Criticism and Analysis

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Photograph of film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert. ©Disney-ABC Domestic Television. All rights reserved.

In the arts, the critic is the only independent source of information. The rest is advertising.

—Pauline Kael

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Define the differences between a film review and a film analysis, and between simple personal opinions and critical analysis.
- Recognize that films have levels of meaning deeper than their obvious referential content, and recognize how they explicitly and implicitly convey attitudes about certain topics in their stories.
- Discuss some basic theories of film analysis and different approaches to criticism, and be able to apply them when appropriate to interpret films.
- Explain how a film can evoke very different, even opposite responses from people who are looking at it for different things, and understand that a successful film analysis will balance a film's good and bad points.

10.1 What Is a Critic?

What is a critic? There are many definitions, some of which are unflattering, including as they do charges of jealousy, mean-spiritedness, and flat-out incompetence. Ironically enough, one of the best definitions comes from a character in a film, and in an animated film at that. In Pixar's film *Ratatouille* (2007), Peter O'Toole provides the voice of Anton Ego, a famous food critic feared for his discriminating palate and his withering criticism. When he samples food that has secretly been prepared by a rat, everyone fears the worst (particularly the rat). However, Ego begins his review with a spirited defense of the art of criticism, observations that apply just as much to film criticism as to food criticism:

> In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations; the new needs friends. . . . Not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere. (Bird & Pinkava, 2007)

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▲ *Ratatouille*'s Anton Ego looks the part of a supercilious critic. In the film, he has a large ego and a reputation for asserting his knowledge and expertise.

This character Ego (and the writers who gave him his words) offers an explanation of one of the most important—and most satisfying—roles the critic plays: as someone who can introduce little-known but worthy work to the public. This requires expertise and confidence—expertise in the understanding of how films are made, as well as

confidence that their opinions are correct, or at least rational, legitimate, and worthwhile for other people to consider. Film textbooks such as the one you're now reading, along with simply watching a lot of movies, can help with the former. The latter, a belief in the validity of your opinion, can be practiced but not taught. It requires both technical expertise as well as a belief in yourself and your skills, a belief that your opinion and your evaluation matter.

Most people think of a film critic as someone who goes to a movie, takes notes, comes home, and writes his or her opinion of it. And there is, in fact, a lot of truth to that notion, though it's not quite as easy as that sounds. This definition applies largely to popular critics. With the combination of a faltering economy sapping advertising dollars and the increasing amount of information available for free online, the professional popular critic is becoming more and more an endangered species. As with most jobs in mainstream media, the movie critic once held a lofty outsider's position. Most newspapers, magazines, and wire services employed at least one movie critic (as well as a television critic, a food critic, and perhaps even a book critic). Economic realities have diminished their number, but a few critics remain in mainstream media. However, film criticism has exploded. How can this be?

Perhaps no one has written more passionately about this development than the late Roger Ebert, one of the nation's best-known critics for the past 30 years, who offered this explanation on his blog:

> This is a golden age for film criticism. Never before have more critics written more or better words for more readers about more films. . . . Film criticism is still a profession, but it's no longer an occupation. You can't make any money at it. This provides an opportunity for those who care about movies and enjoy expressing themselves. Anyone with access to a computer need only to use free blogware and set up in business. Countless others write long and often expert posts on such sites as IMDb, Amazon, Rotten Tomatoes and in the comment threads of blogs. (Ebert, 2010)

Photo by Michael Germana/Everett Collection

▲ Roger Ebert was a critic who appreciated all kinds of films. For him, the best filmmaking was not only popular entertainment, but also art.

We discussed this "new army of critics" briefly at the end of Chapter 1. Ebert also notes, however, that people writing about film must resist a growing trend to ramble on with uninformed personal opinions, to offer immediate reactions to what they've just seen, or to cater to popular celebrity-based fads. A good critic, he says, is a teacher who can help readers broaden their perspectives and discover their own answers:

> A newspaper film critic should encourage critical thinking, introduce new developments, consider the local scene, look beyond the weekend fanboy specials, be a weatherman on social trends, bring in a larger context, teach, inform, amuse, inspire, be heartened, be outraged. (Ebert, 2008)

Ebert goes on to bemoan the modern culture's embracing of fame and glamour with no desire to think critically or question what they are told. "It is not about dumbing-down. It is about snuffing out." Ebert's comments are a powerful warning to those who believe that popular critics are too highbrow and scholarly, as well as to scholarly academics who consider much popular culture, not to mention criticism of it, beneath serious consideration. In truth, popular film criticism may be neither better nor worse than scholarly analysis; they simply

exist side by side. Moreover, a number of serious academics study pop culture (including but not limited to movies) as a means for understanding American life at a deeper level than they feel is possible by analyzing solely serious literature and historical documents.

Popular Criticism

Movie reviews are the most familiar form of **popular criticism**. A simple movie review may indeed be no more than the reviewer's personal opinions. However, such a review typically will hold little weight with anyone whose own opinions are no less valid. This is not to say that reviewers should avoid opinions, but rather that they should also evaluate the acting, directing, story, and production values in ways that will be useful to readers. Many popular movies, designed primarily to entertain wide audiences, may not lend themselves to deep analysis, but they can still be evaluated on how well they accomplish what they set out to do. Far too many amateur critics look at only the story content and ignore cinematic techniques, while perhaps just as many concentrate only on technical aspects or only on star personalities and completely overlook what the story is about.

A reviewer who is conversant with the principles of mise en scène, cinematography, and editing that we've examined earlier in this book can point out far more effectively (and believably) how well or poorly a film might be made rather than saying, "It's fantastic, a must-see," or "It sucks big time." A reviewer who can recognize narrative techniques (or lack of them) will be able to explain why certain characters come off as strong or weak, why the plot holds together (or doesn't), and how the film may present various themes or explore various issues in a satisfactory way (or not). A good way to start thinking about criticism would be to go back to the truth test introduced in Chapter 1. Is a film true to itself, and does it reveal some truth about human nature? What is it trying to say, how well does it say it, and was its message really worth saying? Once a film, however, can stand up to this test, it deserves deeper scrutiny, carefully considered analysis, and a more scholarly approach—analytical criticism, which we will discuss later.

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▲ A. O. Scott's review of the "documentary" *Catfish* cuts to the heart of the "truth test": "It seems either disingenuous or naïve to say that what happens is 'just true.' . . . [*Catfish*] is bluntly simple-minded even as it makes a great show of its epistemological sophistication" (Scott, 2010). The critic asks us to carefully consider this question: How do we distinguish between justifiable certainty and mere opinion?

