A Brief Guide to Writing Film Papers

Introduction

Although most students would have had their fair share of writing book reviews and literary analyses, and are thus accustomed to interpreting symbolism and rhetorical devices, the same students might find themselves at a loss when it comes to writing about the *other* popular narrative medium—film.

Why is this so? Don't both film and literature tell us stories? As the New Wave director Alexandre Astruc wrote in an essay for the legendary film journal *Cahiers Du Cinema*, "the director uses the camera as an author uses the pen." It is not uncommon to see students approaching films as they would literature, focusing on the things that pertain mainly to the script of the film: the plot, the themes, the dialogue, etc. But in doing this, students miss out on what makes film unique as an art form: the moving image. Writing about film requires special attention to its nature as a representative medium—its form and technique, rather than its content or story.

A good analysis of any art form, going beyond a mere exposition or paraphrase of what the art tells its audience, is generally rooted in two things: *the way the artist uses the tools* of that particular art form to express something and *the context* in which the art is made. While the latter type of analysis borders on being historical, the former is unique to the form/medium, on which film studies as a discipline is centered.

When analyzing the film form, we must learn to identify the unique tools of the filmmaker and examine the effects these tools have upon the audience. This guide approaches writing about film from the formal angle rather than the historical angle;[*] it provides 5 easy-to-remember rules, a few sample pieces—along with commentary on each sample's strengths and weaknesses—and some links you might find useful for reference.

* If you're writing about film history, you might want to frame your writing more historically, although some techniques of analysis and interpretation might be useful from the formal angle.

Wesleyan University
Writing Workshop
Name of author
Major, class year of author

1. Pay close attention to detail

When doing a close analysis of a scene, it is vital to **be aware of the smaller details**. Different people have different strategies on how to keep an eye out for details and remember them. Some people prefer taking notes while watching the scene, while others like watching the scene once over without taking notes before re-watching it while jotting down notes. Some others prefer to focus on one particular filmmaking tool (editing, color, framing, etc.) whenever they re-watch a scene. Whatever your preferred method of note taking, it is important that your analysis reveals keen attention to detail.

The following is an example of a detailed analysis of a scene taken from a paper on *Make Way for Tomorrow*:

> The camera then tracks to a closer shot of Ma as she goes to pick up a letter. We see her look at the letter and then in the first of several eye-line match shots, we see her POV as she reads the letter (the fact that it is a POV shot is reinforced by the camera panning over the letter much as eyes would). Because we share her point of view, we are very directly aligned with her at this point. As such, when she learns that the letter is from an aged women's home, the audience learns this information simultaneously. The diegetic music also subtly shifts to a sadder tone as the camera pans to the words "Idylwild Home for Aged Women," providing us with an emotional cue. Our alignment with Ma helps us to sympathize with her and also gives us an upper hand in the next scene, as we know that she has seen the letter, but George does not.

The passage above focuses on the techniques that are used to align us with the emotions of Ma, and establishes a hierarchy of knowledge between the audience and the characters. Not every scene needs to be written in as much detail as the scene described above, and for shorter papers and journals, this might be too much.

In reading and assigning most analytical film essays, instructors are not as concerned with plot and analysis thereof. Instead, one should discuss the plot only as it is necessary to understand the way the film works formally. Here we have very detailed descriptions of camera movement, types of shots used, use of score, and the context of the scene within the story. This paragraph shows how all of these elements work together in creating a certain effect and establish why that is important.

2. Interpret symbols not just for the ideas they represent, but also for their effects

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the most common pitfalls of freshman film students is devoting large portions of their essays to interpreting symbolism. Not only does such interpretation involve a high degree of subjectivity, but analyses of film techniques lie outside of overt symbolism. When giving students advice on the first test about the use of color, Professor Higgins often warns students against interpreting colors as being overtly symbolic, saying, "Don't say red means angry and don't say blue means sad." This is not to say that symbolic analysis has no place in these papers—in fact it is often unavoidable— but that one should exercise caution when doing so: one should stay away from over-simplification and check that one's interpretation relates to the film's form.

