the weak, and thus legal force. However, in one scene, McClane uses plastic explosives to dispatch some villains and in the process blows up an entire floor, an act presented in the film as excessively zealous if not vengeful. This scene and others in the film visually celebrate the destruction of the lush decor of the Nakatomi high-rise by machine gun, explosives, and fire.

To explore *Die Hard*'s treatment of violence, you could do basic research into the film's reception—reading reviews, criticism, marketing materials, interviews of viewers and fans—to learn how the film's violence was marketed and received and then carefully analyzing the formal and narrative depictions of violence for evidence of tone, attitude, perhaps even contradictions. Do scenes such as the destruction of the Nakatomi high-rise provide catharsis for audiences, venting societal aggression? Do they suggest a more deep-seated human aggressiveness toward objects of great economic and social value? Do the film's release during the height of Japanese international economic ascendancy and the Germanic background of a number of the villains hint at collective U.S. envy and aggression toward the country's successful World War II enemies? Ultimately, has the movie struck the right balance between its condemnation and its celebration of violence? What role does the individual spectator play in judging the depictions of that violence?

DIE HARD: BINARY OPPOSITIONS

To begin working with binary oppositions, you should compose a simple list shortly after watching a film. These early notes might also include observations that could eventually become important points in or even the thesis of your paper. A typical Hollywood action film like *Die Hard* suggests dozens of binary oppositions, such as

- man versus woman (in fact, a tough, working-class man versus a white-collar woman; notice that the kidnapping takes Holly out of her corporate world and places her into her husband's element: a physical battle for survival)
- black versus white
- New York (East Coast, nervous, tough) versus Los Angeles (West Coast, laid-back, soft; notice that the film was released at a time of West Coast economic ascendancy)
- local cops versus feds (FBI)
- America versus Japan
- America versus Europe
- outlaw hero versus official hero

Notice how entries such as man/woman and East Coast/West Coast add detail to some very basic oppositions. All of those listed are quite common and, at their most general, could apply to hundreds if not thousands of films. The last opposition, outlaw hero versus official hero, is pervasive in American narratives.[21] Hollywood buddy films such as the *Lethal Weapon* and *Rush Hour* series often team up an outlaw and official partner, whose significant differences in behavior and strategy help differentiate and spice up the characterizations and plots. In *Die Hard,* John McClane follows the outlaw hero model: while combating the terrorists, McClane is technically out of his jurisdiction. By film's end, he looks and behaves more like a guerrilla fighter than like a uniformed police officer. In a paper, you could continue this line of analysis by finding elements of the plot, dialogue, costume, and setting suggesting that McClane is being depicted as an outlaw hero. Indeed, you could chart many of the film's characters in relation to their status as outlaw or official hero.

Die Hard is rich with oppositions that speak to tensions and issues in American culture, including the conflict and the possibility of constructive social interaction between African Americans and whites. Essentially alone as he battles a small army of criminals, McClane is befriended primarily by two black men: Argyle (De'voreaux White), the limo driver who brings him to the Nakatomi Tower, and Sergeant Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson), the first police officer on the scene. Communicating with one another over walkie-talkies, sharing the experiences of their profession, McClane and Powell become so close during their ordeal that they embrace when they finally meet at the end of the movie. In the context of contemporary America and especially Los Angeles, a hotbed of racial tensions and abuses of police power, *Die Hard*'s depiction of black and white unity and collective problem solving (against vaguely European and Germanic villains) offers a therapeutic and hopeful resolution to tremendously difficult and historically fraught social problems. At the same time, the film traffics in stereotypes—for example, Argyle's costume and behavior suggest his less-than-serious attitude toward work and life. In a paper, you could take these general notions and explore *Die Hard*'s treatment of race and of interracial interactions, perhaps in light of Los Angeles history and Hollywood's responses to current events.[22]

WALL STREET: FREUDIANISM

Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) provides an almost textbook example of a Freudian oedipal narrative. Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) is a tremendously ambitious young stockbroker who begins working with Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), a corporate raider who buys companies and breaks them up, selling their assets and firing employees to make a profit. In the background is Carl Fox (Martin Sheen), Bud's father, a hardworking aircraft mechanic and union member who occupies the moral high ground of business: a concern for employees, the creation of good products and services. At first, Bud rejects his father's ethos and embraces Gekko's ruthless, win-at-all-costs philosophy; later, Bud battles with Gekko; finally, Bud embraces Carl's philosophy and pulls a fast one on Gekko, thereby saving the airline his father works for. That Martin Sheen is Charlie Sheen's biological father adds to the film's resonance. Oliver Stone begins the film with a dedication to his own recently deceased father, "Louis Stone, stockbroker," with whom (as he's discussed in interviews) he came into conflict after his voluntary service in Vietnam left him opposed to the war. Though *Wall Street* overtly claims that Stone's father inspires its view of the best of American business practices, we might see the film as one artist's attempt to split the Father into good and bad elements, making it possible to renounce one half and embrace the other. To do a Freudian reading of *Wall Street,* you could investigate Stone's comments on his father and carefully explore the film's treatment of fathers and father figures, perhaps comparing it to that in other Stone films such as *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994)—always remaining mindful of Freud's central idea that oedipal aggression expresses itself indirectly, accidentally, unconsciously.