The kinds of movie reviews typically printed in newspapers and magazines, or presented verbally on radio or television, are very short in comparison to a scholarly analysis or even a moderately in-depth critique. Professional film critics are limited in page space or air time, so they must become expert at cramming in as much important information, observations, and evaluation into as few words as possible. A review may average between 400 and 1,200 words (the equivalent of one to four double-spaced, typed pages), so it must concentrate only on the elements that most impressed the critic (for better or worse). If a reviewer wants to discuss any serious issues, there is no space to include more than a sentence or two of plot summary, just enough to put critical comments in a context readers (or listeners or viewers) will be able to understand. It is also worth noting that, depending upon publishing deadlines, most published movie reviews must be written very

quickly, within a few hours to perhaps a few days after seeing the film, without the luxuries of re-watching portions of the movie or making extensive revisions to the review.

The more space a critic is allotted, the more time can be spent on deeper analysis and interpretation that will give people useful information to influence their interest in the film one way or another. It can be a real challenge for newspaper critics to say what they'd like to say in less than a thousand words. Magazine critics often have double or triple the space available that newspaper or radio/TV critics have. But even though magazine reviews might be able to present more information and a more genuine analysis than a quick newspaper review, they usually contain less depth than an analytical essay written for a critical journal or chapter in a book. Film criticism on personal blogs, because they tend to be self-published, runs the gamut from pure personal reaction to simple plot synopses to informed critical and technical discussion to in-depth critical analysis and interpretation. Let's look now at how even just a little analysis can turn a simple review into a piece of criticism that others are more likely to take seriously. "Criticism," unlike how some may interpret the word, does not mean "pointing out faults." It means discussing something intelligently and being able to recognize a variety of approaches to it.

Analytical Criticism

Film scholarship is a more academic discipline of analysis than writing popular reviews. Scholarly critics may, instead of reviewing a single film, consider it in the larger context of other films of its type (i.e., a genre study) or of its director (i.e., an auteurist approach, as described in the last chapter on directing and style). They will be certain to place it within its historical and social context as well. Effective critics are able to see through the technology, styles, and attitudes of whatever time a film was made to recognize human truths in the story and characters. They will then be able to relate those human truths to what they can tell us about both the filmmakers and their intended audiences. That is, a critic may genuinely believe in the moment that *Goodfellas*, for example, is a great film. But how does it compare to other gangster movies? How will it hold up 20 years after its release? How will it hold up 20 years after that? And, perhaps most importantly, what does it say about society, both at the time it was made—the late 20th century—and about humanity on a larger scale? Does the fact that director Martin Scorsese invites us to identify with and even root for sadistic killers, monsters whose solution to almost every problem involves a fist or, worse, a gun, speak to a violent culture in which morality no longer has a firm grip on us? Or is it meant to be enjoyed simply as a thrill ride, falling back on the "it's only a movie" excuse? (Hint: In the case of Scorsese's films, the latter is never the case.)

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Scene from the movie *8-1/2*. Federico Fellini is a filmmaker whose elaborate fantasies seemed to overflow the screen. The greatest films and filmmakers, like the greatest novelists, offer rich, dense work. The more we bring to a film, the more we can take away.

As you can see, these are weighty issues. What makes the evaluation even trickier is that, at least on a basic measure of competence, films must succeed on a technical level as well. The dialogue and acting may be flawless, but if the director shoots the film in such a way that, for instance, meaningless shots of scenery distract from the actors' performances, it will be less satisfying, both in the short term for popular critics and in the long term for scholarly critics.

Another film might be a tour de force showcase for brilliant cinematography and flashy editing, but it is weakened by poor acting or rendered meaningless by an incoherent, pointless story. The director, as we have seen, must perform a balancing act, and any slip-up will be noticed and discussed in detail. Not only that, but different viewers (and critics) will pick up on different aspects differently. What may be distracting, meaningless shots of scenery to one critic may be a powerfully significant directorial comment on the characters' relationship to their environment to another critic. What may come across as poor acting or incoherent story points to one viewer may be regarded as satirically stylized performances and challenging but daringly fresh plot structure to another. What is dismissed as pretentious by some may be hailed as profound by others.

10.2 Digging Deeper: Levels of Meaning

The easiest way to explain a film to someone is to give a simple synopsis, telling all the main things that happened in the story and maybe describing a few memorable special effects, followed by a personal "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down." But a synopsis, no matter how detailed, is not a film review, and it certainly is not an analysis. It's the equivalent of a typical fourth-grader's first book report—or amateur bloggers and Internet Web forum contributors who simply are incapable of seeing past the obvious. Such people are simply unaccustomed to looking below the surface layers of a film and often may not even recognize the difference between the story they are following and the specific elements of that story that the film's plot is deliberately presenting in a certain order, for a certain length of time, and sometimes more than once, as we learned in our chapter on storytelling.

Some films are conscious, perhaps even self-conscious personal statements by directors who consider themselves artists, who use film as their medium and who are not expected to reach wide audiences. Other films are designed specifically as mass-market entertainment in the hopes of becoming blockbuster hits, made by directors who specialize in fast-paced action-adventure and spectacular visual effects. Although one film may provide richer material for analysis than another, both types can benefit from scratching below the surface. Only in that way can we find a better understanding of them. Next we'll briefly discuss David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and Zack Snyder's *300* (2007), looking for meaning by using four progressively deeper levels of interpretation. Both films received widely diverging critical reactions, with Lynch's work more popular with most critics than with moviegoers and Snyder's vastly more popular with moviegoers than with most critics. A large factor in the different responses to each film (or to any film) is what it is that the viewer chooses to focus upon. This depends upon the critical approach(es) and depth of analysis the viewer is able to apply to the film.

Referential Content

The things that happen in the plot and that we understand about the story, even if merely mentioned rather than dramatized, are part of the first and most basic level of understanding. This is sometimes called **referential content**, as it refers directly to what we see and hear in the film. A one- or two-sentence summary in a TV movie listing or video catalog is a good example of something likely to explain only the referential content. It tells what happens, something that anyone who sees the movie will agree with, but it is unlikely to explain what a movie is about on a deeper level, what it might be trying to tell the viewers. It takes looking below the surface to interpret the film rather than describe it, and there are three deeper levels we can find, with meanings that become increasingly more complex, that reach a point where not every viewer may agree with

any given interpretation. A description that uses only referential content to explain David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, for example, might mention that it is a crime drama in which a college boy and high school girl investigate a mysterious severed ear, only to discover drug dealers, kidnappers, and police corruption in their own small town. But anyone who has seen the film is likely to realize there is much more to it than that.

▲ *Wall Street*, directed by Oliver Stone, is a film that refers to the pre-great recession financial services industry. Its explicit content took on new resonance in its sequel, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, released following the recession in 2010. Gordon Gekko is named after a cold-blooded lizard. He proclaims, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works."

