SIX APPROACHES TO WRITING ABOUT FILM

Two writers may both be interested in the lighting in Fritz Lang's Scarlet Street (1945), but they may use different methods to focus that discussion: A writer using formalist approach might analyze the repetitions of an image or the variations of light and shadow within the film; a writer using a historical approach might show how those lighting patterns can be linked to Lang's beginnings in the German expressionist period. Likewise, different approaches are used when writers discuss stylistic similarities in the films of Renoir or historical changes in the musical. In the first case, the writer uses, implicitly, an "auteur" approach, which is based on the belief that films can be linked through the style of the director; in the second, the writer practices genre criticism, which presumes certain accepted types of movies. An awareness of these methods implies a more theoretical aim in your writing than many competent writers about film have (or even wish to have). Yet, even when you analyze a single film, it is important and useful to understand the approach you are using because this awareness will help you to identify the limits of the approach, the needs of your audience, and the goals of the essay.

As you consider a topic for an essay—such as an editing technique—and as you begin to give that topic shape, consider also the assumptions that underlie your approach: Are you interested in a particular technique, such as parallel editing, because one director uses it regularly? Are you interested in examining a series of images because they relate the film to sociological and cultural issues, as Lotte Eisner is when she suggests that the many staircases in German films of the twenties relate to the romantic ambitions of the society of Weimar Germany? Do you want to focus on how the use of a technique, such as Eisenstein's montage, challenged the way editing had traditionally been used, and thus suggests an important change in film form? No matter what approach you find appropriate, you will always clarify your aims and limits if you get a sense of the larger issues. When comparing two films or parts of films, for example, deciding
on the terms of that comparison—formal, historical, or other—can be an important step in organizing that comparison.

The following introduction to the major approaches or methods used in writing about film does not attempt to review the complexities of any single approach or the ways two or more approaches may overlap in one study. These sketches and examples should, however, help you to identify approaches that can direct your writing about film and give you a sense of how a particular method might organize and use information.

**FILM HISTORY**

A historical approach is one of the most widely used methods in film criticism. It can be employed with varying degrees of emphasis or consciousness, but in general, the writer using this approach organizes and investigates films according to their place within a historical context and in light of historical developments. Such an approach might explore the following:

- The historical relationships of the films themselves, as when a writer compares and contrasts the use of sets in a film from the thirties with their use in a film from the seventies.
- The relationship of films to their conditions of production, perhaps allowing a writer to make connections between American films of the eighties and the trend during those years toward the ownership of studios by large corporations like Gulf+Western or TransAmerica.
- The relationship of movies to their reception, demonstrated in an essay that explores how television in the fifties changed the expectations of movie audiences at that time.

Although there are ways to write about film without emphasizing historical issues, some historical awareness informs most writing about film. An essay that examines *Mildred Pierce* (1945) in the context of post–World War II America and the changing sociological position of women would be based on a historical method, even though the direction and point of the argument may be a feminist critique. Similarly, an essay that presents a straightforward reading of the themes and style of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) could develop that reading by relating those subjects to the Vietnam War, the history of the western in American movies, or innovations in movie technology during the sixties. Many exciting and informative historical essays have main topics that have little or nothing to do with the analysis of specific films and instead concentrate almost exclusively on historical facts and complexities—an economic crisis, say, or the political pressures behind an instance of censorship—which only indirectly figure in what an audience sees on the screen.

When using a historical method to help explain a film, beware of assuming that any particular movie, even a documentary, gives an unmediated picture of a society and a historical period. To be sure, *Our Daily Bread* (1934) tells us a great deal about the early thirties in America during the Great Depression, but what it tells us is bound up with historical questions concerning, for example, its style and intended audience. History is a delicate instrument; use it with as much discrimination as possible. In *Film History: Theory and Practice*, Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery note that “Doing history requires judgment, not merely the transmission of facts” (iv). In this excerpt from their reading of F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), they demonstrate how historical research can be used to fuel an initial curiosity about the lavish and artsy techniques of the movie:

