

## Film Review

The film review is a longer assignment than the screening report, five to six pages, and involves a more sustained discussion of a film. The assignment asks students to move beyond a description of film technique by evaluating an entire film. This involves the very different task of imagining an audience appropriate to the film review and judging the film's merits rather than just observing its systems of representation. In other words, it moves students outside of a purely academic context. I provide some structure for this assignment, because most students have never written a film review before. To begin, I ask them to read some reviews, though not on the film they're going to write on. I suggest that they compare the rhetorical features of different film reviews from various publications, such as academic film journals, magazines, newspapers, and online sources. Then, I try to make them aware of how review writing differs as a genre from analytical writing, and I provide them with a model to follow. First, I suggest that students give an overview of the film somewhere in the early part of the review, followed by a detailed description of a number of scenes, film techniques, and/or details about the acting, script, mise-en-scene, or other elements involved in the filmmaking. I ask them to support their interpretation of the film with persuasive evidence, but not to ignore details that may seem to contradict their reading. I advise them to address contrary evidence and to explain why it doesn't negate their argument. They are told they need to consider both pluses and minuses in their evaluation, though they must ultimately judge the film and make a recommendation to their readers. They are expected to draw on the concepts and terminology from the course, but are asked to explain any technical or theoretical concepts to a general audience of film review readers. Rather than offering a chronological description of the film, I encourage them to organize their review around their interpretation of its salient or not so salient features. They are expected to mention striking details of the film, whether they involve editing, costumes, acting style, or the use of sound. Finally, we talk about the conventions of film reviewing, which include listing the actors' names after the characters' names the first time they're mentioned, not giving away the ending of the film, and so on. Students are then allowed to write on a film we've seen in class or another film by one of the directors we've studied.

### Sample Student Film Review

#### Empty Rooms and Broken Hearts: Christopher Nolan's *Following*, by Lance Belka

Fade in. Close up of a man's hands. He is sliding a pair of latex gloves on. Cut to a small wooden box. The hands pry the box open. He sees a wad of cash, quickly lays it aside. Beneath there are pictures, notes, and a few odd trinkets. He lifts them slowly, methodically, stacking them, organizing them. He comes to an old photograph. We see through his eyes, gaze intently at the image of a woman. We wonder who she is, if perhaps these are her things. Cut to the hands picking up a small plastic seahorse. He rubs it between his index finger and thumb, contemplating. He quickly and carefully places the things back in the box. Cut to the box slamming shut. This is the emblematic shot that will set the tone for the dark and gritty 70 minutes to follow. Welcome to the world of Christopher Nolan's 1998 indie breakout *Following*.

*Following*, much in the same vein as Nolan's later box-office hit *Memento*, is the story of an empty man's misguided quest for meaning, and the way that people manipulate that quest. Following the opening scene, the camera moves to a dimly lit room, where the film's protagonist, Bill (Jeremy Theobald), face hidden in shadow, begins to relate his story to another man (John Nolan) who is listening intently, perhaps a psychologist. We quickly learn that he is a writer and very interested in people. To study them, in order, as he puts it, to "gather material" for the book he is writing, he follows people, seeing what they do everyday, whom they talk to, where they go. At first, he explains, the process was random, but then he started following specific people, and, he prophetically indicates, ". . . that was when the trouble started."

The film then shifts its focus to Bill's extended survey of two seemingly disassociated people: a bleached-blond Marilyn Monroe look-alike (Lucy Russell) and a man with a mysterious bag (Alex Haw) whom he quickly learns is a petty thief. He quickly makes contact with both characters, first by accident (in the case of Cobb, the Burglar, who confronts him in a coffee shop) and then purposefully (in the case of the woman, whom he attempts to pick up in a bar). The burglar invites him to come rob a flat with him, an invitation that he accepts without hesitation, becoming enamored with burglary's voyeuristic potential. The woman goes back to his place, enthralled by Bill and looking for a chance to get back at her boyfriend. These parallel narratives, one crime drama, one noiresque love story, are the basis for the film, as

they progress and eventually intertwine into a devastating story of betrayal.

A central theme of this story, in the tradition of suspense's great auteur Alfred Hitchcock, is voyeurism. Bill is, after all, little more than a Peeping Tom. He seems to derive much of his pleasure in life from covertly watching the lives of others, though he proves much more pitiable and vulnerable than the classic, masturbating-while-peeking-through-the-hole-in-the-wall Norman Bates type. The significant departure that Nolan makes with Bill, the aspect that makes the character so interesting, is that he seems not to get sexual satisfaction from his covert surveillance of others, but rather to use it as a means of projecting meaning onto his own life. In this way, Nolan creates a connection between the audience and Bill, because we are, after all, watching the actions of people without their knowledge or consent in order to better understand ourselves. This connection is meant to make us feel uncomfortable, contributing to the psychological suspense that is the trademark of Nolan's films.