Explicit Content

Below the surface, or the referential content, is some **explicit content** that lets the viewer know some point the filmmakers are trying to make. This, as the term implies, is explicitly stated in the film, whether by a superimposed title, a voice-over narrator, or dialogue that comes directly from the mouths of characters in the film. This may be a kind of "moral to the story" or social, political, or philosophic commentary the filmmaker wants the audience to be sure to get. One line of dialogue in *Blue Velvet* that is repeated numerous times at various points is "It's a strange world," something most will agree that film depicts vividly. We see and hear numerous instances of the "ear" motif, from the discovery of a severed ear, to a superimposed ear as a character is walking down the street, to an extreme close-up of Jeffrey's (the protagonist's) ear as he sleeps, to Sandy, his girlfriend mentioning, "I hear things." Additionally, Jeffrey overhears a phone call while hiding in a closet. Jeffrey and the antagonist Frank later listen in on a police radio. All this is obvious (explicit) representation of the film's pervasive theme of voyeurism, particularly hearing things one might be better off not knowing, things that can get one into trouble. We also hear the evil Frank at one point tell the naïve Jeffrey to his face, "You're like me," but such an explicit statement has much deeper implications that take a deeper level of interpretation to uncover—the film's implicit content.

Implicit Content

Beyond explicit content, which is typically stated in so many words, or depicted in visual symbolism so obvious it is difficult to miss, is **implicit content**, or meanings that are implied rather than revealed directly. We can infer some of the implicit content from dialogue, but it usually takes thinking back on what we've seen to make the connections. In *Blue Velvet*, we see all the trouble Jeffrey gets himself into from his insatiable curiosity; we see him start to change from a clean-cut all-American college boy to someone driven by obsession to experience a dark world he never realized existed. We see him torn between his decent nature, seemingly ideal life, and beautiful girlfriend, and his increasing attraction to a troubled, sadomasochistic woman with dangerous criminal companions who has irresistibly drawn him into her dark world. The film's opening two-minute scene is implicitly a metaphorical miniature of the entire two-hour film. To the strains of the romantic title song, we see a beautiful small American city, a storybook neighborhood, and a pleasant-looking older man watering a perfectly kept yard. The man looks

healthy, but something inside his body suddenly gives way, and he has some sort of stroke. The grass looks nice from a distance, but when the camera moves down for an extreme close-up, we see ominous-looking black insects and hear creepy noises. Things are constantly happening that we'd rather not think about. By implication, the film is telling us that the average American town and the average American person has a darker side, however much it may be hidden or denied. *Blue Velvet* is packed with much more implicit content that different viewers may well interpret in different ways.

Symptomatic Content

The referential, explicit, and implicit meanings that a critic can identify to explain what a film is about all come from details that can be observed within the film itself, what is called internal evidence. However, a deeper interpretation must look outside the film, using external evidence to explain its **symptomatic content**. A film's symptomatic meanings are symbolic of something above and beyond the film's plot and even past its explicit or implicit meanings. Interpreting a film symptomatically literally means treating the film as a symptom of a greater influence than its own characters and motivations. The things that happen in the film are a symptom of the time and culture in which it was created, perhaps even of the director's personal life or point of view.

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▲ This scene from *Blue Velvet* ironically contrasts an idealized white picket fence suburbia complete with baby and puppy, with its brightly lit underside of menace and violence—an explicit visualization of its symptomatic content.

Blue Velvet's plot of crime below the surface of small-town America is a symptom of the realization by the 1980s that drug-related crime had spread beyond major urban slums and that police corruption could happen anywhere. The film's unusually frank depiction of sexual perversion (for its time), especially in connection with violence and brutal language, might be seen as symptomatic of declining morals and loosening standards—particularly in America, with implicit symbolism of the film's pervasive motifs of red, white, and blue. It can be interpreted as a powerful statement on the duality of human nature, with good and evil constantly warring within each individual. Despite its dark themes, like other Lynch films, it is also often an affectionate satire, some might say even a campy parody, on the banality of everyday conversation and personal relationships. By looking at the symptomatic content, one might also see the film in relationship to other films and themes treated by director David Lynch: *Blue Velvet* repeats motifs Lynch had explored earlier and sets up others he would elaborate upon in later films.

Putting It All Together

Not every film will lend itself to examining all four levels of meaning to the same degree, but serious thought and analysis of any film should reveal at least something on each level, even for films not considered to be "arthouse" fare or part of an auteur's canon of work. For example, the historical-action-war film *300* was a huge box-office success and can easily be analyzed for each

level of content. On the surface, it's a retelling of the ancient Greek story of 300 heroic Spartan soldiers led by their king, Leonidas, to hold off an overwhelming force of invading Persians at the Thermopylae pass. A referential description would merely recount what happens in the plot, and for many people who saw it, that's all they paid attention to and all they remember.

Analyzing some of the film's explicit content would mention how speeches of characters promote the ideals of fighting for individual freedom against imposed foreign tyranny, of devotion to national duty over personal concerns, and of willingness to stand by one's comrades and fight to the death for something one believes in.

On an implicit level, the film is a rousing celebration of the benefits of military preparedness, of extreme personal self-discipline, of a "Spartan" lifestyle (i.e., simple and utilitarian instead of lavish and ostentatious), and of the inspiration found from heroic deeds, especially martyrdom, for a just cause. The film's implicit content also shows the dangerous (in this case, deadly) resentment that can develop from rejection of a person's honest desires despite that person's lack of ability.

To examine *300* on a symptomatic level, we must understand that the film was released in 2007 while the United States (founded on ancient Greek and Roman ideals) was involved in a Middle-East war that was threatening to expand. Ancient Persia was roughly the location of present-day Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the film's depiction of Spartan soldiers appears to be an idealization of some elite corps of the U.S. Marines. The self-serving, aging, decrepit, and inbred rulers who refuse to give support to the idealistic warrior king thus can be seen as direct parallels to the U.S. Congress, while the invading Persians are depicted as deformed, gigantic beasts rather than as normal fighting men. This may be easily interpreted on the symptomatic level as a not-so-subtle post-September 11 demonization of present-day Middle-Eastern regimes out to conquer the civilized Western world of Europe and America.

The 2007 film *300*, then, can be analyzed as a rousing action-adventure set in ancient times but also as a strong modern sociopolitical statement symptomatic of the time and place where it was created. Far from being historically accurate, it is an allegory whose deeper meaning is vastly removed from the time, place, and characters actually depicted on the screen.

▲ *300* can be read as a commentary on U.S. wars in the Middle East. This image reinforces a belief that discipline and superior technology (in this case, impressive oversized shields) make a mighty fighting force invincible.

10.3 Approaches to Analysis and Interpretation

Analyzing levels of meaning below the surface story can greatly enhance enjoyment as well as understanding of a film. However, different people can approach the process of analysis from different perspectives and with different purposes; it is entirely possible for five different people to come up with five entirely different interpretations of a film that are all equally valid. Long essays and entire books have been written to explain many specific methods of film criticism in great detail. We'll look very briefly at several of these approaches below, some of which may cover mainly the referential, explicit, and implicit levels of meaning, while others try to identify varying

types of symptomatic content and ideological meanings to explain what a film is ultimately trying to tell its audience.