William Fox's decision to hire F. W. Murnau and to give him virtually carte blanche in the production of *Sunrise* involved much more than the addition of one more “highly artistic picture” to the 1927–1928 Fox schedule. Fox used Murnau's considerable biographical legend as part of a carefully orchestrated plan to elevate the status of his studio to that of preeminence in the motion picture industry. In the mid-1920s, Fox occupied, along with First National and Warner Bros., a middle echelon within the film industry both in terms of economic power and product prestige. (Prestige can be defined as the extent to which the films of a studio are perceived to be of “quality” in the critical discourse of the period.) In the mid-1920s Fox was known as a producer of unpretentious, “folksy” pictures, not highly regarded by critics but for the most part popular with the mass audience. Examining the “Best Films” lists of *Film Daily Yearbook* and *Photoplay* for 1925, for example, we find that of 184 “best” pictures cited by 184 different critics, only 9 were Fox titles; in both lists the films of Paramount and MGM predominate.

In 1925, however, William Fox launched one of the greatest expansion plans in the history of the motion picture industry. The plan eventually collapsed with the stock market crash of 1929, but just before his downfall Fox controlled the production of Fox and MGM studios, Loew's Theatres, Fox's own large theater chain, and a one-third interest in First National Theatres, British Gaumont, and assorted other holdings. The Fox drive for economic power in the late 1920s was paralleled...
by attempts to enhance the prestige of Fox productions, and it is in this context that Murnau’s hiring and his production of *Sunrise* must be viewed. Fox anticipated that Murnau’s production of the highly artistic picture would bolster his studio’s “special” films category. Unless the specials could attract greater critical attention, Fox would never have the prestige to match his hoped-for economic status. (99)

If you decide that your approach will be a historical one, ask yourself specific questions about the role history will have in your argument: Is the historical information you use background or introductory information for your study? Are you concerned with how and why certain historical events are represented as they are in the movie? Does historical background help explain narrative or technical maneuvers in the film? Does the movie stand out in history, or is it part of a historical trend? Is your argument intended to clarify that place in history? What is more important to your argument, the historical facts behind the film, how its successive audiences responded to it, or both? No matter what your specific subject, ask yourself what part history might play in it.

### NATIONAL CINEMAS

If historical issues usually play some part in essays on the movies, another important (and related) way to discuss them is in terms of their cultural or national character. The presumption behind this approach is that film cultures evolve with a certain amount of individuality and that to understand, for instance, the complexities of Alexander Dovzhenko’s *Arsenal* (1929), one must locate it first in the political and aesthetic climate of postrevolutionary Russia. Similarly, to analyze an Indian film of Satyajit Ray, such as *Distant Thunder* (1973), a writer should know something about the society and culture of India. According to this approach, ways of seeing the world and ways of portraying the world in the movies differ for each country and culture, and it is necessary to understand the cultural conditions that surround a movie if we are to understand what it is about. Because it employs many Western themes and formulas, an American spectator might have little trouble comprehending a film by Akira Kurosawa, but without guidance and some cultural background on Japanese society, the films of Kenji Mizoguchi or Mikio Naruse might seem too foreign and confusing for the average American student.

Observe how the author of the following passage identifies the specific cultural heritage of the African films of Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo. While admitting the influences of other national cinemas (like the French New Wave of Jean-Luc Godard), he singles out an oral tradition that distinguishes and marks a range of different films as uniquely African:

Although African filmmakers invoke oral tradition as a primary influence, they have appropriated it and applied it in various ways to create paradigms for addressing the broad range of social, political, cultural and historical issues of Africa. Although their styles are diametrically opposed to each other, this use of oral tradition and African film language can be identified in the films Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo. While Sembene’s narrative is more linear than Hondo’s and imbued with straightforward didacticism (as in *Borrom Sarret, Mandabi, “The Money Order,”* 1968, *Xala, 1974,* and *Camp de Thiaroye, 1987*), Hondos films (*Soleil O, 1969* and *West Indies, 1979*) are... syncopated and eruptive in tone, and reminiscent of the stylistically disruptive tone of black French liberationist literature. The two filmmakers not only share a number of Western influences (such as Italian Neo-Realism, Hollywood, Latin American documentary, and Soviet montage) but are indebted to indigenous oral storytelling techniques as well. Thus, while Western critics have tended to read Hondo’s style as avant-garde and Godardian, Africanist discourse has emphasized its link with oral tradition. (Ukadike 571)

