On writing movie reviews

RISA COHEN / JULY 3, 2002

This paper contains both a lesson plan for the writing of a movie review by students, including film analysis and other related lesson plans, and my response to the original assignment that I created for an Intermediate Writers' Workshop (11th grade English students) at Hopkins High School. The original assignment, a peer review worksheet, assignment assessment, and two student reviews are attached.

Purpose: To provide students with a critical context for the analysis of film. They will learn how to think about film using familiar literary concepts as well as the vocabulary of the medium. They will extend their implicit knowledge of media to make connections between images, stereotypes, and the cultural context in which it is displayed. Finally, students will demonstrate their mastery of film analysis by evaluating a film according to defined criteria, formulating an opinion of the film, and providing evidence for that opinion.

I began the original assignment by asking my Intermediate Writers' Workshop students to suggest films that they would like to watch in class. I was giving them a reward for having completed the research paper assignment that had endured three weeks. Even in a gender balanced classroom, most of the students preferred action/adventure movies. The movie that they eventually chose by vote, *American History X,* was rated 'R' and would require parent permission to be seen by the students in the classroom. For the sake of convenience, I chose a PG-13 James Bond movie, *The World is Not Enough.* However, I quickly realized that this movie typified the action/adventure genre that made it easy for students to identify the conventions of the genre, find examples of those conventions and their characteristics, and develop a reasoned opinion of the movie.

Another way to present a media unit is by having the students brainstorm about three things that they like to see when they go to a movie. This idea was suggested in the introductory paragraph of a student's review in which he discusses his expectations for a good movie. Most students know their own preferences and can easily name their three favorite movies. A class discussion can then ensue about the similarities between their favorite movies, including identifying common characteristics, and lead to distinguishing types of movies and creating definitions of movie genres. The discussion can be broadened to include how movies are marketed, including the appeal and power of movie personalities, and how advertising and product tie-ins affect the movie going experience. Students can bring in examples to share with the class, such as *Star Wars* memorabilia and clips of movie trailers. Images of movie personalities can be used to discuss media stereotypes.

Having chosen the action/adventure genre, my class quickly came up with a list of the conventions that are used by these type of films, in particular those in the James Bond series. They identified: fairy tale plots, superheros, villains, beautiful women, gadgets, action sequences, rituals, theme music, and exotic locales. Using both familiar literary terminology and introducing film techniques, I determined five categories of characteristics of action films that convey these conventions to the viewer:

> action sequences
> characterization
> music
> plot
> setting

However, I think a more effective presentation of this lesson would have included examples of how each of these conventions is realized in film. Students could be encouraged to contribute film clips from movies with which they are familiar.

For instance, an action sequence, such as the car chase scene in *Ronin,* could be viewed and the use of camera angles, special effects, and film editing and speed could be demonstrated. Through this detailed analysis, students can be made aware of their positioning as viewers. They can discover the perspective of the camera and begin to ask questions about what is being shown, what is known, and what has been left out. They can become aware of how the camera interprets action, creates suspense, and gives us information that the characters don't know. They can recognize how their eye is attracted to what is in focus and how that distorts what they are seeing and forces them to see things from a restricted perspective.

Characterization in film can be introduced by asking students to make observations of their impressions of a public figure such as Jesse Ventura. A filmed interview of Ventura could be shown to the class. Students would list what they notice about Ventura; what he is wearing, how he moves and talks, what facial expressions he makes, what language he uses, and how he reacts to others and others react to him. They can share these observations in a large class discussion about how to interpret his character. Also, the effect of the camera work on this portrayal, such as close-ups, could be discussed. Relationships are also important to the definition of character. The use of simple editing techniques to create these relationships in film can be shown, for instance, in an episode of "The Practice." Within a dialogue between two characters, the camera swivels between them to focus on a close-up of each character's reaction to the other. This technique creates dramatic tension and furthers the action. However, it limits the range of emotion expressed to a putting on of comedic masks. Actors are often identified by their charming smiles, childish pouts, and, in the case of Julia Roberts, a vixenish laugh so that viewers come to expect actors to play themselves in their roles. This is another aspect of stereotyping; how someone is expected to look and act. A class discussion could be initiated about the relative importance of verbal dialogue in film and whether it functions more to inform viewers about factual information than it does to establish the nature of the relationship between the characters. A comparison of how dialogue is used in different genres could inform the discussion, and students could be encouraged to share clips of movies. Physical movement is also used to reflect relationships in movies, and a variety of sexual encounters have become the shorthand for describing relationships in film. In one review, a student complained about the unrealistic portrayal of casual sex in James Bond movies; she felt that the disregard for unprotected sexual encounters sent an unacceptable message. However, she did not analyze how James Bond's sexuality perpetuates a cultural myth of sexuality as carefree, and the lack of consequences and Bond's immunity from them are important characteristics of the action/adventure genre. The challenge for teachers in guiding students as they explore film is to help them to see how film mirrors or, in this case, challenges societal attitudes. Self reflection as well as a connection between film and other media such as advertising can be made by having the students create collages as in the following assignment:

A Crazy, Mixed-Up World

How do we know who we are? Do we identify with the portrayals of people that we read about in books or see in the media? The media creates stereotypes, idealized representations of who we should be, how we should look, and what we should do. It creates categories of people such as; suburban mother, father, teenage boy, and teenage girl.

