

Writing a Critical Movie Review

Following the viewing of the PBS series of *The Scarlet Letter*, write a critical review for the movie. Draw on class discussions and the following items included in this packet.

- Film review guidelines
- Outline format
- Film critique terminology
- Film analysis questions to consider
- Graphics for camera angles, framing and lighting

Film Review Guidelines

Paragraph 1: Offer an overall impression of the film while mentioning the movie's title, director, and key actors.

Paragraph 2: Summarize the plot of the film

Paragraph 3: Address how well the film succeeds in presenting the desired purpose or goal of the film. Offer evidence for each opinion. Do symbols and literary devices "transfer" from the novel into the movie well?

Paragraph 4: Introduce and evaluate the director's success. Were any particular film techniques used in key scenes? How did the film techniques and music enhance the setting and themes of the film? Two paragraphs may be needed to explain this information.

Paragraph 5: How did the actors portray key character roles? Did they fulfill expectations visualized during the reading of the original novel?

Paragraph 6: Ending paragraph--the last opportunity to guide the reader. Offer a clincher that tells the reader to attend the film or not.

General Terms

- **Shot:** continuous, unedited piece of film of any length
- **Scene:** a series of shots that together form a complete episode or unit of the narrative
- **Storyboard:** Drawn up when designing a production. Plans AV text and shows how each shot relates to sound track. (Think comic strip with directions - like a rough draft or outline for a film.) Sample provided.
- **Montage:** The editing together of a large number of shots with no intention of creating a continuous reality. A montage is often used to compress time, and montage shots are linked through a unified sound - either a voiceover or a piece of music.
- **Parallel action:** narrative strategy that crosscuts between two or more separate actions to create the illusion that they are occurring simultaneously

Shots

- **Full shot (FS) or cover shot (CS) Long Shot:** Entire scene is encompassed. Often occurs at the opening of the message in order to acquaint the viewer with the total visual environment. Also known as an establishing shot
- **Long shot.** May or may not reveal the entire scene. Person - will show whole body.
- **Medium or Mid Shot:** Middle distance shot - can give background information while still

focusing on subject. Person - usually shows waist to head.

- **Close Up (CU):** Focuses on detail / expression / reaction. Person - shows either head or head and shoulders.
- **Extreme close up (ECU):** focuses on a pianist's hands, a single leaf. Demand viewer's total focus
- **Point of View (P.O.V.):** Framed from a particular character's point of view. Audience sees what character sees.
- **Reverse angle shot:** looking "over the shoulder" of that second character back at the first.

Camera Movement

- **Pan:** Camera moves from side to side from a stationary position
- **Tilt:** Movement up or down from a stationary position
- **Dolly in/out:** When the movement is specified, the entire camera is pushed toward or away from the subject of the shot
- **Truck:** The camera moves laterally parallel to the object or person in the scene
- **Crane/arc/boom.** The camera is mounted on a long manual, hydraulic, or electric arm which allows for shots that demand smooth, flowing changes in height and/or semicircular sweeps toward and away from the scene.

Camera Angles

- **Low Angle Camera:** shoots up at subject. Used to increase size, power, status of subject
- **Eye Level:** shoots directly at the subject. Used to create equality
- **High Angle Camera:** shoots down at subject. Used to increase vulnerability, powerlessness, decrease size

Editing (the way shots are put together)

- **Cut:** The ending of a shot. If the cut seems inconsistent with the next shot, it is called a jump cut.
- **Fade in or out:** The image appears or disappears gradually. Often used as a division between scenes.
- **Dissolve:** One image fades in while another fades out so that for a few seconds, the two are superimposed.

Sound

- **Soundtrack:** Consists of dialogue, sound effects and music. Should reveal something about the scene that visual images don't.
- **Score:** musical soundtrack. Underlines dialogue, establishes mood or atmosphere, provides background filter, establishes characterization and establishes thematic motif
- **Sound effects:** all sounds that are neither dialogue nor music
- **Voice-over:** spoken words laid over the other tracks in sound mix to comment upon the narrative or to narrate

Lighting

- **Three point lighting system:** most common lighting set up using directions of light on a scene: from behind the subject (back light), from one bright source (key light) and from a less bright source balancing the key light (fill light).
- **Back light:** light cast onto the figures in the scene from the side opposite the camera.

Usually creates a thin outline of highlighting on those figures

- **Fill light:** light comes from a source less bright than the key light. Used to soften deep shadows in a scene.
- **Front light:** light is directed into the scene from a position near the camera. Flattens the surface by eliminates shadows.
- **Key light:** in the three point lighting system, the brightest light coming into the scene
- **Side light:** light coming from one side of a figure. Used to sculpt a figure's features.
- **Top light:** light comes from above a person or object and outlines the upper areas of the figure. Often used to create a halo effect showing "goodness" or angelic glow.
- **Under light:** light coming from a point below the figures in the scene. Since under lighting tends to distort features, it is often used to create dramatic horror effects but may also simply indicate a realistic light source such as a fireplace or camp fire.

Film Analysis Questions to Consider

Guide to Critical Assessment of Film

The following questions should help in the critical evaluation of *The Scarlet Letter*. Please keep in mind that sophisticated film, like literature, often requires more than one viewing to begin to appreciate its purpose beyond merely the plot. While viewing the video in class, discussion about some of the above mentioned techniques will be discussed. Use the discussions and some of these questions to compile evidence for supporting the points to be made in the review.

BACKGROUND

- Who is the writer of the film? Has the screenplay been loosely or closely adapted from the novel?
- Who is the director?
- When was the film made?

STRUCTURE / FORM

- What does the title mean in relation to the film as a whole?
- How are the opening credits presented? Do they relate to meaning?
- Why does the film start in the way that it does?
- Are there any motifs (scenes, images) of dialogue which are repeated? What purpose do they serve?
- What three or four sequences are most important in the film? Why?
- Is sound used in any vivid ways either to enhance the film? (i.e. Enhance drama, heighten tension, disorient the viewer, etc.)
- How does the film use color or light/dark to suggest tone and mood in different scenes?
- Are there any striking uses of perspective (seeing through a character's eyes, camera angle, etc.). How does this relate to the meaning of the scene?
- How and when are scenes cut? Are there any patterns in the way the cuts function?
- What specific scene constitutes the film's climax? How does this scene resolve the central issue of the film?
- Does the film leave any disunities (loose ends) at the end? If so, what does it suggest?

- Why does the film conclude on this particular image?

THEME

- How does this film relate to the issues and questions evoked by the director?
- Does the film present a clear point-of-view? How?
- Are there any aspects of theme which are left ambiguous at the end? Why?
- How does this film relate to the other literary texts read in class this year or at another time? Are the themes presented timeless?