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[21] The outlaw hero/official hero binary was best developed by Robert B. Ray, in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Ray argues compellingly that American narratives—especially westerns, action films, and cop and crime stories—often develop a contrast between outlaw and official heroes and their respective modes of behavior. Beginning with the historical and legendary contrast between George Washington and Daniel Boone and continuing with cinematic heroes, Ray notes the difference between heroes that play by the rules in order to do good (official heroes) and those that bend and sometimes break the rules in the service of the good (outlaw heroes). Ray traces the need for an outlaw hero to a sort of Achilles' heel of Western democracies, whose broad protections and rights afforded all citizens, including criminals, allow a certain latitude for nefarious types.

[22] During the 1980s a number of public incidents involving the police took place in Los Angeles. The Watts riots of 1965 may provide the major historical context here.

VERTIGO: COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) asks an old friend, retired detective Scottie Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart), to watch his wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), whom he fears is losing her grip on reality and coming to believe she is the reincarnation of Carlotta Valdes, who died in 1857. Infatuated with Madeleine, Scottie attempts to put to rest her troubling dreams by taking her to Carlotta's grave; there, Madeleine flees from Scottie, who, battling his fear of heights, chases her to the top of a bell tower; he arrives just in time to see her fall to her death in the courtyard below. Recovering from the nervous breakdown that follows, Scottie revisits places associated with Madeleine and recognizes her in other women. One day, he sees Judy Barton (Kim Novak), who in profile looks exactly like Madeleine, though her dress and hair are different. Scottie approaches her and pleadingly asks to get to know her. When Scottie leaves, the audience learns Judy's story: Gavin Elster set Scottie up to believe that the murder of the real Madeleine Elster was a suicide by having his mistress, Judy, portray a psychologically disturbed Madeleine. Not knowing the truth, Scottie makes Judy over into his memory of Madeleine, and she reluctantly obliges.

Vertigo is interesting cognitively in a number of ways: the point-of-view depiction of vertigo effects, the visually dramatic dream sequences, and the viewer's less spectacular but more significant sharing of Scottie's visions of Madeleine and then his memory of her through Judy. One of *Vertigo*'s strongest visual themes is the use of the profile for Kim Novak's various incarnations as Madeleine. The repeated silhouettes help link Scottie's obsession with Madeleine to the Western aesthetic conventions for representing feminine beauty. That is, Hitchcock transforms Novak/Madeleine into a work of art: statuesque, reserved, posing, in profile—"those beautiful phony trances," Scottie angrily shouts when he discovers the artifice. Of course, these transformations are motivated dramatically, in that Gavin Elster and Judy know how to go about manufacturing a beautiful, mysterious woman because they are familiar with the conventions for representing feminine beauty, whether in high art, fashion, or Hollywood itself. *Vertigo* exploits our most basic cognitive skills, particularly the ability to remember and recognize a familiar face (profile). While Freudianism emphasizes the unconscious, cognitive science holds that many types of cognition can operate as unthinking habit. Facial recognition, like voice and language recognition, is typically a habituated process that functions as we're busy doing other things. *Vertigo* exploits this ability by habituating viewers (through Scottie's detective work and his obsession) to a Madeleine Ideal, which is then destroyed—only to be reborn in front of our eyes in the guise of Judy. When Scottie sees Judy on the street for the first time, we have been set up to share Scottie's cognitive dissonance (she looks like but doesn't look like Madeleine). A student paper might explore *Vertigo*'s many other hauntingly familiar treatments of feminine ideals, profiles, and hairstyles. More generally, the idea of cognitive dissonance can apply to any number of Hitchcock films, which are famous for complicating "normal" human vision and classical Hollywood perspective.

REAR WINDOW: AUTEURISM

The title of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) refers to Jeff Jeffries's (Jimmy Stewart) apartment window, which looks out onto a courtyard and a host of New York apartments. Stuck inside and practically immobile in his hip-to-toe cast, Jeff amuses himself by watching his neighbors. In addition, he is visited daily by his nurse, Stella (Thelma Ritter), and his girlfriend, Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly). One day, the bedridden wife of his neighbor Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr) disappears. Jeff suspects foul play. When Thorwald learns that Lisa and Jeff suspect him, he comes to Jeff's apartment, struggles with him, and pushes him out Jeff's rear window just as the police arrive in time to cushion his fall and save his life.

Rear Window encapsulates much of what has come to be identified with the Hitchcock film. The director's obsession with "cool blondes" is embodied in Grace Kelly, whose Lisa Fremont is as elegant and beautiful as she is strong and funny. His penchant for leading men who could represent the average guy caught in outlandish situations is perfectly satisfied in Jimmy Stewart. Most important, Hitchcock's interest in voyeurism is profoundly evident in both the film's form (Jeff looks; the audience shares Jeff's point of view; the audience sees Jeff's reaction) and its themes (looking is exciting, dangerous, guilt-laden, and a compulsive group activity). In terms of production, *Rear Window* is a good example of Hitchcock's well-documented desire for control and manipulation. The *Rear Window* set built at Paramount Studios was one of the largest and most elaborate ever created, and the film never leaves it (a restricted location similar to Hitchcock's experiments in *Lifeboat* [1944] and *Rope* [1948]). Actors in the apartments across the way wore earpieces that Hitchcock could use to communicate directions, and the lighting for the entire set could be controlled from an electronic console.