Here is an example taken from an essay on *Singin' in the Rain* that interprets symbolism and relates it to the larger context of film: "The boldness of the color in this scene is a visual representation of the coming of sound in the film industry." Here we see something akin to symbolism. A key phrase, however, is "visual representation." When talking about film, **it is more often relevant to describe how certain techniques create an emotional effect**. So when the author above talks about how color is a visual representation of the coming of sound, they don't mean that it symbolizes this, but rather that it emphasizes and visually portrays the *feeling* of the novelty of an event that is already explicit.

The following is another example of the interpretation of symbolism and representation from an essay about *Make Way for Tomorrow* that is appropriate for film analysis:

> We then see a wide shot of Rhoda dancing. This encounter continues the thread from the previous scene depicting the problematic tension between the youthful Rhoda and the elderly "Ma" Cooper. The jazz music itself is associated with youth and is shown to disturb Ma. Rhoda's dancing is also energetic and youthful. The mise-en-scène also contributes to this theme with the strong contrast between Rhoda's bright, trendy outfit and Ma's black, matronly dress. The director uses mise-en-scène at various points to connect to larger themes. Another example of this later in the sequence is Ma's rocking chair, a motif associated with old age throughout the film.

Here we have a more explicit reference to symbolism, where **certain elements of the scene are embodiments of a central theme**. This example, however, is a good example of how one can **speak about symbolism cinematically**, referencing the choices of mise-en-scène by the director and **clearly justifying the connections to the themes**.

3. Justify your analysis

It is one thing to make a statement such as "Color elevates the fantasy of the scene," for a scene more removed from reality than the rest of the movie, and another thing to explain **how it does that and why it is important.**

In explaining "how," you have to be able to justify **how a technique you say has a certain effect achieves that effect**. So instead of saying simply that color elevates the fantasy, it is better to say something like: "For most of the movie, the director utilizes a restrained color palette with very few bright colors. In this scene, however, there is an abundance of bright color separating it from the rest of the film visually and highlighting the fantastical nature of the scene."

Explaining why something is important is also key. Oftentimes students say that the director does something and this has a particular effect, but fail to relate this to a larger point. It is very important to **ground the details you analyze in some larger point about how the film or the scene works as a whole** and not just list a string of techniques used without unifying them in some way.

4. Be specific to the film

Oftentimes papers analyzing color will say something along the lines of "In this scene, the director uses color to help to direct the audience's attention within the frame." This kind of analysis, while true, only scratches the surface. An important question to ask oneself when analyzing a film is how any particular technique—such as the use of color—is used within the unique context of the film in question. **All of the choices made in a film help to shape that film as a unique work of art.** If Citizen Kane had been shot in color what would change? How would the director convey the same emotions using different techniques and what would be lost or gained in the process?

Basically, film essays on form should focus on how the techniques used within a film help the director portray **a particular story and a particular emotion** either in one scene or in the film as a whole. Analysis of a film should be unique to that film and one should first understand what a film is trying to accomplish before one goes about trying to understand the means by which it accomplishes (or fails to accomplish) that goal. *Star Wars* feels grand and operatic. One thing—among others—that helps it do this is the style of the score. Wes Anderson films feel quirky and artificial. His symmetrical framing and painterly use of color are part of this.

The following is an excerpt from a film journal on *Man on a Ledge*, showing how analysis should be focused on the specific:

> Character and clarity of story trump realism whenever necessary. The noise from the crowd that gathers beneath the ledge is a good example. Throughout the

first half of the film the crowd grows until it can roar an ugly chant of "Jump Jump Jump." But this is a convenient roar that quiets whenever characters need to talk, and rises when we need to be reminded of Nick's desperation. Eventually the roar changes its attitude. The crowd decides that Nick is a folk hero to be cheered. Just when Angie needs encouragement to crawl through a terrifyingly tight air duct, Nick can tell her over his com link that the crowd is pulling for her. The music builds, she pauses in the air duct, and then the crowd's chants make their way into the sound mix, implausibly penetrating Angie's spy-film quiet space. It makes no physical sense, but like the score, the crowd's roar briefly crosses spaces and confirms character motivation. She crawls forward. If the film is working, then this manipulation should go unnoticed. It all happens again in the denouement: noise in a crowded bar fades out so that Joey can propose to Angie. All sounds share the same aim, the emotional engagement of the viewer.

