Kinds of Film Papers

Now that you have a sense of what it means to write an academic paper, you can think about what you need to do to write successfully about film. Film studies is a broad and fascinating field. Scholars who write in this discipline write not only about particular films, but also about the filmmakers, industry, cultures, and histories that make these films. Let's turn our attention now to some of the kinds of papers that you will be asked to write in a film studies course.

Formal Analysis

Formal analysis of a film or films requires the viewer to break down the film into its component parts and discuss how those parts contribute to the whole. Formal analysis can be understood as taking apart a tractor in a field: you lay out the parts, try to understand the function and purpose of each one, and then put the parts back together so that the tractor runs better than it did before.

The most typical writing assignment in an introductory film studies course looks at how a single cinematic element functions in a single film. Although some instructors provide detailed instructions in their assignments—which topic to cover, which elements to discuss, possibly even which scene or shot to analyze—others permit students to choose the movie and the overall topic they wish to discuss. Thus, you might write a paper about discontinuity editing in *Black Hawk Down*, or the use of the Steadicam in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, or the use of sound in *A Man Escaped*. Each of these topics clearly focuses on describing the use and interpreting the effectiveness of a single cinematic element in a single movie.

Sometimes a professor will ask you to do a formal analysis paper comparing and/or contrasting two or more films. The following titles show how the comparative approach is well suited to forceful, interesting papers:

1. "Domestic Ideals and Film Noir Dysfunction in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)"
2. "Horror Film Violence Before and After Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)"
3. "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. 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.

The compare/contrast format works very well if you take two things assumed to be very similar and show important differences (say, contrasting *The Godfather* with *The Godfather: Part II*), or if you 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*). But for a compare/contrast paper to be effective, the writer must be sure to limit the comparison to the most salient points. A paper that articulates carefully a few important comparisons and/or contrasts and analyzes their significance will fare much better than a paper that simply presents a laundry list of similarities and differences with no analysis or commentary.

Film History

All films are deeply involved in history: they reflect history, influence history, *have* history. A film like *Gone With the Wind* not only tells a story of the South during the Civil War, but (more importantly) it reflects the values and ideas of the culture that produced it, and so it can be understood as a historical document.

All films are part of our culture's history. They derive from and contribute to historical events. War films, for example, take their substance from historical events. They also influence those events—by inspiring wartime audiences to rally behind the troops, or to protest them.

Films also have their own histories:

- All films have production histories, which involve the details of how and why and when they were made. Production problems often (if not always) affect what we see on the screen.
- All films have distribution and release histories: some films are released to different generations of audiences, to wildly different responses; other films are banned because they threaten certain cultural values. (Thailand, for example, banned both *The King and I* and the more recent *Anna and the King* because, in the estimation of the Thais, the films were disrespectful to their royalty).
- All films have economic and industrial histories. Hollywood films are vulnerable to certain economic and industrial pressures; China's cinema and India's Bollywood have their own economic and industrial histories that influence the films that they produce.

- All films have an audience. Some have a fan base. The history of these communities—and their reactions to films—offers an interesting view into how a public influences what films are produced, how they're shot and edited, how they're distributed, and so on.
- Finally, all films should be understood in the larger context of film history. A particular film might "make" history through its technological innovations, or it might reflect certain historical trends.

Ideological Papers

Even films that are made to entertain promote a set of beliefs. Sometimes these beliefs are clearly political, even propagandistic: Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, for example, is a glorification of Soviet values. Other films are not overtly political, but they still promote certain values; *Mary Poppins*, for example, argues for the idea that fathers need to take a more active interest in their families.

When watching a film, it's important to remember that even films whose purpose it is to entertain may be promoting or even manipulating our feelings about a certain set of values. *Independence Day*, for example, is entertaining, in part, because it plays on our feelings of American superiority and "never say die." An analysis of the film benefits from a consideration of these values, and how they're presented in the film.

Finally, students familiar with different schools of criticism—Marxism, feminism, new historicism, and any of the other isms—can use these critical frameworks to come up with ideas for writing. For instance, if you want to write a paper on Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), you can view the film through a Marxist lens, exploring it in economic terms, focusing on matters of privilege and power. Or you can take a feminist perspective, considering how the heroine's cultural situation (or Campion's) is relevant to the themes of the film.

Cultural Studies/National Cinemas

Films reflect the cultures and nations in which they were produced. Hollywood films, one might argue, reflect certain things about our nation's culture: our love of distraction, our attraction to adrenaline and testosterone, our need for good to triumph over evil, and our desire for things work to out in the end.

Other cultures and nations have different values and thus produce different sorts of films. Sometimes these films baffle us. We might watch a French film, for example, and wonder why it's funny. Or we might watch a Russian film and wonder why the director never calls for a close-up. These

observations are, in fact, excellent starting places. Consider differences. Find out if these differences reflect something about the national character, or if they reflect trends in the national cinema. You may find that you have something interesting to say.

Auteur Criticism

Auteur criticism understands a film as the product of a single person and his vision. In most cases, this person is the director. Auteur criticism is useful because it helps us to understand, for example, what makes a certain film a "Spielberg" film. However, auteur criticism is sometimes based on the erroneous assumption that films are like novels—that is, that *one* person is the author.

The idea of the author's presence in a cinematic work has been long debated. Whereas some critics argue that a work's coherence depends on the vision and decisions of a single person, critics in the opposing camp believe that it's the structure of a work—and not the personality that created it—that we can justly address.

Complicating the matter further is that film is a collaborative medium. It's important to understand that no one person can control the product. The director of photography, the screenwriters (often many), the wardrobe and makeup people, the head of the studio—all these and others have a hand in determining the final product of a film.

Still, auteur criticism is widely practiced and is useful in helping us to understand the common themes and aesthetic decisions in films by the same director (or producer, or star). Keep in mind, however, that the best of the auteur criticism draws on other sources, like film history or formal analysis, to ensure that the paper is not simply an examination of the private life or the psychology of the auteur.