An auteur analysis of a film and director is only as good as the writer's knowledge of the director's body of work. Because the main value of this approach is in drawing comparisons and tracing the evolution of the director's work across a number of films, a thorough familiarity is needed. Moreover, an auteur study should avoid the simplistic assumption that any director, even Hitchcock, was solely responsible for his films. Hollywood films, at least, are undertakings too large for any one person to control in the way that novelists and painters can govern every element of their art. A more nuanced application of auteurism might begin with the notion that Alfred Hitchcock was not only a dominating presence on all his films but also a smart collaborator who hired the best artists and actors in Hollywood and allowed them to contribute to his overall vision. Film scholar Steven DeRosa's *Writing with Hitchcock: The Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and John Michael Hayes* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001) is one of the more recent works to detail how films like *Rear Window* were collaborative affairs that strove for a Hitchcockian style and model that had, by the 1950s, outgrown the direct influence and control of the director himself. The auteur approach need not be undermined by a false dichotomy that sets total directorial control against collaboration—Hitchcock's films are excellent examples of how the director together with his cast, crew, and writers created unified and intelligent works.

METROPOLIS: MARXISM

Fritz Lang's silent masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927) has influenced an extraordinary range of productions, from science fiction dystopias such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) to music videos such as Madonna's "Express Yourself" (1989). Recognized as the high point of German expressionism, *Metropolis* borrows heavily from Marxist critiques of unrestrained modernism. Set in a futuristic high-rise city with a vast underground population, the film presents a social structure much like that described by Marx: the wealthy leisure and administrative classes of the upper world (the bourgeoisie) run Metropolis, while the laborers (the proletariat) of the lower world must tend the huge array of machinery that powers the upper world. The film's sympathies are obviously with the suffering laborers and against the pampered and ruthless upper classes. Known for its striking compositions, elaborate sets, and expressionistic camerawork and lighting, *Metropolis* presents many images that boldly register the plight of the workers and the domination of the elite: legions of workers marching slowly and mechanically through underground tunnels at the start of their shift; workers stretched across the face of clocklike machine controls, constantly moving the controls as if shackled to them; the elite, arrogant, smartly dressed functionaries and government engineers in the cloud-high command center.

A Marxist reading of *Metropolis* might attend to the basic historical context of the film—1927 Weimar Germany, a time when some viewed communism as a solution to Germany and Europe's economic misery. The social upheavals of the 1920s led instead to the coming to power of the Nazis—deadly enemies of communism—in 1933. Lang obviously sympathized with the Marxist distrust of modern capital and industry, and he turned down the Nazis' offer to run the German film industry under the Third Reich; ironically, though, on the set of *Metropolis* the director's perfectionism and onerous working of his actors and extras seemed profoundly exploitive. Marxism's central tenet—exploitation of workers by those who control capital—remains an undercurrent in all the various science fiction dystopias that *Metropolis* influenced, any of which might be examined in a paper on the film. You might also compare the film, from a Marxist perspective, with classic Soviet films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (*Stachka,* 1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyomkin,* 1925) or with more recent American films such as Barbara Kopple's documentary *Harlan County, U.S.A* (1976) and John Sayles's feature film *Matewan* (1987), which present worlds in which workers are obviously exploited. Or you might compare *Metropolis* to films that focus on the lives, loves, and pleasures of the American working class but are not overtly about work and economic inequalities, such as Peter Yates's *Breaking Away* (1979), Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), and Alex Cox's *Repo Man* (1984).

THELMA AND LOUISE: FEMINISM

In Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Thelma (Geena Davis) is married to a slob of a husband, and her friend Louise (Susan Sarandon) works as a waitress at the local diner, waiting for her musician boyfriend to get serious about their relationship. The two women decide to spend a long weekend together to get away from it all. They stop at a roadhouse for some drinks and dancing, and as they are leaving Thelma is nearly raped in the parking lot. Louise pulls a gun on the man, who defiantly curses at her; Louise pulls the trigger, killing him. Thus begins a flight from the law and a strange road movie, in which Thelma and Louise bond as outlaws against a male-dominated western landscape. Refusing to surrender, the women take to robbing banks and, after a long chase ends with them surrounded by police, drive their T-bird over a majestic southwestern cliff.

At the time of its release, *Thelma and Louise* inspired a good deal of debate simply because it was one of the first big-budget Hollywood films to assert a feminist perspective. The details of the film's feminism remain debatable, however. First, at its most simplistic, the film traffics in stereotypes of male chauvinism: a lewd trucker, a sanctimonious highway patrolman, a husband more interested in beer and football than in his intelligent and beautiful wife, a young hunk who steals hearts as well as purses. In the Hollywood tradition, each stereotypical man gets his comeuppance at the hands of the hero(in)es; this pattern seemed appropriate to most mainstream viewers, although the results can be seen as far from progressive or sophisticated. Second, Thelma and Louise take on traditionally male roles as they replace the outlaw-buddy heroes of countless westerns and road movies. Both visually and thematically, the image of Thelma and Louise packing pistols and using them with gusto was a striking inversion of the cultural tradition. Third, in the film's most sophisticated move, Callie Khouri's script presents two women who develop before our eyes into proud, fearless, and genuinely satisfied individuals. Thus the road picture and the western, each characterized by a separate search for identity, overlap with feminist concerns about the formation of new, truer identities for women. Fourth, in the tradition of Hollywood liberal critiques of society, *Thelma and Louise* condemns the criminal justice system and its unwillingness to believe in and protect women victimized by sexual assault. Finally, the movie deflects the traditional Hollywood "male gaze," wherein a male character, the camera, and the viewer share a desire-filled view of a female character; this happens most particularly when Thelma ogles the good-looking J.D. (Brad Pitt). To do a feminist reading of *Thelma and Louise,* you might begin with any of these notions, finding similarities and differences with mainstream, male-centered films of the road picture or buddy genres, such as George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) or Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969). Or you might compare this movie with a smaller, independent feminist film such as Allison Anders's *Gas Food Lodging* (1992), Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), or Edward Zwick's *Leaving Normal* (1992), a female-buddy road film reminiscent of *Thelma and Louise*.

