

# Assignments for English 364, *Introduction to Film Studies: Independent Filmmakers*

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The writing assignments in the course will provide you with an opportunity to apply technical and theoretical analyses to the films we're studying. There are three kinds of writing you will do in this class, and they are all detailed in *The McGraw-Hill Film Viewer's Guide*, by David Bordwell (included with the textbook *Film Art*). The following is a brief synopsis of these assignments; make sure you read the extended descriptions.

## **Screening Reports on the Film of the Week (9 total for 50% of your grade)**

The purposes of this assignment are to help you watch more attentively; to gather your thoughts, impressions, and ideas about the film; and to write a detailed technical or theoretical analysis of one scene from the movie. The scene you choose to analyze should demonstrate how film technique contributes to meaning and form, so it should conform to and support your thesis of the film. This type of critical writing is called media-specific analysis, because you consider the technical format of filmmaking as part of your analysis. It is different to write about or analyze a film rather than literature or a sculpture or some other art form; and this difference in the specificity of the medium needs to be reflected in your writing. Paying attention to film form and the technical basis of filmmaking allows you to recognize the distinctive characteristics of the medium and the ways in which they shape the meaning of the film. In this class, it is not acceptable to write about film solely from a thematic point of view. You must always incorporate a technical analysis into your discussion of film and its practices.

After writing your screening report, don't worry if class discussion has gone in another direction and makes you feel off base about your interpretation. When I evaluate these, I look for overall thoughtfulness and attentiveness to the film. You may also write on topics we discussed in class as long as you take the discussion in another direction or bring greater depth to the commentary.

Note: Bordwell and Thompson's McGraw-Hill *Film Viewer's Guide* has good advice about how to watch movies critically and take notes (p.10). Timothy Corrigan's, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, has an even more detailed chapter on the subject with a useful shorthand method for note-taking, if you would like greater support.

### *Criteria for Screening Reports*

Length: 2-3 typed double-spaced pages. The screening reports are due on the Friday following the viewing. Late screening reports are not accepted. Your screening reports will be evaluated using a check system with specific criteria attached to the different scales. Use the following descriptions to guide your work.

### *Screening Report Evaluation*

You will earn 0 (no credit) if:

- The report does not meet the assignment guidelines
- The report is late
- The report doesn't contain detailed examples
- There is no attempt to use film concepts and terminology and/or critical and theoretical principles

You will earn a v- (C/D+ range grade) if:

- The report is completed on time and addresses the requirements of the assignment, but is otherwise incomplete, lacking in detail, or too brief
- There are examples, though they are not developed substantively
- There is some evidence of critical thinking
- There is some attempt to use film terminology and/or theoretical principles, though it may only be minimally

You will earn a v (B/C+ range grade) if:

- The report is completed on time and follows the guidelines of the assignment
- The report addresses a scene or element of the film in substantive detail
- There is solid evidence of critical thinking
- The report contains technical language and/or theoretical principles explained in depth
- The response shows evidence of engagement and thoughtfulness:
  1. it is written for a sustained period of time (not hurried to get done)

2. details are used to illustrate ideas and ideas are used to explain details
3. the response resists prematurely judging or evaluating ideas/issues

You will earn a v+ (A/B+ range grade) if, in addition to v criteria, your response also:

- Asks probing questions and explores the issues surrounding those questions
- Pushes beyond the obvious or superficial to comment on what's implied (or suggested)
- Often makes connections among ideas and/or details from reading, writing, viewing, or class discussion

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### **Film Review (one for a total of 10% of your grade)**

This assignment will give you the opportunity to move beyond a description of film techniques and/or theory by evaluating an entire film. A film review judges the quality of a film and provides enough information to support the writer's evaluation.