When deciding to discuss a movie or a group of movies from a foreign culture, a writer might begin by questioning, with an open mind, what exactly distinguishes these films from the American ones with which she or he is familiar. (This implies that, at the same time, the writer will sketch a sense of what is specific about the American cinema of a given period.) How do the meanings of these films change when they are seen outside their culture? In what ways might you, as an American, understand British films of the fifties differently from the English audience at that time? What kind of cultural research might give you a better handle on the themes? Should you read something about the other arts, the politics, the economics of the movie industry there? Try not to oversimplify the connections between a culture and its films; remember that an approach of this kind implies (perhaps falsely) a unity or a fundamental similarity between many different films from a country. Could you find a similar kind of unity in American movies of the nineties?
GENRES

A French word meaning “kind,” genre is a category for classifying films in terms of common patterns of form and content. Many of us casually practice the categorizing behind genre studies when we view movies: often, we identify a set of similar themes, characters, narrative structures, and camera techniques that link movies together as westerns, musicals, film noir, road movies, melodramas, or sci-fi films. Westerns feature cowboys and open, uncivilized spaces; sci-fi movies deal with adventures in outer space or intrusions by extraterrestrials. In analytical writing, a discussion of genre is frequently an effective way to begin examining how a film organizes its story and its audience’s expectations. A western such as John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) operates expressly out of a generic tradition, and although there may be many ways of talking about the film, one of the most important is to examine its subversion of many of the traditional patterns and expectations about the western. This particular movie is the tale of a western hero, but we discover that this hero is not like the usual western hero, and so we are surprised by the intentional generic variation.

In the following passage, Vivian Sobchack discusses the genre of film noir. Rather than concentrate on well-known characteristics of this genre (such as stories of crime and the use of dark lighting), she highlights here the more subtle contrast between a house and home in this postwar genre:

In [film] noir, a house is almost never a home. Indeed, the loss of home becomes a structuring absence in film noir. It is particularly telling to think here of the ironic “domesticity” that runs through Double Indemnity (1944) or Mildred Pierce (1945)—films that are linked irrevocably to noir but pose problems to its particular urban iconography. The suburban house into which Phyllis Dietrichson invites insurance agent Walter Neff is merely a house: its furniture plain, its decorations sparse and impersonal, motel-like. It doesn’t look lived in. Indeed, its interior decoration is best described in a line of dialogue offered by a character about a house in a later film noir, The Big Heat (1953): “Hey, I like this. Early nothing.” And, even in her domestic beginnings, Mildred’s home is also figured as merely a house: drab, plain, unmarked by the people who live there and supposedly constitute a family. The kitchen in which Mildred bakes her pies has none of the warmth and coziness of Norman Rockwell’s kitchens and is hardly a felicitous space. And this lack of felicitous space is echoed in her voice-over narration that accompanies a flashback: “I was always in the kitchen. I felt as though I’d been born in a kitchen and lived there all my life except for the few hours it took to get married.” (144)

In writing about film genres, always keep historical distinctions in mind, as Sobchack does here, because genres change with the times. Also identify for yourself what common structures, themes, and stylistic techniques are associated with a particular genre. When did this type of movie first appear? What are the antecedents outside film history—novels, opera? How has it changed through history, and why? Does the story of the movie you are analyzing fit the genre it seems to be placed in? If not, does the mixing and matching of generic formulas serve a purpose, as in Blade Runner (1982), in which the detective and sci-fi genres, among others, are superimposed? As genres mature through the years, you may discover a strange self-consciousness in a film’s use of generic formulas, as in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. How is this self-consciousness used? Is it an attempt to poke fun at the genre, or is it an attempt to show the limits of the genre in describing the complexities of the modern world? Is a road movie such as Thelma & Louise (1991), for example, best understood as a provocative variation on a genre dominated by male relationships?