In groups, you will identify a media stereotype and create a collage from media images. What do they wear? Where do they live? What do they do for work and fun? What do they eat and drink? What do they buy and where do they shop? In other words, what is their lifestyle?

In a journal, write a reflection on this collage that answers two of the following questions:

- How do these stereotypes affect you?

- Does anything about these stereotypes bother you?

- Are these stereotypes and the expectations that they create realistic?

- Are there expectations of you?

- How do you cope with expectations?

This assignment was very successful and somewhat insidious. The students didn't recognize until they completed their collages and presented them to the class what the implications were of these socially manufactured stereotypes and how large of an effect they had on their perceptions of themselves.

Continuing the evaluation of film characteristics, a cartoon could provide the focus for a discussion of the role music plays in film and the way sound and images are associated. Music can provide aural cues that generate suspense and provoke emotional reactions as well as set the pace of the movie. Theme music creates expectations in viewers especially during a James Bond film when it signals climactic action. The absence of music can create tension, too. Although many of my IWW students chose to evaluate how music was used in *The World is Not Enough,* they could not determine whether they liked it. They recognized that they expected to hear music that correlated to what they were seeing on the screen and that it was an effective technique to create suspense and emotion; however, they criticized how blatant and "cheesy," as one student commented, the soundtrack of the movie was. They couldn't decide whether technical expertise that met their expectations was as or more important than artistry and originality. As an English teacher, the crux of the difference between the study of literature in the classroom and that of film involves the popularity of film as an art form. Ideas and technique cannot be considered to the exclusion of the commercial aspects of movie making. It is one thing to make students self aware as viewers; it is another, perhaps more challenging, task to make them aware of themselves as consumers.

In my 20th Century American Literature class, I used a survey that a student had developed for a media unit in another class. The objective of the survey was to discover whether students were willing to define themselves according to the current stereotypes of teenagers. Each student could choose to identify him/ herself as a member of a group or fill in their own affiliation. Most of the students who did identify with a group were those who considered themselves as belonging to the preps. In the ensuing class discussion, the preps defined themselves as consumers; they saw themselves as having material advantages that set them apart from the other students who considered themselves 'normal,' a word written in by many students. The atmosphere in the classroom became divisive and even more segregated according to class. I now recognize how resistant students can be to exploring their own socially acceptable values.

Another difficulty that confronted the Intermediate Writers' Workshop students was the writing of a summary of the film. Students are used to being passive viewers; they follow along with the action and think that these effects are what make a movie work dramatically. Having been trained to critically read literature, they are better schooled at identifying the dramatic devices that build tension within a written work; contrasting themes, rising and falling action, the climax of the plot, and its resolution.

In my discussion with colleagues at Hopkins High School and from my study of their lesson plans and assignments that explore media in the English classroom, I discovered that most use a literary approach to film analysis. They have students analyze the relationships in a movie and how those relationships relate

to the movie's theme in much the same way as characterization in a literary work is connected to thematic meaning. They avoid the visual aspect of how meaning is created in film, and don't explore how the experience of viewing creates a different response and different meanings than result from the experience of reading.

The idea of critically reading film, in my opinion, needs to be discarded in favor of a critical approach that views film as representational and interactive, exploring the response to the images as integral to the images itself. In other words, the artistry of movie making can also be evaluated by how the film communicates with the audience through the cultural significance of imagery and conventions as well as cinematic technique. This is different than the reader response approach to literary works since a consensus of experience and meaning among viewers will be important, and the viewer's individual perspective that is brought to the interpretation of the film will be less significant than the immediate experience of the film. However, the basic principles of storytelling are still at play in movies, and students can be helped to identify them with a simple worksheet that will also encourage them to develop critical viewing habits. The worksheet should prompt students to list the protagonists and the actors who play those roles, to define the conflicts between the protagonists and what is at stake, to describe the climax, the moment of greatest tension in the film, and to elucidate the resolution by identifying the winners and what was won.

How each student sums up these facts in his/her review gives insight into how he/she responds to the film and whether he/she suspends disbelief or maintains his/her skepticism. The importance of a film's believability, whether viewers have an expectation of reality or fantasy and how that applies to a particular genre of film, could be discussed. Some of my students gave their opinions about how they respond to the James Bond fantasy in their reviews; however, they felt that their responses were a matter of personal preference.