#### *Criteria for Film Reviews*

Length: 5-6 typed, double-spaced pages

Good reviews offer an overview of the film somewhere in the early part of the text, followed by a detailed description of a number of scenes, film technique, and/or details about the acting, script, or other elements involved in filmmaking. Don't write about the whole film chronologically! Instead, shape your paper around your interpretation of the film, elaborating on the details that develop your point of view. This doesn't mean that you should ignore details that seem to contradict your reading, however. You should also address contrary evidence, but explain why it doesn't negate your argument. You may also want to concede some points in a negative review; that is, you may want to recognize some of the film's strengths, even though you are not recommending it. In the end, you need to judge the film, but if you have done so with equanimity and by offering strong evidence to support your reading, you won't put off your readers. You should also strive to draw on the concepts and terminology of both *Film Art* and *Cinema Studies* to offer as precise an analysis of the film as possible. And be sure to mention striking details of the film, whether they involve editing, costumes, acting style, or color design. There are also certain conventions, which need to be followed in review writing. Be sure to include the actors' names after their characters' names (in parentheses) the first time you use them. Make sure you've included a plot synopsis in the early portion of your review, and don't reveal the ending of the film. You may use any of the films that we look at in class in whole, or in part, or another film by one of the directors we have studied.

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### **Critical Analysis (one for a total for 10% of your grade)**

The analytical paper differs from the film review, in that it is not primarily evaluative. Rather, this assignment allows you to analyze film, in terms of its social, political, and ideological contexts, by focusing on a close reading of the text. One way to think about it is you will apply the methodology of the screening report, but with a larger focus on understanding the filmic logic of a particular movie. Foremost, you need to have a strong thesis, which you will work to support in your paper; and secondly, you should consider the different theoretical approaches we've studied to decide how best to approach your film. You should also provide a detailed technical analysis of one or two scenes, at the most. Like the screening report you should demonstrate how technique contributes to the overall meaning of the film, so that you're conscious of your thesis all the way through the paper.

#### *Criteria for Analytical Papers*

Length: 5-6 typed double-spaced pages.

*Specificity and focus:* It must be clear what your thesis is, what theoretical approach you're using, and which specific scene or scenes you are using in your analysis.

*Accuracy of terminology:* If you have doubts about using terms correctly, bring it up in class, ask Tony or me, or e-mail one of us.

*Descriptive clarity:* Since visual media carry enormous amounts of information rapidly, describing visual detail in a concise and understandable way can be challenging. The technical terminology is very important here as well as some creativity in making a reader see what you see.

*Application of the technical concepts to interpretation:* After you have described the specific technique at work in the film (or while you're describing it) you should be discussing how it works to generate meaning and effect in the scene and how it fits into the larger context of the movie. This is the payoff, the reason for the technical description. You don't have to come up with a single or a highly definite idea here--speculation is good too--but make sure you are thinking and talking about meaning and the larger context for what you are analyzing.

*Organization:* These don't have to be highly formal pieces of writing. You can write in a comfortable informal voice, digress; speculate where it's appropriate. But you should work at having a clear introduction that locates what you are doing and why, a body that does the description and analysis, and a conclusion.

*Editing:* I don't read with a red pen in hand, but if errors in proofreading and editing distract me, it will affect my evaluation.

*Some Suggestions:*

- Watching a film for technique takes practice. Try watching a movie, focusing on just one element. Then pick a scene or a shot that strikes you as interesting or especially representative and that you want to figure out.
- It's important to work with the film and scene available to you: a VCR or DVD player with an effective pause control is essential. You can't do this assignment well from memory. Take lots of notes before you write, and after you have a draft going look again, since new details and ideas may now appear that you want to include.
- Don't let any of the above scare you. This analysis can be quite limited in its aims and be very successful. The key to this assignment is substantial prep time, choosing the film, taking notes from the reading, reviewing the specific scenes you want to discuss, and then taking notes on them.

### **Video Production**

It is possible to substitute your own video for the film review or analytical paper. See me early in the quarter, if you're interested in this option.

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### **New Film Presentation Project (30% of your grade)**

The purpose of this assignment is to present to the class another movie by one of our directors and to focus on some aspects of the film's form and technique as it generates meaning. The total time for the presentation is 40 minutes, and these presentations will be scheduled the latter part of class on Mondays. Your group should plan to meet once with Tony and me to discuss your plans.

Although I have broken this project down into the specific units below for clarity, you should organize the session in a way that emphasizes your group's cohesiveness. In other words, work to ensure that your presentation is well coordinated, even though everyone is assigned an individual job. The best presentations have a plan, and the students have worked together to envision the whole.