AUTEURS

Auteur criticism is one of the most widely accepted and often unconsciously practiced film criticisms today: it identifies and examines a movie by associating it with a director or occasionally with another dominant figure, such as a star (say, Clint Eastwood). In a sense, referring to “a David Lean film” or “a Steven Spielberg movie” is in itself a critical act, because it implies that the unifying vision behind what you see on the screen is the director’s and that there are certain common themes and stylistic traits that link films by the same filmmaker. Although writers refer casually to a dominant actor or even a screenwriter as an auteur (an “author”), auteur criticism has its historical roots in the claims of literary independence and creativity made by and for certain directors. Since the 1950s, it has become a standard strategy in writing about film, with the director understood to be the auteur who anchors and unifies our perception of the film. Here, Thomas Elsaesser examines characters in the
films of Samuel Fuller, and pinpoints general character traits and actions attributable to Fuller's guiding vision and consistent interests:

One of the most distinctive features of a great number of Fuller heroes is their willingness—indeed their compulsion—to expose themselves to situations charged with contradiction. The Fuller heroes, as it were, come to life only under conditions of extreme physical or mental stress; they seem, and often are, on the verge of hysteria, and their mode of action betrays a kind of electric, highly explosive energy.

Paradoxically, the impression one gets is that this apparent mental and emotional instability is what makes them strong in will and action. I am thinking of figures like the Baron of Arizona, Zack in The Steel Helmet, O'Meara in Run of the Arrow, Tolly Devlin in Underworld USA, and even Merrill in Merrill's Marauders. All live impossible situations, and knowing they cannot win, they nevertheless act with a kind of conviction, a kind of instinctive immediacy—as if they were engaged in an incessant flight forward, and were committing themselves to a course of action in whose perverseness they almost seem to rejoice, because they intuitively accept it as the fundamental condition of their existence. (291)

Although auteurism provides the foundation for many excellent studies, it should be used with some skepticism for at least two reasons. Rarely does a director have the total control that the term suggests, because anyone from a scriptwriter to an editor may be more responsible for the look and logic of a film. And what an auteur represents differs quite a bit depending on the time and place: auteur applied to Truffaut or Eric Rohmer has quite a different meaning from auteur applied to Samuel Fuller or David Lynch. If you embark on a comparative study of the editing in two films by the same director, you should make it clear that you know you are using an auteur model and indicate how that tag applies to this director. Ask also how the historical conditions of film production encourage or discourage the auteurist unity you find in his or her work. Were the films made as part of a studio system, as were George Cukor's, in which the influence of the studio might be more noticeable than the influence of the director? Or did the filmmaker have a great deal of independence, as does the British filmmaker Peter Greenaway, and thus control over how the film looks? What are the most distinctive signs of the filmmaker's control over the film: Editing? The stories themselves? The themes? The setting? Are your expectations about a film conditioned by what you know about its director, as when you anticipate a great deal of

violence from a Sam Peckinpah movie? Why? What kind of changes are there in the director's work over the years, and how do you account for them? Are there special marks of this filmmaker in each of the films, like Alfred Hitchcock's cameos, Joseph von Sternberg's cinematic portraits of Marlene Dietrich, or Spike Lee's appearance as an actor in some of his movies? Keep in mind, finally, that sophisticated auteur studies are interested in the films, not in the psychology or private life of the filmmaker.