Here we see the author making a general point about the film, that character and clarity of story trump realism, and showing how this is done through sound. The author contextualizes each moment in the broader context of the film and describes how the techniques used function within the particularities of the story being told by this movie. These techniques are used in many films, but this example shows the uniqueness of how they are used in *Man on a Ledge*.

5. Know your audience

You know who will be reading your paper: your professor.

There are certain pedagogical purposes—other than to decide what overall grade to award you with—your professor wants to achieve by assigning a paper topic. Thus it is important to read the prompt very closely. **Pay attention to keywords in the prompt** that tell you to do something: Analyze, Explain, Evaluate, Comment, Discuss? What, How, Why? Are there **key themes and technical terms** that have been used often in lectures?

Once you have an outline, read the prompt again and check your outline against the prompt to make sure you are on track to answering all the questions adequately.

The prompt should also be read in context. The professor often has an intention for the main themes of a course and what he or she hopes students will learn. These purposes differ based on the professor and the course agenda. Thus it is important to closely read and internalize what is on the syllabus. It is good practice to re-read the syllabus before writing a paper so as to **internalize the broad themes of the class** and to remind oneself of what the professor is hoping for you to learn.

It is also good practice to go through the example essays in relation to the sample prompt and identify the techniques the author used and the style they adopted. Compare these essays against your own and ask yourself: **"What did this person do that I did not?"** Don't be too literal when trying to learn from these essays. A lot of the understanding of how to write these essays comes over time from internalizing the techniques on a subconscious level.

Whether you still have doubts after reading all these material, or think you're ready to submit your paper, **talk to your professor**. Run your ideas by them. You might learn new things that weren't mentioned in class, or you might be challenged with counter-arguments. This is not to say that you should slavishly amend your ideas to align with your professor's; rather, you should consider what different dispositions and assumptions you and your professor have, and try as much in your paper to bridge any conceptual gaps between writer and reader—whether through rhetoric or more nuanced consideration—in order to make a persuasive and compelling argument. To write an effective paper, you have to know your audience—and your professor is your audience.

So, **read the assignment prompt, the course syllabus, and the example essays, and talk to your professor.**

Sample Passages

Sample 1

The "Good Morning" sequence in the film demonstrates a turning point as sound and color bring motifs to a forefront. Just as the characters have a revelation, character development, emotion, and plot fall into place for the audience. The scene is set up as the camera closes in from outside the window as it rains. The next shot encompasses a bowl of yellow fruit on top of a golden cloth in the foreground and the actors centered at the table as the sound of the rain fades out. The fade-out goes unnoticed but elevates the scene from realism, and the splash of yellow in the frame introduces this significant color that will be revisited. As Don and Kelly stand together, their outfits are clearly complementary, each incorporating pale blue and gray tones, at last aligning the characters and making it apparent that they work together as a team. The scene gradually builds up to a musical number through sound. Initially discouraged, the trio is uplifted with an idea that culminates in song and dance. Though background noise is silent, Kathy and Cosmo's voices start to take on enthusiastic, musical tones as they "one up" each other in a crescendo that leads Cosmo to do a jig and song. This is silly at the time, but introduces song to a scene that is still grounded in reality, which is clear as he bumps into a wall, ending his display. It also serves as an important transition to song, as afterward, the score begins and gives Don and Kathy the idea of making his film into a musical, again demonstrating how the pair work together. The music builds up as the three once more begin an animated speaking crescendo as their idea falls into place. Kathy's line, "and what a lovely morning!" is the final melodic transition that works perfectly to draw characters into the musical number.

Sample 2

The "Good Morning" number uses sound to seamlessly weave its talking and musical components together. It allows the action to effortlessly transition from Don, Cosmo, and Kathy talking, to a fabulous song and tap number, and then to resume their conversation. The instrumental track starts underscoring the trio's conversation, so when Kathy begins singing, it is a logical extension of her line, *(con't)*

These three sample passages each discuss the same scene from Singin' in the Rain, with specific regard to the use of sound and color.