REPO MAN: CULTURAL STUDIES

Alex Cox's *Repo Man* (1984) is the strange tale, set in Los Angeles, of Otto (Emilio Estevez), a disaffected urban punk who leaves behind his ex-hippie born-again parents and a string of menial jobs for an apprenticeship with a group of repo men—automobile bounty hunters who repossess (in effect, steal) cars from owners who have failed to keep up their loan payments. Along the way, Otto survives a number of liquor store robberies carried out by old punk acquaintances; is attacked, beaten, and shot at during his various car repossession runs; meets and seduces a young woman working with a secretive UFO cult; is captured by federal agents and tortured; and flies off into the night inside a radioactive Chevy Malibu containing the bodies of four aliens.

Repo Man's low budget, black comedy, and cult status make it the kind of film that traditional criticism frequently dismisses as unworthy of study or analysis. But cultural studies, with its claim that any film—even a low-budget cult film—may speak eloquently about social conditions and attitudes, validates the study of such films and allows for serious appraisals of ostensibly unserious subject matter and genres. Recalling Shakespeare's line that "many a truth is said in jest," we find that *Repo Man* says a great deal about 1980s culture. Besides its admittedly exaggerated portrayal of urban punk attitudes and behaviors (Alex Cox went on to direct the punk biopic *Sid and Nancy* [1986]), *Repo Man* parodies our spiritual yearnings, whether expressed through UFO mythology, Scientology, televangelism, or mainstream religion. Also parodied are mass marketing and advertising; characters sing jingles even as every consumer product in the film appears in white-and-blue "generic" packaging, including large cans labeled "food." The film is full of what anthropologists and sociologists call subcultures: the distinctive milieus of punks, repo men, UFOlogists, scientists working on top secret projects, CIA agents. By exploring these subcultures and their interactions, *Repo Man* captures people's attitudes and manners of expression and dress better than most serious, big-budget films do.

Most important, the film traces certain American strains of paranoia, conspiracy theory, working-class cynicism, and millennialism. Ten years before *The X-Files* began its run on television, *Repo Man* was exploring this terrain of urban legend and mythology. Though the movie's plot is ridiculous, the attitudes, language, dress, and paraphernalia of popular culture offered up suggest actual subcultures and thinking. To do a cultural studies reading of *Repo Man,* you might examine the film's treatment of the punk movement, urban legends, and conspiracy theories, or you might compare this film with others that depict subcultures of disaffected youth, such as Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991), Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumble Fish* (1983), or Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994). Cult films, by definition, have small but devoted audiences that admire and value certain aspects of them. The films may then perpetuate attitudes and stances among the subcultures that embrace them. You might explore the narrow demographics of cult films, contrasting these audiences with our monolithic conception of a mainstream audience.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Teachers of writing refer to the *writing process,* emphasizing the process because, for many writers, the act of writing itself generates attitudes, ideas, and styles. Inexperienced writers sometimes stare into space hoping for inspiration to come to them. You'll have more luck finding your muse if you dive into the process and just start writing.

PREWRITING: DISCOVERING WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

The technique called *freewriting* involves writing without restrictions or concerns for correctness. To freewrite, just pick a general topic, subtopic, or question related to your planned essay, set a time limit (between five and thirty minutes), and start writing. Some believe writing by hand (as opposed to using a keyboard) allows for more freedom of thought and exploration. This writing is "free" in that you know it may never be presented to a reader, it shouldn't be burdened by concerns with spelling or grammar, and it isn't bound by assumptions and plans about the assignment. The key to freewriting is for you to do it first and then return later to the piece with a more critical eye: Did I create or discover any useful phrases or sentences? What questions or parts (of the film, of the topic, and so on) kept drawing my attention? Did my attitude toward something grow stronger? What was I using for supporting evidence and examples? Freewriting thus enables you to create and discover through writing. Even a freewriting session that provides nothing useful for your paper may reveal a boring approach to a topic, or one that leads only to a dead end. Would you rather have that dead end discarded in one of your freewriting exercises, or publicly displayed in the final draft of your paper?

Concept mapping is another writing and organizing strategy that may help you develop ideas. Instead of relying only on words, here you use hand-drawn diagrams, flow charts, and other graphic methods of association. Fill a page with key terms, ideas, and phrases, laid out in some kind of logical spatial array. Which ideas are subordinate? Which dominate? What are equally important? What should be grouped? Do the ideas seem to relate better in a sequence, a grid, a simple juxtaposition? Begin with topic words and phrases, but then include words that provide evidence or counterarguments. Use concept mapping first to explore the breadth of your topic and how it may ultimately connect to everything, and then to become aware of the limits and focus you will need when writing your essay.