Only a few of the many approaches to examining a film will be discussed here. In writing a critical analysis, many of these may overlap or be used together with one or more other approaches, especially the auteurist approach that we discussed in some detail in Chapter 9 on style and directing, and the generic approach that we examined back in Chapter 4 on film genres. Topics and issues that interest particular critics usually determine which approaches they use to interpret films, but it's worth remembering that no one approach should be considered definitive. In fact it can be a worthwhile exercise to try to apply as many approaches as possible to analyzing a film, just to see how looking for different things can color how you understand what the film is really trying to say. Some approaches focus on understanding how a film communicates its ideas, whereas others look more at what the film is saying (whether the filmmaker is conscious of the statement or not). Let's look at these approaches now. (See Tables 10.1a and 10.1b later in this section for examples of each of these approaches and the *Behind the Scenes: Examples of Critical Approaches* feature box for examples of the approaches discussed in the text.)

A **formalist approach** to analysis is concerned with film form, or how the basic elements are organized to convey certain meanings. Critics using this approach study the film itself, and possibly its screenplay—the internal evidence we discussed earlier. This includes things such as plot structure, mise en scène, camera techniques, editing, and sound—all the elements that have been discussed in this book. A formalist film analysis that is strictly concerned with narrative elements, however, might ignore most or all of its cinematic techniques to focus on characters, plot development, story structure, motifs, foreshadowing, motivation, and the like. On the contrary, a formalist analysis might instead focus on how the filmmakers use cinematic techniques in specific ways to convey, stress, or enhance the themes of the narrative. This could include, for example, how cinematography and editing draw the viewer's attention to parts of the mise en scène and tell the story in ways that go beyond the mere dialogue and plot actions. Both of these formalist approaches look within the film to analyze its content.

The opposite of a formalist approach would be a **contextualist approach**, which looks outside the film for meanings or to explain why certain formal elements might be used or why the film's internal content deals with certain issues and themes in certain ways. It includes most of the other approaches mentioned and sets a film within some sort of context using varying types and degrees of external evidence—something completely removed from the world of the film's story and characters and cinematic techniques. A contextualist approach would be looking very much at a film's symptomatic content, and there are numerous different contexts that may be used to analyze any film. Some films may lend themselves more obviously to one approach or another, and some films can yield greater meaning using a combination of approaches. For example, one type of contextualist approach would be a **culturalist approach**, or seeing the film as symptomatic of the culture in which it was created. This approach can easily be combined with one or more other approaches listed below, which would then be applied specifically to the time and place in which the film was created or is depicting. A culturalist approach is usually a requirement for full appreciation of films made in other countries and in other historical eras. The most effective films are those able to transcend time and culture in their observations of universal human nature, and this is an important aspect that might be explored in a culturalist approach.

Another type of context, a **feminist approach**, would look at a film as a statement on women's place in society, how women are treated, and various issues related to gender and equality. Gender and queer theory might take that concept further to examine a film's treatment of sexuality and sexual alternatives, whether explicit or implicit in the story. In some cases, this might also

attempt to identify how and where filmmakers have included references to homosexuality in ways that were unnoticed by censors and mainstream audiences when the films came out, yet can now be recognized as key elements of a film's characterizations and overall sociopolitical statement. A **Marxist approach** would examine how the plot and characters in a film reflect Karl Marx's sociopolitical views on class conflict, labor vs. management, oppressive governments, and more. Typically, a Marxist approach will identify instances of everyday people struggling to survive in the face of some unsympathetic authority. A **psychological approach** is especially concerned with how a film provides examples of various psychological theories and concepts, particularly those of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (e.g., sexual symbolism; subconscious repression and dreams; the id, ego, and superego; the collective unconscious). This approach again might be examining sexuality using gender and queer theory. A **dualist approach** tries to identify pairs of opposites in a film's content and how they're used in the story to express certain attitudes. Such opposites often are character types (good–evil, male–female) but also may be symbolic concepts such as light–dark, open–closed, urban–rural, quiet–noisy, civilization–nature, and the like. In many cases, these opposites may be tied to one or more of the other approaches just mentioned.

▲ *Made in Dangenham*, a film about organizing for equal pay for women workers, could be viewed from both feminist and Marxist perspectives. A culturalist approach would focus on the '60s setting of the story.

Two of the most common contextualist approaches to analysis are often used by people who have never even taken a film course but see lots of movies, because those people are likely to have favorite directors and favorite genres. An **auteurist approach** takes for granted that a film's interpretation goes beyond that individual film and can be better understood by knowing what else the same director has done. It may concentrate on either cinematic techniques or ideological thematic material, or both, but always within the context of the director's other films. Some directors specialize in films that are in specific genres, and an auteurist analysis may easily incorporate a generic analysis. Likewise, the **generic approach** treats a film as one of many within a genre, trying to interpret meaning by looking at recurring symbolic motifs, character types, plot formulas, visual styles, and anything else common to films with the same genre. As we noted in Chapter 4, genre films are often perceived as simple entertainment, but filmmakers often disguise various ideological themes related to contemporary life in the trappings of some film genre (such as a fantasy or a western). Making genre films may get the filmmakers' ideas out to viewers who would never consider watching a straight drama about social issues or political ideas. Thus, genre films often lend themselves to a variety of approaches for interpretation, as they typically have much ideological and symptomatic content worthy of analysis to place them in cultural context that will give them greater meaning. The psychological, dualist, feminist, queer/gender-theory, and other approaches may be effectively applied to specific genre films within the overall context of the genre.

A **structuralist approach** is similar in some ways to a formalist approach, as it examines the film's structure and how the constructions of scenes and shots tell the story, but it digs deeper to find meaning. Instead of merely examining how narrative and cinematic techniques enhance our involvement in and understanding of the story, structuralists are more likely to search for

hidden symbolism they believe may be present in various elements of the film. They tend to look at filmmaking as another type of language for self-expression and try to determine how and why we respond to what we see, and how particular films illustrate their theories. Structuralist critics often use semiotics as the basis of their analysis, which is a theory for identifying symbolic content encoded in patterns of cinematic elements, including mise en scène, framing, and editing. Semiology and other extreme forms of structuralism get into detailed and highly technical explanations, often with various psychological and ideological interpretations, of how specific elements of a film express meanings—in a manner comparable to how the study of linguistics tries to explain the various ways people use the words and syntax of language to express meaning. This sort of complex, esoteric analysis is a specialized field in itself.