This first example provides a thorough analysis of both sound and color; it also goes further in explaining the effects of sound and color on thematic elements (e.g. unity) and on the film's realism.

However, the author of this paragraph might have attempted to do too much in this paragraph; the paragraph discusses only one scene, but the ideas that are generated are not completely related. It would be clearer to discuss sound and color in two separate paragraphs, as the next two samples do.

This next example is a less, but sufficiently detailed treatment of sound in the same scene. This paragraph's strength is in its concision and focus—unlike the previous one, it looks only at sound and links it directly to the film's realism.

(con't)
"and what a lovely morning!" This naturally embeds the song into the scene without disrupting its flow. A similar sound technique is used to transition out of the dance sequence and back into the characters' dialogue. Instead of pausing after the musical number ends to leave space for where the applause would fall (had this been a live performance), they all immediately begin laughing. Their distinct self-awareness of what just occurred makes the number weave into the world and feels more natural and less performance-like.

Sample 3

The scene also uses color to develop Don, Kathy, and Cosmo's narrative and emotional unity. The filmmakers avoid striking juxtapositions of color, and instead use it to subtly underscore a development. Cosmo's gray suit and Don's light blue shirt are both reflected in Kathy's grayish-blue dress. Narratively, this scene is where the trio comes up with an idea together. Emotionally, it is where they begin to think like a team. The shared colors of their costumes work harmoniously to reflect their cohesive unit. As the scene progresses and excitement rises, the rooms they dance through become more colorful and gain depth. It is still a restrained design, but yellow, purple, and gold accents are added. Care is taken to keep colors from becoming too assertive. The raincoats that Kathy, Don, and Cosmo dance with each vary slightly in shade as to avoid a uniform, picture-perfect look. Their hues are not aggressively yellow, a distinction from the yellows in "The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat" number from *All the Gang's Here*. The incomparable dancing of the trio is the priority here, and color is used to support it and not distract.

This last example covers the same point that the first example does on color. However, as with the second example, this example is less technically detailed. The author makes up for this by seamlessly weaving this visual detail with its thematic implication.

In addition, the author draws the use of color in this scene in comparison with another scene from another film, thus demonstrating her close attention to detail beyond this film. Despite using an example from another film, this comparison is relevant, as it is made to justify her analysis that "care is taken to keep colors from becoming too assertive."

ONLINE RESOURCES

Some online resources about writing film papers

- University of Richmond Writing Center
  http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/w
  web/filmstudies/advice.html

  Despite the outmoded aesthetics of this web resource, there are two pages that could prove particularly useful to some students who are new to writing about visual techniques in film. 'Advice from Professors' is a helpful reminder of what instructors want students to learn from writing about film: that it is a narrative medium that employs particular visual techniques to tell a story, and that any good analysis would explain how form and content are brought together to produce the film's meaning. 'Film Terms' provides a rudimentary and handy list of technical terms (and useful, brief examples) that students may use in their papers to show their engagement with visual devices.

- The Writing Center, University of Colorado, Denver
  http://www-
  bcf.usc.edu/~bitel/documents/Howto
  WriteAboutFilm.pdf

  This downloadable PDF is a broad overview of the types of paper a student should expect to write for a film course. With each broad category, the author lists guiding questions that would be useful in helping students consider the purpose and approach of their writing.

- Yale Film Studies
  http://filmanalysis.yctl.org/

  This multimedia resource provides short introductions in greater detail than the list provided by the first link above. Additionally, there are two shot-by-shot sample analyses that students might find useful in learning how to begin their analysis. Note however, that these samples are probably too bare or skeletal for a real film paper; they are good starting points, but ideally, students would have to go into greater elaboration to build their analyses and arguments.

- Duke University Writing Studio
  https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/fil
  m.pdf

  This great resource is concise and effective in three main areas: 1) the 'Overview' section puts the purpose of writing a film paper into perspective by suggesting an approach of 'visual literacy' rather than passive viewing; 2) 'Moving from Description to Analysis' provides a good paragraph outline; and 3) the 'Movement' section offers simple but effective guiding questions or prompts on how a student may go about thinking and writing about the sequence of shots in a film.

  *Last accessed April 2016