GENERATING TEXT

Sometimes, when you set out to write a paper, you confidently adopt a stance or thesis. As you invest more time and effort and compose page after page, it becomes ever more difficult to alter or discard your initial thesis. Remember, though, that eight pages of boring prose or a paper without a debatable thesis will not succeed. You should explore any hint of a more exciting angle on the topic. You might find it quicker to begin again than to try to salvage an approach that leads nowhere. Treat your thesis as provisional, and take into account what you learn as you research, study, and compose your essay; you might start out arguing *for* a particular position and eventually come to argue *against* it. Be sure to let your ideas evolve—don't be afraid to change your mind and your paper.

All writers, neophytes and professionals alike, have experienced *writer's block*. Like any inner struggle, writer's block can be difficult to overcome and can have any number of causes: lack of confidence, lack of ideas, confusion regarding an assignment, or panic over an assignment's importance. Freewriting is one excellent way to crack through writer's block. Another approach is to begin with a simple, narrowly focused task. If you know you are going to write about a particular scene, shot, or character, start writing solely with the purpose of description. Or you might begin with a quotation, either from the film or from a critic, and write an introduction and a follow-up for the quotation, explaining its importance and relevance. Sometimes, the detailed notes you take while analyzing a tape or DVD can help you work your way toward more sophisticated writing worth including in an essay. Finally, you might compose a rough outline, and begin expanding the bullet points into sentences and paragraphs in whatever order seems easiest to you. The introductory paragraph can be the most intimidating part of a writing assignment, and it is often best saved for the last task. Follow any of these strategies and you'll eventually obliterate writer's block and reach your goal—a complete first draft.

REVISING

Reflection and the passage of time are a writer's greatest allies. Have you ever returned to an old paper you wrote only to be confused by your own writing? When the writing is still fresh, you easily supply connections left unmade on the page by referring to the thoughts and ideas within your head. Your readers, however, are not mind readers. By putting aside your first draft for a while, you allow yourself to shift naturally from *writer* to *reader*. In a pinch, you can force this critical stance by reading your paper out loud, thereby accomplishing two ends. First, the act of reading helps show where the prose needs revision—you'll stumble over your own words if they're not properly composed. Second, the act of listening to yourself empowers your own "critical ear," enabling you to hear what works and what doesn't in your own writing. Reading your paper in front of a mirror may be particularly helpful. As you grow more experienced and learn to force yourself to view your draft as a reader would, you'll be able to lessen the amount of time between initial composition and critical revision. But almost nothing can replace the benefits of allowing at least one full day to pass before you return to the draft. If you begin your essays the night before they are due, you are taking a gamble you will probably lose.

Moreover, leaving time between your first and last drafts enables you to share your early drafts with friendly readers, who can discuss possible revisions and help you recognize that your words can have very different meanings than you intended. Though we often view our writing as a personal extension of ourselves, its purpose is to communicate. In the end, a reader (parent, sibling, friend, roommate) who is willing to give honest feedback can be invaluable in showing where improvement is needed. If a reader hesitates to offer criticism, ask pointed questions about what you thought you conveyed, focusing on specifics of your argument. Force readers to pick their favorite paragraphs and their least favorite. Readers can, of course, be wrong or misguided, but if two readers agree, you probably should trust their judgment.

James Arnett, a student at the University of Illinois, wrote the following paper for an introductory film course. In it, he employs several strategies to present his thesis and to develop his supporting arguments, and he backs up his claims using different types of sources. Marginal comments elaborate on the paper's strengths.

SAMPLE STUDENT PAPER

Arnet 1

James Arnett

Professor Baird

English 4-1

May 2, 2003

Modern Indemnity

This short, playful title invites readers to decode it, just as the film noir narratives discussed in the essay invite viewers to decode them. Once decoded, the title, though only two words, prepares readers for the essay's linkage of "modern" film noirs with the classics. Because Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) is so well known, the writer knows he can count on his teacher's getting the reference, even though his essay never makes the connection explicit. A more obscure reference, however, might be lost on everyone but the writer.

Film noir is a tricky subject. No single, universal definition exists for this term; as David A. Cook notes in his A History of Narrative Film, "it has become fashionable to speak of film noir as a type . . . of realism . . . but . . . it seems better to characterize it as a cycle rather than to delimit its boundaries too rigidly" (451). To analyze some aspects of film noir in this paper, however, I must establish at least a working definition for the term. Phil Hardy's article in The Oxford History of World Cinema pinpoints some notable features of film noir. One facet involves a gender reversal from the crime films of the 1930s. Women are imbued with more power --typically sexual in nature--while men are presented as less energetic than in other films

This direct opening sentence uses a rhetorical strategy common to academic papers: it states a problem, in this case the difficulty of defining the film noir genre.

The writer uses ellipses to trim the quotation to what is directly relevant to this essay. The essay begins with an authoritative quotation that reiterates the problem—defining film noir—that the opening sentences assert.

The writer makes clear his methods and turns from Cook's somewhat problematic treatment of film noir toward Hardy's "working definition," which allows the author to search for three traits—gender reversal, Freudian psychoanalysis, and fractured fabulas—in the contemporary noirs.