A **realist approach** tries to describe how a film depicts "reality." Of course, film as a medium is an artificial and artistic reproduction of something real, and always a subjective interpretation of the director. However, most mainstream filmmakers try to make techniques "invisible" so that viewers will be concentrating on the characters and plot rather than on the filmmaking process. A few films, on the other hand, do try experimenting with cinematic techniques, especially the cinematography, sound, and editing, to simulate some sort of reality one of the characters is experiencing—intoxication, love, aging, memory, insanity, stream-of-consciousness thought—and the result may appear confusing at first, until a viewer realizes what is going on and why. This type of film may require multiple viewings to provide an understanding of the way the filmmaker is hoping to communicate. Others, such as Rob Cohen's *xXx* and *The Fast and the Furious*, use nontraditional editing for specific sequences to convey the sense of experiencing the action multiple times from multiple angles, rather than simply observing it unfold chronologically in real time. A few examples of films well suited to analyzing from a realist approach include Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and films written or directed by Charlie Kaufmann, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Synecdoche, New York*, *Being John Malkovich*, and *Adaptation*.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Billy Wilder is an auteur who worked across genres, from a comedy based on cross-dressing and mistaken identity (*Some Like It Hot*, pictured here) to film noir (*Sunset Boulevard*). Within the studio system, he was able to create films redolent with his cynical take on modernity.

A **genetic approach** to analysis requires much outside research and access to earlier versions of a film and its script. Virtually every film goes through many revisions from script to screen and from first roughcut to final release cut, and sometimes later to other editions. This approach traces a film through the process of its creation and release. It documents and discusses the meaning of various changes made in screenplay drafts or during production, scenes cut or added during editing, the theatrical release version (or versions), alternate endings (if any), and any altered re-release or television/video versions, up through a final and definitive "director's cut." Such a study is not typically a mere chronicle of changes, but a critical evaluation and interpretation of their impact on the film and its meaning. This can be difficult to do for most films without being an insider in the production process, but a few films have been released to DVD or Blu-ray with two or more versions, along with copies of deleted or alternate scenes, and documentaries about the production. Popular films such as the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of*

the Rings series exist in theatrical cuts as well as extended editions prepared for video release. George Lucas famously re-edited his original three *Star Wars* films (now called episodes 4, 5, and 6) decades after they were filmed to make changes and add new digital effects. Some of the most prominent films that can be studied in multiple versions include Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Oliver Stone's *Alexander*, and James Cameron's *Avatar*. For instance, in *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola struggled to come up with an ending and shot several different ones. There are bootleg versions that last nearly five hours. And in 2001, Coppola released *Apocalypse Now Redux*, which restores 49 minutes cut from the original film, much of it taking place at a French plantation. The restored footage and alternate endings do not necessarily change the film's message appreciably, but they do add more context to what Coppola was trying to say and can be analyzed using this approach. Oliver Stone re-edited his 2004 biographical epic *Alexander* in 2005, adding, rearranging, and deleting footage for a "director's cut" with a slightly shorter overall running time than the theatrical cut, then made a substantially longer two-part "final cut" in 2007, yet continued to make changes for an "ultimate cut" in 2013. Analytical comparison of the various editions may reveal some of the thought process that goes into making a film that will be acceptable to audiences as well as to the director.

Table 10.1a Approaches to film analysis: *Rear Window*

Courtesy Everett Collection

Approach	Possible things to consider
Formalist	Focus on plot structure, the limitations of the setting, the use of music from within the setting rather than traditional underscoring, the use of mise en scène to establish character and advance the plot, the camera and editing techniques that heighten viewer involvement.
Feminist	Examine the portrayal of Grace Kelly's "Lisa" character for female stereotyping and reversals of stereotyping; contrast her character with other female characters such as Stella the nurse (who might also be examined in detail for reversals of stereotype), Miss Lonelyhearts, Miss Torso, and Mrs. Thorwald.
Psychological	Explore various personality and sexual issues inherent in Jimmy Stewart's "Jeff" character, including the phallic symbolism of his camera's telephoto lens, the obsession with voyeurism into his neighbors' private lives, his inability to commit to the prevailing standards of married life vs. Lisa's willingness to adapt—to a point.

(continued)

Dualist	Discuss various pairs of opposites, such as Jeff/Lisa, Jeff/Thorwald, Jeff/detective, Jeff's apartment/the outside world, single people/couples, privacy/socialization, following due legal process/taking law into one's own hands, active life/passive life.
Auteurist	Examine the film's relationship to other films by Alfred Hitchcock, in style, subject material, types of characters (e.g., cool blondes, an accused man, a persistent investigator), popularity with audiences and critics.
Generic	Compare *Rear Window* with other murder mysteries, suspense thrillers, and romantic comedies for shared and differing elements and approaches.
Culturalist	Look at the film as a metaphor for the public's fascination with watching other people's lives on movie screens (comparing window shape to movie screen shape); see how characters reflect common personalities and attitudes associated with the 1950s; find parallels in Jeff's refusal to settle down with postwar soldiers who preferred the adventurous life away from a cramped apartment (contrasted with unexpected husband of Miss Torso); look at influences of society and fashion-makers on public tastes.
Marxist	Focus on Thorwald's character as the overwhelming pressures of capitalist service to meet sales quotas and satisfy demands of a selfish consumerist wife pushing the man to commit murder; note how the common people of the apartment complex can band together in support of each other when needed.
Structuralist	Examine the exaggerated long-lens camera that sits on Jeff's lap as a phallic symbol as he spies on neighbors, and as he talks with Lisa. Look at the shape of the various windows Jeff watches as metaphors for the movie screen the audience is watching.

Table 10.1b Approaches to film analysis: *The Hunger Games*

Murray Close/©Lionsgate/courtesy Everett Collection

Approach	Possible things to consider
Formalist	Focus on plot structure, the limitations and significance of the setting, the use of mise en scène to establish character and mood and to advance the plot, the camera, editing, and sound techniques that heighten viewer involvement.
Feminist	Examine the portrayal of Jennifer Lawrence's Katniss character for female stereotyping and reversals of stereotyping; contrast her character with other female characters such as Rue, Clove, and Effie Trinket, or with the male characters of Peeta, Gale, Haymitch, Cinna, President Snow, etc.