**KINDS OF FORMALISM**

*Formalism* is a name often given to film criticism concerned with matters of structure and style in a movie, or with how those features discussed in Chapter 3 (such as the narrative or the mise-en-scène) are organized in particular ways in a movie. In most instances, a writer will want to discuss these formal matters together with the major themes of a film, but the chief focus of a formalist essay will be on patterns such as narrative openings and closings, the significant repetition and variation of camera techniques, or the relation of shots and sequences to each other. In the context of a discussion of CinemaScope and by concentrating on color and space, the writer of the following excerpt presents an illuminating and exact account of a sequence in formalistic terms:

In Rebel Without a Cause (Ray, 1956) a shot of extraordinary beauty comes after the first twenty minutes of the film, during which the surroundings have been uniformly cramped and depressing, the images physically cluttered-up and dominated by blacks and browns. Now, James Dean is about to set out for school; he looks out of the window. He recognizes a girl (Natalie Wood) walking past in the distance. Cut to the first day/exterior shot, the first bright one, the first “horizontal” one. A close shot of Natalie Wood, in a light-green cardigan, against a background of green bushes. As she walks the camera moves laterally with her. This makes a direct sensual impression which gives us an insight into Dean's experience, while at the same time remaining completely natural and unforced. On the small screen, such an image could not conceivably have had a comparable weight. (Barr 10-11)

Strictly speaking, formalist criticism does not emphasize matters outside the film proper, such as the different effects a movie may have on audiences, the historical conditions of its production, or any other questions that are not immediately apparent on the screen. (Rarely today,
that there are unintended social or political perspectives at work here. Mainly entertainment, and their makers would probably resent any claim (2001). Like the majority of movies, these films present themselves as temporary political quagmire by telling a darkly comic tale of a Bosnian and a different political messages at work

In one sense, ideology is a more subtle and expansive way of saying politics, at least if we think of politics as the ideas or beliefs on which we base our lives and our vision of the world. Ideology might refer to one person's belief in the sanctity of the family or another person's sense that civilization is basically progressive. When we see a movie such as No Man's Land (2001) or Potemkin, there is little chance of mistaking the different political messages at work in each. The first describes a contemporary political quagmire by telling a darkly comic tale of a Bosnian and a Serbian soldier trapped together between enemy lines; the second hails the force of a socialist revolution in Russia. Less obvious, however, may be the messages about life and society communicated in films such as The Sound of Music (1965), The English Patient (1996), or Monsters, Inc. (2001). Like the majority of movies, these films present themselves as mainly entertainment, and their makers would probably resent any claim that there are unintended social or political perspectives at work here.

Yet most of us would probably acknowledge that each of these has rather clear ideological messages about individualism, gender relations, the importance of family life, race, or European history. Similarly, many of us might see The Godfather II (1974) as an exciting and well-made gangster film, but a writer sensitive to the ideological values in the movie might see those elements as part of another perspective, one concerned with the business of capitalism:

Godfather II clearly shows the destruction and/or unobtainability of the basic bourgeois values. They are not destroyed because they are inadequate per se; family ties, social mobility, quest for security, male companionship, and even religious values all relate and correspond to real universal human needs for community, love, respect, support, appreciation. Coppola demonstrates that the social institutions—nuclear family, Mafia family, ethnic community, and the Church—upon which the Corleones relied to provide and protect these values withered before the irrational, destructive forces of capitalism, the main goal of which is profit, the meeting of human needs.

Coppola builds up, interweaves, and finally destroys four levels of familial affiliations—the nuclear family, the Mafia family, the ethnic community, and the Catholic Church. Through careful juxtaposition, he shows how each strives unsuccessfully to create an ideal community. In all cases, the needs of business destroy whatever communal aspects these associations might provide. In fact, it is the very effort to conserve and support these families that becomes corrupted by business and destroys them. Godfather II works out on the level of human relations Marx's insight that capitalism, even at its best, must destroy human life and associations to exist. Thus, the more vigorously bourgeois society strives to achieve the ideals it has set for itself, the more destructive and corrupt it becomes. And this contradiction is most clearly visible in American gangsterdom, the perfect microcosm of American capitalism. (Hess 11)

In critical writing attuned to ideology, any cultural product or creation carries, implicitly or explicitly, ideas about how the world is or should be seen and how men and women should see each other in it: the clothes you wear express social values just as the films you watch communicate social values. Whether we agree or disagree with the values expressed in a particular movie, the ideological critic maintains that these movies are never innocent visions of the world and that the social and personal values that seem so natural in them need to be analyzed.
Figure 19 Like many films, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) responds to different perspectives and approaches. Aside from the formal analysis, it can be investigated as a genre film that shares many of the characteristics of other crime movies. For some critics, moreover, *Pulp Fiction* provides rich material for an ideological approach attuned to questions of race and violence in contemporary America.