(306). Hardy's second major characteristic of the film noir focuses on the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on the crime film and the subsequent development of characters who are governed as much by their subconscious minds as by their conscious ones (308). Hardy's final point concerns the fabula, or the chronology of the narrative's presentation. Pointing to its ability to prevent progress for the central character, he emphasizes the importance of the flashback in the film noir (309). For the purposes of this discussion, I will use Hardy's tenets as the central features of the film noir.

Another clear articulation of the essay's forthcoming method.

The term "film noir" was coined in 1946, midway through the film cycle's first era of popularity (Cook 449). The cycle has reappeared in American films at various points; the mid-1980s saw a resurgence in popularity, and the era of independent film in America in the 1990s kept film noir alive (950-51). Recently, numerous films--including Bryan Singer's The Usual Suspects (1995), Christopher Nolan's Memento (2000), and David Lynch's Mulholland Dr. (2001)--have tampered with and twisted the basic elements of film noir listed above with the intention of engaging and surprising the audience; the results for The Usual Suspects and Memento were sustained theatrical runs that seemed to build on good word of mouth, while Mulholland Dr. has enjoyed steady and strong

Good use of a nontraditional film.

While anecdotal evidence carries less weight than do surveys and other studies, its use here to stimulate thinking about contemporary spectator response is useful and appropriate.

A quotation used to begin an essay or a section is called an *epigraph.* This essay uses four epigraphs (drawn from dialogue from the various films) to structure the sections of the paper.

When referring to sources, the writer varies his language to avoid reusing the same form (*Hardy says, Hardy says, Jackson says, Sugimoto says,* and so forth). Among the many words that can work in this context are *says, observes, finds, believes, holds, argues, concedes, thinks, reiterates, concludes, begins, stresses, asserts, and claims.* Note, too, that each word offers a distinctive meaning that can help convey the tone and context of the original source.

Of course, phrases provide even more tone and expression to characterize the original source author's ideas as well as your stance toward them: *As Cheng has made clear again and again . . . , In the opening pages of Jones's brilliant opus . . . , Struggling with the complexities of the topic, Smith begins . . . , Ali, ever hopeful of setting us straight, . . .*

References to German expressionism reveal the writer's appreciation for the larger historical context of the films he is studying.

video and DVD rentals and sales. All three films currently appear in the top 100 of the Internet Movie Database's list of the top 250 films, which is established by votes from visitors to the site. In addition, from conversations with friends and acquaintances I have determined that many viewers chose to see these movies repeatedly, thus increasing the profit for all three films. I intend to examine these films and discover what changes have been made to the essential film noir that (or, perhaps, in order to) stimulate such multiple viewings.[1]

"If he comes up for anything, it'll be to get rid of me."

Hardy observes that the emergence of film noir in the 1940s was triggered by a variety of influences. The two primary movements that prompted the new style were the burgeoning importance of Freudian psychoanalysis in Hollywood society and the immigration of German expressionist filmmakers to Hollywood (308). The effect of Freudian analysis on the film noir is fairly obvious; Freud's concepts of the ego, the superego, and the id, the conscious and the subconscious, fit well within the framework of human beings' destruction and self-destruction through compulsion toward their baser instincts. The expressionists, meanwhile, were well versed in the art of visually portraying characters' frayed mental states and displaced identities. The struggle among humanity's split natures became a central issue of the film noir.

A case study in split natures, The Usual Suspects ends with a twist that requires a psychological rereading of Verbal Kint's story. Dave Kujan notices that several key elements of the story have come from the objects in his office. The name of Keyser Soze's henchman came from the brand of china that Kint was drinking coffee from, the reference to the barbershop quartet in Skokie was derived from a poster on Kujan's wall, and so on. Thus the ending of the film implicates Kint's story as both a fabrication and, in its artistry, a reflection of his subconscious.

Some students might only *tell* their readers that the "key elements of the story come from the office," but this writer *shows* us, by offering two concrete details from the film: the china and the barbershop quartet.

What does Kint's story tell us about the subconscious mind of Verbal Kint/Keyser Soze? A possible answer lies in the characterization of Kint's fellow criminals. Dean Keaton, the group's unspoken leader, is obviously a double for Soze's intellectual self. He delights in outwitting the police; this is evidenced by the banter that is exchanged when the police arrive at Keaton's restaurant to bring him in for questioning. This quality is also seen in Kint's conscious self through his deception of Kujan during questioning. Michael McManus represents the rage and violence that Soze developed in response to his wife's murder.

A good rhetorical strategy, when used in moderation: begin a paragraph with a question.

The writer develops his ideas further by introducing a new metaphor (in this case, a further explication of the repeat-viewing phenomenon): the tampering and twisting of the classic form becomes a type of "puzzle" that encourages "problem solving" in viewers.

Fred Fenster and his accent embody Soze's Hungarian background and his status as an outsider. Todd Hockney brings to life Soze's neuroses and fears of death and capture. Observed from this view, The Usual Suspects appears an elaborate puzzle, engaging the viewer in the traditional whodunit questions but also in what is ultimately revealed to be an elaborate psychological allegory. Part of the film's popularity may reside in the problem-solving element for the viewer, who is encouraged to seek connections between Kint's story and the "real" scenes in Kujan's office.