(continued)

Psychological	Explore the personalities and attitudes that seem to dominate in the various districts, how the personalities of the contestants change or stay the same from their training period to actual combat, how the power struggles and concerns of various people in the Capitol may be related to personal issues.
Dualist	Discuss various pairs of opposites, such as Katniss/Gale, Clove/Rue, Katniss/Peeta, Cinna/Snow, Haymitch/Effie, low-tech/high-tech, District 12/Capitol City, Capitol City/the Hunger Games playing area, real life/TV life, participants/audience, adults/young people.
Auteurist	Examine the film's relationship to other films written or directed by Gary Ross, in style, subject material, themes, types of characters (e.g., misfit adolescents, athletic competitors, political figures), and popularity with audiences and critics.
Generic	Compare *The Hunger Games* with other dystopian post-apocalyptic science fiction, action-adventures, sociopolitical satires, and teen coming-of-age romances, for shared and differing elements and approaches.
Culturalist	Look at the film as a metaphor for the modern public's fascination with reality TV as entertainment, with live sporting events, a trend toward "extreme" sports, and the preoccupation with celebrity; see how characters reflect common personalities and attitudes associated with the 2010s; find parallels in the expanded government control and monitoring of private lives and applications of modern technology; look at influences of society and fashion-makers on public tastes.
Marxist	Focus on the extremes of class distinctions and the government's exploitation and oppression of its workers in outlying districts to support the decadent luxuries and technology of the Capitol; note how common people forced to fight each other by the totalitarian system can band together in support of each other when needed, build popular support, and even defy government regulations successfully.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Examples of Critical Approaches

The following links provide examples of the critical approaches discussed in the text.

Essays from noted film professor David Bordwell

Mad Detective (2007) Nov. 2010
Generic and auteurist approach
http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/maddetective.php
Courtesy Nick Wrigley, used by permission of Professor David Bordwell.

Lady in the Water (2006) Sept. 2006
"Making of" book review that includes auteurist, genetic, and culturalist approaches
http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/hearing.php
Used by permission of Professor David Bordwell.

filmreference.com essays

The Bicycle Thief (1947) by Joel E. Kanoff
Social-historical context
http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Kr-Le/Ladri-di-Biciclette.html

(continued)

Blade Runner (1982) by John McCarty
Both generic and genetic context
http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Bh-Bo/Blade-Runner.html

Manhattan (1979) by Doug Tomlinson
Auteurist context
http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Ma-Me/Manhattan.html

Metropolis (1927) by B. Urgosikova
Social and historical context, including audience reception
http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Ma-Me/Metropolis.html

Bluray.com

Quite a few of the reviews on this site (especially those of classic, foreign, and independent films) include concise but surprisingly comprehensive film critiques from one or more contextualist approaches (most often a generic or auteurist approach).
http://www.blu-ray.com

10.4 Criticism: Weighing the Balance

We have discussed several times the need for all elements of a movie to work in concert if it is to be successful, and that this is, ultimately, the responsibility of the director. However, it is not necessarily essential for each element to work equally well, and this is important to note when you approach a critical analysis of a film. There are many kinds of movies made in many kinds of ways. Thus, it is obvious that no magical formula, no uniform percentage of acting, writing, directing, technical competence, and whatever else goes into making a movie, can be prescribed universally. We will look at two examples to show that it is possible for the scales to be evened, for one element to pick up the slack for another. (We should also acknowledge that it is possible for a rare movie to fire on all cylinders equally well, as with *Schindler's List*, the first two *Godfather* movies, or classics such as *Casablanca* and *The Wizard of Oz*. It just doesn't happen very often.) We do not need to look only at low-budget or independent productions to find films that have some merits but don't quite succeed at everything they attempt. *Apocalypse Now* and *Avatar* both had huge production budgets. Both were even Academy Award nominees for Best Picture and Best Director, but both lost those two most prestigious Oscar categories, winning only technical awards.

Apocalypse Now is regarded by many as one of the finest films ever made, in spite of a number of flaws partly due to its legendarily chaotic, bloated, near-disastrous production. In director Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film, U.S. Army Capt. Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) is dispatched to find Col. Walter Kurtz (Marlon Brando) and terminate his command with extreme prejudice—in other words, to kill him. The film follows Willard's travels through the jungles of Vietnam. Filming in the Philippines, Coppola faced several obstacles during the production of the film, including a typhoon that destroyed sets and added to the ballooning budget. Brando showed up overweight and did not know his lines. Sheen had a heart attack during filming, delaying production further. It seemed that the film would be a spectacular bust.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ *Apocalypse Now* is a monumental film, but Brando's over-the-top performance and Coppola's extravagant jungle setting could be critiqued as a caricature of the madness they are trying to portray. This image from a behind-the-scenes documentary catches them in the midst of the process.

And yet, somehow, it wasn't. The chaos is reflected in the final film; it actually works to make it seem like a more realistic depiction of Vietnam than it might otherwise have been. This is probably a combination of happy accident and genius, for Coppola is widely considered a uniquely gifted director.

In the case of *Apocalypse Now*, most of the elements are in place for success, despite the craziness of production. Coppola shot millions of feet of film, making editing a Herculean task, but this gave him plenty to work with. The visuals of the film are spectacular, as are the complexly layered sounds that accompany them in an experimental use of stereo surround effects. Whether the movie is a realistic portrayal of what Vietnam was like during the war (a question that can be debated, and has been, many times), there is no doubt that Coppola achieved the sense of madness for which he was looking. Nevertheless, something had to give, and it did—the acting is somewhat unhinged, with all the main characters seemingly operating at varying levels of insanity. The stress clearly affected Sheen's health; Dennis Hopper shows up as a lunatic photographer loyal to Kurtz. As for Brando, he whispers most of his lines, lying in a darkened room. Whether this is simply an idiosyncratic actor doing what he wants or a savvy portrayal of a man who has lost his grip on reality—even if it is both—it is often remarkably haunting and effective.

Where *Apocalypse Now* falls even shorter for many viewers is in the story. Based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it meanders. Coppola cut out long stretches of the film, some of which he restored in later versions. Many critics find the last half hour to hour the weakest, although some actually prefer the film's final third and dislike the first two-thirds. Coppola famously could not decide on an ending, shooting several variations, and it shows. Whereas chaos actually helped the film in some aspects, in trying to tell a coherent story the chaos betrays the story. To try to follow the narrative is like listening to a crazy person talk. It starts and stops, jumps around, and leads the audience down paths that it leaves hanging, never to be revisited.

Yet most critics and audiences now agree that *Apocalypse Now* genuinely deserves its status as a great film, a brilliant work of art. How can that be, when the story is such a mess? Because the rest of the film is so superlative, balancing the scales of quality. Some critics hint at this. Writing in *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby suggests such a balance: "Vittorio Storaro…is responsible for the extraordinary camerawork that almost, but not quite, saves *Apocalypse Now* from its profoundly anticlimactic intellectual muddle." In fact, the film won the Oscar for its cinematography, as well as for its sound. Yet despite his misgivings, Canby also praises the film as being "as technically complex and masterful as any war film I can remember" (1979).

Avatar, James Cameron's 2009 film, is another example of an inequitable balance of form and function, relying as it does upon the jaw-dropping technological mastery of its director to make up for the banal story (Cameron wrote the film as well) and wooden acting. Set in the year 2154, the film takes place on a moon in outer space called Pandora, where continued mining

▲ Much of the success of *Avatar* can be credited to the seamless juxtaposition of two literally alien worlds.

by humans threatens the ecosystem of the Na'vi, the blue-skinned indigenous beings living there. To more fully interact with the Na'vi, humans have developed avatar technology, which creates a human–Na'vi hybrid that the human host controls with his or her mind.

Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a Marine recruited for the avatar program, grows increasingly sympathetic to the Na'vi's plight, despite the objections of the corporation doing the mining and the paramilitary security force it employs. Jake will eventually lead the Na'vi in a successful war against the humans and, after his human form is exposed to the poisonous-for-humans Pandora atmosphere, become a full-fledged Na'vi himself.

The film was a stunning success, taking in more than $2 billion at the box office on its way to becoming the highest-grossing film in history. Its Oscar-winning art direction and visual effects are truly stunning, incorporating technology that Cameron himself invented. And beyond the computer-generated settings and characters, its 3-D format both accentuates the visuals beyond anything ever seen in a movie before and serves as a demonstration of how 3-D technology might be used as more than the revisiting of a gimmick. The colors, the textures, the flora and fauna Cameron and his effects team created digitally in three dimensions are genuinely amazing.

Yet some critics argue that Cameron invested too much time in developing the technology at the expense of almost every other aspect of his film. The story is a mishmash of plots and themes found in films such as *Dances with Wolves* and *Pocahontas*, among others. Its politics are preachy, predictable, and banal, an oversimplification of the effects unchecked capitalism and industry can have. The acting, meanwhile, is almost as much of an afterthought as the plot and dialogue, despite the presence of many talented actors. Sam Worthington's character Sully is wooden, a disappointment because Worthington is so good in other projects. Sigourney Weaver is given little to do as a scientist in charge of the avatar project, which is actually preferable to the work done by Stephen Lang as the leader of the security force. He is a cigar-chomping cliché, a laughable cartoon instead of a real character. Giovanni Ribisi fares little better as the boss of the mining operator, a greedy villain so stereotyped that he lacks only a top hat and mustache to twirl.

Nevertheless, some critics and many audiences warmed to the film, even while pointing out its deficiencies. Why? For one thing, Cameron's sheer audacity is winning. He creates an entire universe from scratch; years were spent just on the language that the Na'vi speak. That is ambition on a scale not usually found in filmmaking or any other endeavor. It is, quite simply, something audiences had not seen before. The emphasis on effects may sacrifice some of the quality of the other elements of the film, but the finished product is so overwhelming that some never noticed its faults, and for many, it at least evened things out.

Apocalypse Now and *Avatar* both have elements that impressed numerous critics and moviegoers and elements that disappointed or completely turned off many other critics and moviegoers.

There are countless other examples of films that fall into these categories; in fact, most do. Every film, no matter how "good" or "bad," has people who love it, people who hate it, and people who fall somewhere in between. Nitpickers may find fault with the most popular or the most artistically successful films. On the other hand, even the most derided movie disasters will still have their champions or at least people who can find something worthwhile in them. Mind you, an utter failure in a single facet can sink a movie, no matter how strong the others may be. But that failure has to be near complete to merit a wholly negative analysis. In the case of these two particular films, one can also now examine, evaluate, and debate changes made by the directors between each film's original theatrical release and a substantially extended "director's cut" released to home video. And knowing all that goes into making a film, whether a mega-budget studio production or a no-budget independent, makes it easier to appreciate just what the filmmakers were able to accomplish, even if you don't particularly like it.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

Effective film criticism is much more than merely expressing personal opinions or recounting a plot synopsis. Opinions must be supported with specific examples from the film to be convincing, but a critic must also be able to recognize what filmmakers seem to be telling their audience on a deeper level than the basic (and obvious) actions of the plot. Various messages, attitudes, and issues may be discussed by characters explicitly. Implicit themes and ideas may become evident by the way characters change or react to the circumstances they must deal with. The film might also be consciously or unconsciously incorporating material from the real world outside the story being dramatized on the screen, in effect serving as a symptom of general public attitudes, concerns, and fears, or personal issues directly related to the filmmakers.

Numerous approaches may be used when analyzing a film, focusing on the aspect or aspects that most interest the critic and seem to be most apparent in the film. A formalist analysis will explain how the filmmakers use cinematic techniques (such as mise en scène, cinematography, editing, and sound) to convey information about the story and its themes to the viewer. A contextualist analysis looks beyond the film's story and techniques to find meaning, examining how the film fits within the context of the time and place in which it was made, a cultural approach. Such an analysis may incorporate one or more additional approaches, applying principles relating to feminist, Marxist, psychological, auteurist, or any number of other interpretations to place the film in a context that can explain more than a simple summary of what happens.

An effective critic must be confident in his or her opinions and interpretations, and able to support them, yet must also recognize that every film can inspire widely divergent reactions from people who are equally confident and persuasive about their opinions. The same film might be admired for certain aspects but berated for other aspects, appreciated for what it achieves while its flaws are still acknowledged. The things one critic might like about a film might be the very things others dislike, and vice versa. Once a person understands how films are able to manipulate viewers, and how filmmakers incorporate subtexts of meaning beyond the basic plots, it becomes easier to understand why one reacts to a film in a certain way and others react in a different way. This is the application of critical thought.

A Conclusion to the Student

Whether you want to post reviews to a blog, write for a newspaper, publish a scholarly essay on film, or simply earn a good grade on a college paper, there is one primary requirement: Watch and comprehend the movie. This sounds like a simple matter, and on some level it is. However, to analyze a film requires more concentration than simply watching it for fun. It demands that you pay attention not just to the film as a whole—though that you must—but also to its individual parts. It can be difficult to pay attention to all of the details while also paying attention to the overall story; you do not want to miss an important plot point because you are busy scribbling notes about the background lighting. Analyzing an entire film is something of a balancing act, and it requires practice. Eventually, though, it will become easier; it can become almost second nature. But this will take time and patience.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Whether one is watching a film through 3-D glasses (such as in this 1954 British theater), on a huge theater screen, on a TV monitor, on a tablet, or on a phone, critical viewing demands active, questioning intelligence. Cinema can be much more than popcorn and entertainment.

Analyzing a film also requires knowing what to look for. The chapters of this text outline a variety of topics that can be the focus of a critical analysis, starting with the story itself. The rest of the filmmaking elements we've discussed can be analyzed on their own, in conjunction with others, or simply in terms of how they enhance the meaning of the story. A critique may center on the screenplay, the acting, the mise en scène, the cinematography, the editing, the sound, the special effects, or the directing. It may be more concerned with the film's societal impact, its genre, or any of the theories that give rise to the approaches mentioned in this chapter. A critical analysis may attempt to explain how various techniques are used to make certain scenes or the whole film particularly effective, or it may instead try to interpret the deeper levels of meaning that the critic is able to read into the film.

