

Beginning to Think, Preparing to Watch, and Starting to Write about Film

I. Prepare Yourself for a Movie before It Starts:

- A. Movies are a mixture of a variety of different art forms: literature, music, dance, theater, architecture, etc. Ask yourself which art forms interest you and which you know the most about. Could you use your knowledge of literature or painting--for example--as a guide to a particular film?
- B. The film industry depends on and responds quickly to changes in technology. If you are interested in technology, prepare to note features of the movie and its story that might depend on technology. Does the director make special use of black-and-white film? Why? Does sound technology seem to play a large part in the movie?
- C. Film technology, production, and distribution are commercial and economic enterprises. It is crucial to keep this in mind when approaching any movie. Be open-minded and suspicious: if a movie looks like a film that was made inexpensively, does this reduced cost allow it to do and say things that a big-budget movie might not be able to? Conversely, how do some Hollywood movies take advantage of a big budget or make creative use of a small budget? Where is much of the money directed? The stars? The special effects? The promotion?

II. Silent Dialogue: Talking Back to the Movies:

- A. In order to successfully analyze a movie, you must develop a habit of looking for key moments, patterns, or images within the film--even during a second or third viewing. As you develop your film analysis skills, keep the following guidelines in mind:
 - ↳ Note which elements of the movie strike you as unfamiliar or perplexing.
 - ↳ Note which elements are repeated to emphasize a point or a perception.
- B. Recognizing patterns and deciphering why they are important is a first step toward analyzing the meaning of a movie. Even if you can't decipher immediately the meaning of movie patterns, asking questions appropriate questions while watching a movie is a key to a good analysis:
 - ↳ What does the title mean in relation to the story?
 - ↳ Why does the movie start the way it does?
 - ↳ When was the film made?

- ⌘ Why are the opening credits presented in such a manner against a particular background?
- ⌘ Why does the film conclude on this image?
- ⌘ How is the movie similar to or different from the Hollywood movies you have seen recently or from those of an older generation?
- ⌘ Does the film resemble a foreign film you know?
- ⌘ Is there a pattern of striking camera movements, perhaps long shots or abrupt transitions?
- ⌘ What three or four sequences are the most important?

III. Taking Notes:

- A. Good film essays require more than one viewing. Like reading literature, a good first viewing technique would be to watch the movie for enjoyment first, without taking a lot of notes. With the second screening, you can begin to take more careful and detailed notes.
- B. Since movies are constantly in motion, try to develop a shorthand system that allows you to quickly record technical information:
 - cu* "close-up"**
 - ha* "high angle"**
 - ls* "long shot"**
 - ps* "pan shot"**
 - ct* "cut"**
 - crs* "crane shot"**
- C. Since it would be impossible to exhaustively annotate an entire film, focus your annotations on particular themes, characters, or technical elements.

IV. Visual Memory and Reflection:

- A. After taking preliminary notes, elaborate on them shortly after seeing the movie by filling in the shorthand with more carefully measured descriptions.
- B. When you've reviewed your notes, possible arguments and topics should begin to present themselves.