The Usual Suspects employs an unusual narrative form in that the principal narrative strand occurs through flashback. As Kint is interrogated by Kujan in the film's "present," the interrogation scenes are intercut with the visual display of his story, which appears in flashback. This technique effectively grounds the bulk of the movie in Kint's perspective and thus facilitates one of the film's major devices. Kint has been captured by the police; the rest of the criminals' having suffered their respective fates seems to spell doom for him. His point of view on the behind-the-scenes machinations of the raid is the only one the viewer sees; however, his squirming before Kujan indicates that Kint fears Soze and is most likely telling the truth with little embellishment. While the viewer will likely interpret Kint as a tragic character due to the inescapable nature of his story, the film's conclusion upsets this assumption. When the viewer realizes that Kint is the mysterious Keyser Soze, Kint's story loses validity. When Kujan notices that Kint's story contains elements from his office, the story falls apart. Thus the ending of _The Usual Suspects_ aborts and annihilates the prime narrative in the film. Since Kint's story doesn't hold, the viewer is left wondering just what happened. To make sense of the pieces, the viewer most likely will watch the film again.

The writer colorfully and provocatively dramatizes the film's concluding revelation, but he avoids excessively ornate language, or *purple prose.*

"I always thought the joy of reading a book is not knowing what happens next."

Memento provides an interesting look at the conscious mind and subconscious of its protagonist, Leonard Shelby. Shelby's inability to form short-term memories disturbs, fragments, all of his mental workings. Shelby's conscious mind is readily available to the viewer; the voiceover narration offers direct access to his thoughts throughout the film. In the film's final moments, Shelby's voiceover reveals that he has deliberately been telling himself a false story and thus living a lie, in fact a series of lies--in Freudian terms, he has repressed the truth. His subconscious, the viewer may infer, knows the truth and is at war with his conscious mind.

By employing a technical film term *(voiceover narration),* the writer demonstrates that in the process of film analysis he can apply the specialized vocabulary and ideas learned in class.

Just as Shelby's mind must be struggling to reconcile what it knows (on a subconscious level) with what it has been told to believe (consciously), so Shelby struggles, from moment to moment, to make sense of reality. When he finds a man beaten up and bound in his closet, he does not know how to react because he cannot remember why the man is there. In fact, he does not know that he should remember. In situations like this, he must either rely on the "facts" he has assembled in the form of notes, Polaroid photos, and tattoos or he must ask others for information. This dependence allows the other characters (Teddy, Natalie, Burt the motel clerk) to manipulate Shelby for various purposes.

Narratively, Memento puts its own special twist on the idea of living in the moment. The order of the events as portrayed in the film--the fabula--does not correspond with the actual chronological sequence of events. In addition, making matters more complicated, the narrative has two parts, one shot in color, the other in black and white. The first scene in the color sequence shows Shelby killing Teddy. From there, the fabula of the color sequence progresses backward, step by step, with each scene depicting the events that have led to the preceding scene. The fabula becomes an expression of Shelby's condition; the viewer, who also (but for a different reason) has no memory of the events prior to Teddy's death, is locked into a spiral, traveling backward into the story. The black-and-white sequence of the film's narrative is intercut with the color sequence; these scenes progress chronologically, but they exist outside any other time frame. Until near the end, when the two strands meet, the viewer does not know whether the black-and-white sequence occurs at some point during the color sequence, or before or after the color sequence. Like Shelby, the fabula has no real concept of the passage of time. In one sense, it skips backwards; in another, it is lost.

This technique not only draws the viewer into the story, but also creates a great deal of suspense. Shelby's notes, photos, and tattoos seem to maintain his grasp on reality throughout the film, but the nature of that reality remains mysterious. The double-stranded narrative both reveals the circumstances under which Shelby created his mementos and continually modifies the viewer's understanding of the mementos and their creator. One of the film's most compelling mysteries concerns the admonition on Shelby's photo of Teddy--"do not believe his lies." By the time that mystery is finally explained, the viewer has absorbed so much information, so much of it in conflict, that a second viewing is in order.

Descriptive detail from the film makes the writer's point concrete.

Another use of technical film terminology coupled with a nice bit of descriptive writing.

Although he begins with something of a cliché *(the world at her fingertips)*, the writer elaborates that general proposition with three *specific examples* from the film.

"I have a recurring dream. I come to this Winkie's."

Mulholland Dr. portrays the conscious mind and the subconscious of its protagonist quite literally. After the opening shots of a jitterbug contest, a brief shot shows a person climbing into bed and falling into a pillow before the sign proclaiming Mulholland Dr. shimmers into view. As we later learn from a shot of her emerging from that same bed, the sleeping person is Diane Selwyn, and a large portion of the film consists of Diane's dream--her subconscious life, we might say. She finally wakes, however, and the remainder of the film deals with her conscious life.