Applying the truth test and Goethe's three questions about art is a good start: trying to determine whether a film is true to itself and whether it reveals greater truths about us as human beings, what it is trying to say, how well it says it, and whether its message was worth saying. Using these tests, one film may seem to be merely an exercise in flashy cinematic techniques with no dramatic substance, while another may deal with heavy dramatic content in a simple, straightforward way. Still another may have obviously high ambitions but its success at achieving them may be debatable, depending on what a viewer is looking for.

The most important thing to remember about film criticism is that any film can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. It may succeed at some and fail at others, but it cannot be simply dismissed because the viewer does not like (or understand) one aspect of it. A movie review that is a mere personal reaction is all but useless to anyone else. A critique that tries to identify how a

film's content, technique, or form communicates meaning and attitude, on the other hand, can help others understand why the critic likes or dislikes a film and get an idea of what their own reactions will be.

In an especially thoughtful essay in *MovieMaker Magazine*, John W. Whitehead offers the following as advice: "Cinema should be viewed with greater thought than the vast majority of us give it . . . ; the knowledgeable filmgoer should approach the experience with a receptive mind, open to the possibility of not only entertainment, but enlightenment" (Whitehead, 2003).

Questions to Ask Yourself About Criticism and Analysis When Viewing a Film

- What is the referential content in the film?
- What is the implicit content in the film?
- What symptomatic content can you use to analyze the film?
- What approaches to analysis seem most appropriate to use when analyzing the film? (formalist, contextualist, structuralist, auteurist, realist, generic)

You Try It

1. After watching a movie of your choosing, find and read a review of the movie from a professional critic, then use the Internet to find the same film reviewed by a blogger or online-only writer. Compare the two reviews for writing and analytical skill. Try to identify what levels of content they discuss and what approaches they seem to be using. Which review better reflects your feelings about the film? Use the links suggested in the *Behind the Scenes: Links to Film Resources* feature box to help you find reviews.
2. Again using a movie of your choosing, pay attention to a single formal element from the lists of "Questions to Ask Yourself . . ." throughout this book (e.g., acting, directing, effects, lighting). Evaluate how this element contributed to the movie's success—or failure.
3. With a movie of your choosing, write a popular review. That is, review the film as if your writing would be published in a newspaper or magazine, with attention paid to whether the people reading it should attend the film. Make a case for the film being a success or failure at the truth test. Again, use the links suggested in the *Behind the Scenes: Links to Film Resources* feature box.
4. Use a contextualist approach to analyze a film. Do not limit yourself to current or even recent releases. Instead, choose a film or films and examine them from the perspective of what they say about the culture in which they were created, as well as how they speak to our culture of today. Your analysis may also include an auteurist, generic, feminist, or psychological perspective, or any other external influence that you believe helps explain your interpretation of the film. Some samples of brief critical essays that incorporate various contextualist approaches (social, historical, auteurist, generic, genetic, psychological, etc.) can be found at http://www.filmreference.com and on noted film professor David Bordwell's blog at http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/ (note that most of these assume the reader has already seen the film being discussed).

BEHIND THE SCENES

Links to Film Resources

Below you will find film clips, box office figures, popular reviews, scholarly analyses, and more that will be helpful in your study of film.

American Film Institute

http://www.afi.com/
Official site of the American Film Institute, which contains several lists and other useful information.

Blu-ray.com

http://www.blu-ray.com
Comprehensive film critiques from one or more contextualist approaches (most often a generic or auteurist approach).

Box Office Mojo

http://boxofficemojo.com/
The accepted source for box-office information.

Dark Horizons

http://www.darkhorizons.com/
Good site for release dates for upcoming films.

Film Reference

http://www.filmreference.com
Some samples of brief critical essays that incorporate various contextualist approaches (social, historical, auteurist, generic, genetic, psychological, etc.). This site also includes numerous references to articles and books for further study.

Internet Movie Database

http://www.imdb.com/
The accepted source for information about a film, including cast, crew, and studio, as well as other information.

Metacritic

http://www.metacritic.com/
Another site that compiles not only popular movie reviews but also reviews of television shows, music, and games.

Movieclips

http://movieclips.com/
Good site for finding clips of specific scenes from films. It is not complete, but titles are constantly added.

(continued)

Noted film professor David Bordwell's blog

http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/
Note that most of these essays assume the reader has already seen the film being discussed. This site also includes numerous references to articles and books for further study.

Rotten Tomatoes

http://www.rottentomatoes.com/
Compilation of popular reviews from newspapers and magazines. It also has a searchable database.

Key Terms

auteurist approach Analysis that looks at a film as part of its director's overall body of work instead of as a single entity.

contextualist approach Analysis that treats a film as within a broader context rather than as an isolated unit.

culturalist approach Analysis treating a film as symptomatic of the culture in which it was created.

dualist approach Analysis that identifies pairs of opposites within a film and describes how they are used to express attitudes.

explicit content Meaning that a film communicates to viewers directly, typically through lines of dialogue or obvious visual symbolism in the plot that the director expects audiences to understand as something they should remember (e.g., "there's no place like home").

feminist approach Analysis concerned with describing the roles of and attitudes toward a film's female characters.

film scholarship In-depth study, evaluation, and interpretation of a film, aimed at a sophisticated readership who most likely have already seen the film.

formalist approach Analysis treating a film as an isolated unit, concerned with film form and how its basic elements (narrative structure, mise en scène, cinematography, editing) are organized to convey certain meanings.

generic approach Analysis treating a film as just one in a genre of similar films, rather than as an isolated unit.

genetic approach Analysis that traces a film's development through various stages, from script to screen to revised reissues.

implicit content Meaning that viewers can infer from a film by the ways characters act, react, and grow throughout various situations during the course of the story; themes, ideas, and attitudes that are implied but not stated explicitly—e.g., "crime does not pay," "love conquers all."

Marxist approach Analysis concerned with applying Karl Marx's sociopolitical views, particularly those related to class conflict and capitalist excesses, to interpreting a film.

popular criticism A relatively superficial discussion evaluating a film, aimed at members of the general public who most likely have not seen the film.

psychological approach Analysis concerned with examining a film as a demonstration of various psychological theories and concepts, especially those of Freud and Jung.

realist approach Analysis that is especially concerned with the ways a film is representing some sort of reality.

referential content Content of a film that would be considered an objective description by anyone who saw it (e.g., a simple synopsis of the plot), referring only to what can be seen happening rather than interpreting deeper meanings.

structuralist approach Analysis similar to a formalist approach but often employing semiotics (identifying symbolic content encoded in patterns of cinematic elements).

symptomatic content Meanings in a film that can be determined only by looking at the film as a symptom of something outside of the film itself (plot, characters, techniques, form), such as the time and place it was created, or the filmmaker's personal life, experience, and attitudes.