Film Review Essay

Together in class we will watch and discuss two films that prominently feature food, and you will write a film report for one film of your choice. The two-page report will relate the film to class readings ("*What is Food*?", "*What is Culture*?", and the other reviews read in class), and our discussions on intercultural understanding.

Student Task: Film Review Essay

Whether a movie is a rotten tomato or a brilliant work of art, if people are watching it, it's worth critiquing. A good movie review should entertain, persuade and inform, providing an original opinion without giving away too much of the plot. A *great* movie review can be a work of art in its own right.

Read on to learn how to analyze a movie, come up with an interesting thesis and write a review as entertaining as your source material.

STEP 1: STUDY YOUR SOURCE MATERIAL

1. Gather basic facts about the movie. You can do this before or after you watch the movie, but you should definitely do it before you write the review, because you'll need to weave the facts into your review as you write. Here's what you need to know:

* The title of the film, and the year it came out.
* The director's name.
* The names of the lead actors.
* The genre.

1. Take notes on the movie as you watch it. Before you watch a film, get out a notebook or a laptop to take notes. Taking notes allows you to jot down little things you can return to later.

* Make a note every time something sticks out to you, whether it's good or bad. This could be costuming, makeup, set design, music, etc. Think about how this detail relates to the rest of the movie and what it means in the context of your review.
* Take note of patterns you begin to notice as the movie unfolds.

1. Analyze the mechanics of the movie. Analyze the different components that came together in the movie as you watch. During or after your viewing, ask yourself what impression the movie left with you in these areas:

* Direction: Consider the director and how s/he chose to portray the events in the story.
* Cinematography: What techniques were used to film the movie? What setting and background elements helped to create a certain tone?
* Writing: Evaluate the script, including dialogue and characterization. Did you feel like the plot was inventive and unpredictable or boring and weak? Did the characters' words seem credible to you?
* Editing: Was the movie choppy or did it flow smoothly from scene to scene? Take note of the use of lighting and other ambient effects. If the move has computer-generated graphics, think about whether or not they looked realistic/fit in with the rest of the film.
* Set Design: Consider how the setting of the film influenced its other elements. Did it add or subtract from the experience for you? If the movie was filmed in a real place, was this location well-chosen?
* Soundtrack: Did it work with the scenes? Was it over/under-used? Was it suspenseful? Amusing? Irritating? A soundtrack can make or break a movie, especially if the songs have a particular message or meaning to them.

1. Watch it one more time: If possible, watch the film an additional time, and pause it often to take notes. I will allow students to check out the DVD to take home.

STEP 2: COMPOSING YOUR REVIEW

1. Create an original thesis based on your analysis. Now that you've thoroughly studied the movie, what unique insights can you bring to the table? Come up with a thesis, a central idea to discuss and back up with your observations on the various elements of the film. Your thesis should be discussed in the first paragraph of your review. Having a thesis will take your review beyond the plot summary stage and into the realm of film criticism.

* How does the film reflect culture? How does it use food to define culture? How is food and culture intertwined in the film's plot? What role does food and language play in defining culture within the context of the film? What other cultural markers (language, food, dress, music, traditions, holidays, religion, etc ...) are employed by the film to explain and project culture?

1. Follow your thesis paragraph with a short plot summary. It's good to give readers an idea of what they'll be in for if they decide to see the movie you're reviewing. Give a brief summary of the plot in which you identify the main characters, describe the setting, and give a sense of the central conflict or point of the movie. Never break the number one rule of movie reviews: don't give too much away. Don't ruin the movie for your readers!

* When you name characters in your plot summary, list the actors' names directly afterward in parenthesis.
* Find a place to mention the director's name and the full movie title.
* If you feel you must discuss information that might "spoil" things for readers, warn them first.

1. Move into your analysis of the movie. Write several paragraphs discussing interesting elements of the movie that support your thesis on food and culture. Discuss the acting, the direction, the cinematography, the setting, and so on, using clear, entertaining prose that keeps your readers engaged.
2. Use plenty of examples to back up your points. f you make a statement about the movie, back it up with a descriptive example. Describe the way scenes look, the way a certain person acted, camera angles, and so on. You can quote dialogue to help you make your points as well. In this way you are giving your readers a feel for the movie and continuing to express your critique of the film at the same time.
3. Wrap up your review with a conclusion. It should tie back to your original thesis and provide some guidance as to whether the audience should go see the movie.

STEP 3: POLISHING YOUR REVIEW

1. Edit your review. Once you've finished the first draft, read it through and decide whether it flows well and has the right structure. You may need to shift paragraphs around, delete sentences, or add more material here and there.
2. Proofread your review. Clean up typos, grammatical errors, and other spelling errors as well. Have a classmate proofread and edit your review.
3. Publish your final review. Your review needs to be typed: double spaced, one-inch margins, and size 12 font. Attach a Works Cited page listing any sources used, including the film itself, using proper APA style format.

*SAMPLE FILM REVIEW*

*Tortilla Soup* tells the story of a Mexican American family composed of three daughters and their father, Martin. Martin is an incredibly talented chef, who oddly enough has poor senses of taste and smell. His three daughters Carmen, Leticia, and Maribel are all grown women, with vastly different personalities. Throughout the film the four family members go through their own separate romance stories, and are often only seen together when eating dinner. During these dinners there is usually one character that chooses to use the meal as an occasion for a grand announcement such as Leticia’s marriage, Carmen’s move to Barcelona, or Maribel’s decision to forego college for a year or two. The film has a happy ending for everyone involved, and expresses the importance of family gatherings, and the significant role a good meal can have in discussing family matters.

The movie was pretty hilarious throughout, and had interesting takes on very different romantic encounters. I found Carmen’s speech on why we touch glasses before drinking to be particularly interesting. Furthermore, the twist at the end, in which Martin chooses the younger woman to marry, caught me by surprise. The cause of Martin’s first wife’s sudden death was left unexplained, leaving me curious, but overall the plot line was well developed throughout. Mainly, the film reminds viewers the value in paying close attention to their family members own unique beliefs, feelings, and desires.

Tortilla Soup relates particularly well to our class discussion on the preparation of food. One of the universals of eating amongst humans is that food is “cooked” or prepared in some manner. Martin, as a chef, does this as his profession. In other words, he is an expert at preparing food for others in a way that is both delicious and meaningful. This preparation allows for food to be more than just consumed, but also appreciated as an art. In addition to Tortilla Soup’s attention to preparing food, the movie also provides a look at food’s relation to culture. Martin is a purist, and feels that a food should represent a specific culture such as Mexican, French, or Italian foods. This is also reflected in his dislike of “Spanglish”, preferring English or Spanish to be spoken at the table, not both. However, his eldest daughter Carmen prepares meals which reach across cultures, combining elements from many different foods and preparation techniques which traditionally belong to a specific culture.

In my opinion, this reflects the increased acceptance of blending cultures amongst newer generations of people.

I would recommend *Tortilla Soup* to anyone looking to enjoy a romantic comedy, particularly if they have an interest in Hispanic culture or food preparation. Food certainly holds an important place within the film, and illustrates the often close relationship between family gatherings and a good meal. The movie actually inspired me to spend a little and

go eat at a restaurant instead of fast food dining for one night!