The long sequence of Diane's dream intricately displays her subconscious desires. She is transformed through this dream into Betty, a beautiful young woman who has the world at her fingertips. She is living rent-free in her aunt's Hollywood apartment; she is a brilliant actress capable of wowing everyone at an audition and willing to cut short a meeting with Adam Kesher, one of Hollywood's hottest directors; she finds love with Rita, a woman she meets, literally, in her aunt's shower. Camilla Rhodes's transformation into Rita is the most revealing aspect of Diane's dream. In reality, Camilla abandons Diane for Adam and behaves spitefully and condescendingly toward the lover she has outgrown; in the dream, Diane fashions Camilla into exactly what she desires. Rita is helpless without her identity; she has no home, no friends, and nowhere to go. She depends completely on Betty. Additionally, Rita's amnesia places her in a "virginal" state equal to Betty's; although she initiates sexual contact with Betty, Rita does not know whether she has had a lesbian relationship before.

Likewise, in her dream Diane nearly ruins Adam. He is intimidated by the sinister Cowboy into giving up creative control of his film; he discovers his wife cheating on him. In each of these situations, Diane's subconscious emasculates the director. This aspect of the dream is indicative of Diane's unconscious asserting itself; Adam is rendered as ineffectual as Rita. On first viewing, Mulholland Dr. seems to present a disjointed and fragmented narrative similar to that of Lynch's Lost Highway (1997), in which characters in one part of the film simply seem to take on different names, appearances, and personalities (and to be played by different actors) in the later part. However, with a deeper look at what takes place in Mulholland Dr., the viewer will recognize that the narrative chronology is straightforward. The sequence of the film following the Cowboy's message is actually Diane's life. The minor flashbacks here

In this fairly sophisticated psychological reading of the film's characterization, the writer avoids doing too much "armchair analysis." He doesn't want to give the impression that he has mistaken fictional psychologies for literal ones, that he has begun work as a licensed psychologist and is "treating" characters as real people.

Without showing off, the writer displays his knowledge of the director's work and thus lends his whole essay a degree of credibility.

represent delusions and guilty memories that accompany Diane's growing insanity following Camilla's murder.

If the narrative confuses the viewer, this occurs because only that single, early shot indicates that most of the film is a dream. A viewer who misses the significance of the person climbing into bed will assume that the narrative is a normal one and will be puzzled by the correlation between the two parts of the film. For instance, female characters' names become jumbled in the two parts. Likewise, the blue metallic house key is transformed into a mysterious blue box and key in the dream. Lynch's plan is rather devious. By appearing to create a disjointed fabula, the filmmaker ensures confusion, curiosity, and repeated viewings.

"Maybe it's time you started investigating yourself."

The Usual Suspects, *Memento*, and *Mulholland Dr.* examine the psychologies of their main characters. Each film engages the viewer through a narrative mode or style that approximates the experience or psyche of its protagonist. The central theme of *The Usual Suspects* revolves around the identity of the mysterious Keyser Soze; ultimately, he is a myth, a composite of stories and legends that may or may not be true. Such is also the nature

Here the author carefully summarizes and brings together the three films and the particular ways each expresses character psychology through narrative mode and style.

of Kint's ultimately unreliable narrative. The audience is unable to discern the fiction from the reality in much the same way that Soze/Kint is both a mythic figure and a real person whose actual identity has become blurred.

Likewise, the experience of being Leonard Shelby is replicated by *Memento's* narrative strands. Shelby constantly tries to delve backward to understand the significance of events that are happening to him. The film's use of backward chronology forces the viewer to think in a similar fashion; this thought process is rendered visually in the film's opening scene, in which Teddy is unshot. The intercut black-and-white sequence fleshes out the experience of being Shelby. Not knowing when these events occur or two whom Shelby is speaking, the viewer experiences some of the isolation, fear, and suspense that Shelby lives and deals with.

In Mulholland Dr., Diane Selwyn has a dream that causes her to kill herself. To make this premise believable, Lynch renders the dream in as tantalizing a manner as possible, using several methods. His use of deep, saturated color during the dream sequence gives the scenes a lush feel, which clashes with the muted dinginess of Diane's apartment and the bleak light in her kitchen. Additionally, the eroticism of the film's first part creates a sense of peace, happiness, and sanctuary, all of which the dreamer will lose in her waking life. In

Good descriptive language captures some of the film's mise-en-scénes.

comparison with the dream state, the latter portions of the film seem unbearable, and the juxtaposition of these two expressions of Diane's mental state allows the viewer to understand her suicide at the conclusion of the film.

These three films have found a resonance among audiences in part because of their narrative expressionism. The films have been designed to make audiences empathize with and relate to the plights of the characters. Through their presentations of events, the filmmakers have subtly coerced viewers into thinking along certain lines--namely, those of the protagonists. By combining the film noir tradition of fractured fabulas, flashbacks, Freudian psychology, and expressionism with ever more elaborate puzzles, contemporary filmmakers are developing film noirs that encourage repeated viewings through diverse and redundant distribution methods: movie theaters, television, video, and DVD. With videogaming now a multibillion-dollar industry, adopting narrative strategies that approximate puzzle solving is probably anything but a subconscious strategy on the part of Hollywood filmmakers.

The best endings for papers offer readers something more than summaries of the previous pages. Note how this writer extends the success and profitability of the puzzlelike noir films into the current cultural context, where video games and films influence and mimic one another. Note, too, the clever echo of the word "subconscious"—here by way of a more common meaning.

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[1] The three films in question--particularly Mulholland Dr.--address the issue of gender in new ways. This essay, however, is primarily concerned with the psychological and narrative ramifications of said films. For this reason, I will not discuss gender in this essay, where it could not receive the full and rigorous examination it deserves.

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