To begin with everyone in the group should watch the film by this director and read criticism and reviews. Share these sources with each other. Inform yourself of the critical dialogue that exists on the film as a way to organize your own interpretation of its meaning. (For older films this dialogue may be found in film journals or books; for newer films, you may have to rely on reviews. Note that film reviews can vary hugely in their substance. Look for reviews that are substantive (more than superficial praise or criticism). To find articles on films or directors: go to the Library Main page>online resources>databases and indexes>Citation Index. Choose the *Arts and Humanities Index* "Easy Search," then "Topic" for a film title or "Person" for a director (you'll also get different results if you type last or first name first). Three of the leading film journals in which you'll find a lot of articles are *Sight and Sound*, *Cineaste*, and *Film Quarterly*. *FQ* publishes article length reviews on particular films, and these are often quite good. At any rate, it should be evident in your presentations that you are drawing on a level of sophisticated analysis. Organize presentation time so that most of your presentation focuses on the critical analysis and film clips. Present your material extemporaneously. Don't read to the class unless you are citing quoted material from printed texts. You can use note cards to remind you of key points you want to cover.

#### *Film Background, History, Plot (1 person)*

Your job is to introduce the students in your group to the class and to provide a clear synopsis of the film. Include background about the film (any interesting details about its making, for example) and details about its historical context (where it falls in the director's body of work, how it's been received). You should start by giving a basic introduction to the film, a kind of overview, so that students in the class understand the work on a basic generic and structural level. Take your time doing this and consider carefully how best to present the film, because most of the class won't have seen the movie. Remember that you have to explain motivations very clearly and simply, because people are taking this in for the first time. Try to convey the overall shape of the film and its key moments, but don't get bogged down in too much detail or plot summary. It's a good idea to use handouts or transparencies to convey a lot of this information, but make sure you refer to the handout, if you use one. Finally, be sure to coordinate with the rest of the group, so that your information provides a context for their work.

#### *Critical Analysis (3-4 people)*

This part of the presentation should contain the following elements:

- an overall assessment of the film, themes, ideas, metaphors and larger meanings, relationships to other films, and so on. This is where you will use some of the information you've read in reviews and criticism and express the way or ways your group is interpreting the film.
- a more focused analysis of some particular aspect of the movie, such as a key scene or scenes, technical innovations, aspects of technique or style, or theory
- use of three or four short film clips to illustrate your points and perhaps to engage the class in discussion of specific techniques; be very selective here and careful about time. (You'll have to use a computer with a video and make sure it is correctly cued up; DVDs offer greater ease with their chapter organization.) When you present your clips to the class make sure you contextualize them as part of the larger work, drawing on the work of the first presenter. I'll be looking for insightful analysis regarding technique and/or theory in your commentary. It's helpful to be as explicit as possible by using the terminology from Film Art and Cinema Studies.

The above does not necessarily have to happen in this order. Some of the elements can be combined. Give a lot of thought to what interests you most about the film and therefore the best way to accomplish the above. It may be a good idea to give someone primary responsibility for handling the equipment. In the past groups have handed out lists of critical questions that stimulate thinking about the film. If you can tie some of these questions into specific scenes, it helps involve the class in your discussion. How you want to take class questions or how much you want to engage the class is up to you, but let people know at the beginning if they should ask questions along the way or wait until the end.

Though your group will collaborate, I will evaluate each of you individually. When you get ready to make your presentation, the first person should give me a sheet with each person's name and description of what they will be doing in the presentation and the approximate time they plan to take. I will grade your work according to this description. In my written assessment I will be looking for your understanding of the materials and the quality of the end product.

### **Tips**

- The actual time for the presentation is briefer than you think. In front of the class things always take longer than you plan for. Rehearsal is critical to staying within the time limit. You must practice as a group at least once before you present in front of the class.
- In the critical analysis portion of the presentation, it usually works better if you find ways to do your analyses together to some degree, as opposed to three or four completely separate mini-presentations.
- If you are having problems with your group, please try to address them early on. If the problems persist, talk to me or Tony and we'll do what we can to help. We're well aware of the various kinds of problems that can come up with group presentations, and we'll work with you and your group to resolve them.

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