The settings, however, were easy for the students to identify as well as the role they played in the action scenes and their significance for the action/adventure genre. Setting being completely visual, as opposed to how it functions in literature to create meaning as metaphor or establish mood, the students can interpret its filmic qualities. For instance, most car chases take place in urban settings to enhance the thrill of the scene. One student wrote about the use of the black and white contrast in the ski chase scene to create tension, and another wrote about the mountain scenery providing a contrasting setting, romantic but dangerous, for the same scene. The students interpreted setting as visual cues for the film's drama.

If the purpose of this lesson plan was solely focused on film analysis, other activities could be included. Students could be asked to draw a new storyboard of one scene from the movie. They would incorporate new camera angles, choose music and determine when it would come in, and decide on any special effects and the timing of slow motion sequences. A more challenging project would be to have students create their own action/adventure scene based on the class discussion of the conventions and characteristics of the genre as well as a viewing of films within the genre. They would provide the scenario of who, what, and where, as well as creating a storyboard for the scene.

A final independent assignment would ask the students to rent a movie in a genre that they don't usually watch. They would then write a before and after journal about their experience of this genre of movie describing their responses to the conventions of the movie and whether the movie met their expectations for that genre.

Finally, for this lesson plan, the students transformed their film analysis into a review of the movie. In writing this review, they had to evaluate their expectations for the film based on three of the five characteristics of its genre and develop an opinion as to whether the film met, surpassed, or violated those

expectations and what that meant for their experience of the movie. The students were given the five paragraph essay format as a template for their review. Their starting point was a strong assertion of opinion about the movie. They read examples of other movie reviews and noticed the strong, arousing language that was meant to convince and entertain the reader. They were also expected to include a summary of the film and a recommendation to the film's potential audience.

For this assignment, I encouraged the students to do as many peer reviews as possible as a way for them to exchange ideas about the movie and give each other feedback. Once the students had written their reviews, it became apparent to me that the students could identify what about the movie they liked or disliked. They had expectations for their experience of this genre and could evaluate the film based on those expectations. During the film, I commented on how those expectations were manipulated by the director, but the students didn't seem able to provide a larger social context for viewing the film.

Once again, the issue of the commercial appeal of a film and how that popularity reflects the values and tastes of the society at large is difficult to frame in class discussion or even encourage individually.

Intermediate Writers' Workshop Movie Review
Ms. Cohen

Movie: *The World is Not Enough*

Background: People often disagree about their opinions of a movie. Even best friends will argue about their experience of a movie. However, if we think about what we expect to see in a certain type of movie before we see it, we can evaluate it critically. We can communicate a reasoned opinion about the movie and provide examples of what we mean.

Assignment: Write a movie review of The World is Not Enough. Evaluate the movie based on three of five characteristics of action films. Give a recommendation for or against the movie in your conclusion.

Format:

Introduction: Begin with an interesting, creative lead. State your opinion of the movie based on your choice of three characteristics.

Body Paragraph 1: Write a brief summary of the movie. Include the title and names of the director and actors.

Body Paragraphs 2, 3 and 4: Evaluate how well the movie portrays each of the three characteristics in three separate paragraphs. Provide examples from the film for each characteristic.

Conclusion: Restate your thesis and give a recommendation for or against the movie.

Intermediate Writers' Workshop Movie Review Notes

Action films are defined by the following characteristics and techniques:

Action sequences (special effects, fast pacing, rapid cutting, and slow-motion violence)

Characterization (super hero, evil villain, and other stereotypes)

Music (theme and suspense provoking)

Plot (realistic, unrealistic, intriguing, and predictable)

Setting (familiar and exotic locales)

Choose three of the above and note examples of each as you watch the movie.

1.

2.

3.

Peer Workshop: Movie Review

1. Read through the paper completely.

2. Now go back, reread and think about your response. Write directly on the draft.

• Does the attention getter provoke your interest? Is it catchy? Does it make you want to read more?

• Underline the thesis. Does it give three categories for analyzing the movie? Does it express an opinion of the movie?

• Does the summary give you a good picture of what this movie is about or is it confused? Are there too many plot details?

• As you read, put a wavy line under any words or thoughts that you don't understand or don't seem to make sense.

• Put a check mark next to ideas that are repeated or restated.

• Is each category discussed in a separate paragraph? Are specific examples from the movie given for the category? Are they introduced and explained?

• Are there transitions between the paragraphs that connect them?

• Does the conclusion offer a recommendation for or against the movie?