Shot on weekends while the cast and crew worked fulltime day jobs and financed by Nolan's and his wife Emma Thomas's paychecks, *Following* looks stripped down and bare. While such a tiny budget would often be a constraining factor for directors, here Nolan uses it to his advantage. The grainy 16mm black and white film stock contributes strongly to the gritty, evil feel of the movie, as well as distancing it somewhat from the more tonal grayscale of classic film noir. The handheld, walking shots enhance the voyeuristic aspect of Bill's subjective gazes, as well as make the audience more aware of this voyeurism. The actors are suitably anonymous, having no previous feature film experience, and having rather nondescript, "average white" looks. This has the combined effects of mirroring the emptiness that these characters feel and deepening the connection between the audience and the characters. Truth be told, the cheapness of *Following* is an integral part of the film's feel, and one of the things that makes it so good.

Every element of the film's mise-en-scène works to create a dark, empty world for its characters to inhabit. Perhaps the most important element of the film is its very classic, realist use of lighting. The lighting in the outdoor scenes is suitably gray and washed out, as if the clouds will break at any moment and wash the sins of our characters away in rain. The indoor scenes, however, and especially the dialogue scenes, are shot with very high key lighting and strong sidelighting of the faces. The light sources in these scenes are often diegetic and identifiable: an old lamp, or perhaps an open window. This effect adds to the film's realism, making it more believable and adding to the uncomfortable feeling it is meant to give us. All of these elements work together to create the ominous, tense, film noir feel that is Nolan's trademark in this movie as well as in *Memento* and *Insomnia*.

The various settings of the film themselves, ordinary and yet desolate, work to further the feeling of emptiness. The outdoor scenes, despite their metropolitan setting, remain largely uninhabited by extraneous characters, and occur mostly in alleyways outside dilapidated buildings, or on deserted rooftop, foregrounding the architecture of the dismal city that mirrors the empty souls of the characters. In the burglary scenes, the apartments have distinctly different furniture, showing differentiation and individuality in the people they are robbing, but also an overwhelming sense of open space suggesting the emptiness of their lives. Some critics complain that this sameness of interiors detracts from Nolan's efforts to portray the burglaries as invasions of very personal spaces, but I think that it furthers it. Precisely because these spaces are so similar, the details, which Bill and Cobb rifle through, steal, and destroy, are the only shreds of individuality that they possess in this world, and the invasion of privacy is all the more acute.

Nolan also makes extensive and innovative use of nonlinear editing in *Following*. Much like Quentin Tarantino in such films as *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction*, Nolan reassembles the events of his story non-chronologically. Unlike these Tarantino films, which have a more episodic structure, however, *Following* shows us brief pieces of each story, a technique that strengthens parallels between the two narratives as well as creating intratextual references which creatively reveal the chronological order of certain scenes as well as draw the audience in by creating a sense of mystery. A perfect example of such a symbol is Bill's shiner, which we first see in a striking, quick, and unexpected image of the man lying on the ground and coughing up a latex glove. He has obviously just been beaten up, but why? A moment ago the camera was following his gaze, slowly zooming in on the door to a bar that the woman has just walked into. We immediately begin to construct a mental story of what happened. Maybe the woman's lover beat him up, maybe the woman herself, or maybe someone completely unrelated to her story. This becomes the subject of the audience's mental inquest for much of the remainder of the movie, entralling us, and forcing us to look closely at the film for clues. Beyond this, though, the black eye begins to serve as a sort of marker for the position of otherwise difficult to place scenes: we assume that all scenes where Bill has a black eye must have happened after he got beat up, and that all that don't include the shiner must have happened before. This effect contributes greatly to the mysterious and foreboding feel of the film.

While the atmosphere of the film is intricately and concisely concocted, however, the plot runs a little thin at times. If you put the events of the film in chronological order, the story becomes, like *Memento*, a relatively simple tale of revenge and deceit with very few complications, and rather one-sided characters: Bill is the lonely, fragile daydreamer searching for meaning, Cobb is a cliché existentialist loner with slight delusions of grandeur, claiming that what he does is "Show them what they've got by taking it away," and the girl is a typical femme fatale, abused but assertive and at times rather manipulative. This works to the film's advantage in that it adds to the sparse, empty feel of the film, but it left me wanting a little more. The potential in particular for Bill to really explore the voyeuristic aspect of breaking and entering was left unrealized, something that could have been accomplished perhaps through some solo break-ins. With that said, though, the film never feels shallow or boring because it doesn't take up any more time than is absolutely necessary: it clocks in at just under seventy minutes, and every shot in the film is jam-packed with meaning that furthers the plot.

With *Following*, Christopher Nolan takes the conventions of film noir and classic psychological thrillers and molds them into a new genre, which reverberates with the intensity and darkness of the originals, but is all the more realistic and close to home for his touches. This postnoir or metanoir feel no doubt served as a basis for the style of his later movies *Memento* and *Insomnia*. This film certainly has the ability to stand on its own, though. The dismal look, the attention it demands, and the ways it makes us uncomfortable all make *Following* a film worth watching.

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