(Figure 19). Good writing of this kind usually avoids the obvious politics of propaganda in a movie like *The Green Berets* (1968), in which the American presence in Vietnam is naively hailed, and instead looks into the more subtle and less definitive politics of a film like Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1992), in which the filmmaker tells a complex story of interracial romance in the American South.

The following six approaches are the principal ideological schools of film criticism today. Each attends not only to the films themselves but also to the ways those movies are made and understood by audiences:

- studies of Hollywood hegemony focus on how classical film formulas dominate and sometimes distort ways of seeing the world
- feminist studies investigate how women have been both negatively and positively represented through the movies
- race studies concentrate on the depiction of different races in films, such as Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans
- class studies analyze the social and economic arrangements shown in a movie to show how social power is distributed in and through certain films
- postcolonial studies examine movies within a global perspective, aiming to reveal the repression of or emergence of indigenous perspectives within formerly marginalized or colonized cultures (like India or Iran)
- queer theory investigates how normative relations can be challenged or disrupted through films, especially through confrontations with heterosexual values

The best examples of ideological criticism attempt to avoid limiting themselves to the content of a movie; instead, sophisticated ideological criticism relates questions about characters and plot to more complex points about the shape of the narrative or the distance of the camera from the characters: what, for instance, is the ideological point of a war movie in which the enemy is seen only in large groups or in which the camera makes them all look alike? (In this kind of analysis, the intentions or claims of the filmmaker should not necessarily be accepted as what the movie is truly about.)

With an ideological approach, begin by trying to pinpoint what message or messages a film aims to communicate about its world and, by implication, our world. What is it saying explicitly? What is it saying implicitly? What does the film suggest about how people relate or should relate to one another? Is individuality important? Is the family important? Is the film straightforward and direct about those values and what they demand, both gains and losses? Are these values depicted as "natural," and if so why? Does the movie challenge the beliefs of its audience or support them? Why? How do the politics of the film and the way it entertains intertwine? Particularly with issues related to gender and race, ideological criticism today offers many exciting ways to look at movies: how movies depict women or minorities, how movies exclude people of color, and how movies are seen by audiences outside the middle class. Above all, ideological approaches urge you to be suspicious of what you might normally take for granted.

As you read and write more about film, you will encounter other approaches to writing about film to add to the list of principal approaches described in this chapter. And you will find that these approaches overlap and can be used with various degrees of emphasis, depending on what you wish to say about the movie. Writing about a film by Krzysztof Kieslowski (such as the 1993 *Blue*) would probably involve the writer in questions about Kieslowski's status as an auteur, his place in both Polish and French
cinema, and both the historical and the formal features of his films (a short or even medium-length paper is not likely to allow this much scope). You should consequently never be too restricted by a particular approach, nor should you hesitate to work out other ways to write about film. Yet, knowing these models and being conscious of when you may be using them can be extremely valuable in organizing your thoughts and in bringing your writing into focus. Most important, recognizing different ways of looking at the movies and writing about them will enable you to choose which method or methods best suit your own interests and aims.

SAMPLE ESSAYS

This first essay, written by a knowledgeable film student, examines Fritz Lang's *M* primarily as part of a tradition of German cinema and within the larger context of German culture and politics of the early thirties (Figures 20 and 21). Observe, however, how formalistic questions and auteurist assumptions also play a role. In the second essay, a student who began only with an uneasy feeling about a film's portrayal of women, demonstrates an ideological approach to *Ordinary People* (1980). More precisely, her essay is a feminist reading of the movie: it is less concerned with what the film intends to say than with what it does say about how women appear in a male-dominated society. Note that this "reading against the grain" of the film nonetheless remains very close to the images and actual story.