Movie Review Essay Evaluation

Name:

1 = not working 2 = adequate 3 = strong 4 =excellent

1. Introduction Attention getter
   1 2 3 4 Thesis including three analytical categories Opinion of movie expressed

2. Summary Statement of what the movie is about
   Reader gets it 1 2 3 4

3. Category One Specific examples provided
   Examples introduced and explained 1 2 3 4

4. Category Two Specific examples provided
   Examples introduced and explained 1 2 3 4

5. Category Three Specific examples provided
   1 2 3 4 Examples introduced and explained

5. Synthesizing Conclusion Restates thesis
   Makes recommendation 1 2 3 4

6. Mechanics Spelling Grammar
   1 2 3 4 Catchy Title

Points for Peer Review: _____ (15)
Points for Personal Essay: _____ (60)
Total Points for Assignment: _____ (75)

Movie Review: *007*

The World is Not Enough is the title of the most recent James Bond film. With all of the features that made it exciting, the fast-paced action and modern-day technology were the most appealing. The only downside to this type of movie is that it is very predictable. Many bond movies before this one have had the same type of plot. Agent James Bond sets out to save the world from some of the most notorious of terrorists, while overcoming all of the dangerous obstacles and managing to get the attention of many beautiful women. While this is very predictable, I still enjoyed the movie.

The World is Not Enough was directed by Michael Apted, and was the 19th in the running series of James Bond movies. From scenes of the Nervion river in Spain, to the boat chase on the Thames river in London, to the highlands of Scotland, this movie had many breathtaking scenes. The plot was a very twisted and intriguing one. James Bond (Pierce Brosnan) was assigned to protect Elektra King (Sophie Marceau) from Renard (Robert Carlyle), the world renowned terrorist that feels no pain. However, Bond soon discovered that King and Renard were working together to take over the world's oil industry and wipe out all of Istanbul, Turkey. James then meets Christmas Jones (Denise Richards), a biochemist who helps him to track down the bomb just before it detonates in a submarine as they are able to contain the explosion. There are the expected hostage situations, and many near death occurrences for Bond, but in the end he saves the day.

My first criteria for this movie was the action. It was a very steady but fast-paced movie and all of the action was very suspenseful. There were scenes with snowmobiles on parachutes floating down from the sky and shooting at the unarmed Bond and King. Bond was able to find woods and defeat all of the attackers with his wit. It was a high-energy scene and was great action. Another example of a good action scene was the part when two helicopters came down from the sky and used chain saw type weapons to destroy a house in another attempt to kill Bond. This was also very exciting but was not successful. The last example of great action in this movie was the final submarine scene when Bond and Jones were trying to stop Renard from detonating his nuclear weapon. It was the type of action that makes you not want to blink. It was very suspenseful and came down to the last couple seconds until finally Bond and Jones escaped. This movie was loaded with these types of action scenes, and it made the movie fun to watch.

Another highlight of the movie was all of the high-tech equipment that was used. Many of the action scenes were further enhanced by all of the special effects and technology as well. James Bond's car was a prime example of this, because it was his typical BMW car with bulletproof glass and ejectable seats. It also had rockets hidden on the sides of the wheel wells, allowing him to unexpectedly escape from a helicopter attack. Another example of the advanced technology in this movie was the boat that he used to chase the villain in the very opening scene. It was equipped with very nice features, including a submarine feature allowing him to go under a bridge that had already lowered. The last example of the technology was when Bond pulled out a little gadget that shot a hook up to the top of the tunnel. It helped Bond and Jones escape from the area just before the bomb Renard had set exploded. This was a thin string that must have been made of very strong material to hold two bodies and pull them upwards.

My last criteria for the movie was it's predictability. This movie had many seemingly suspenseful scenes, but many were quite predictable. For instance, when the attackers dropped from the sky

with machine guns to attempt an assassination of James Bond, it was almost obvious that he would manage to escape and kill them in the process. Another example was when Bond had captured Renard in the missile base. He was obviously not going to kill him when he had the chance, because then the movie would have ended. It really took away from the suspense factor of the movie. It also was predictable when Bond saved the day in the end by killing Renard in a very improbable way and saving all of Turkey. You could see all of this coming from a mile away, and it made the movie less exciting.

With all of the features included in the movie, it was good action and had some cool technology, but lacked the spontaneousness and spur of the moment scenes that left you thinking. It was way too predictable. I liked the movie solely for it's appeal and content of effects, but the plot was weak. The predictability and weak love story took away from the action that could have made this one of the best action movies I've ever seen. I would rate this movie a 6 out of 10 because it had some of what was appealing to me, but I would have liked more action and less mushy stuff.

Overall, I would recommend this movie to many action fans, but mothers and children might not enjoy this movie as much.

Amanda Kuhrke IWW Hour 2 Cohen 5/30/02

The World is Not Enough

James Bond is a character that most of us are familiar with. He's handsome, suave, and knows how to get what he wants. However, he's also predictable, unrealistic, and not very exciting. After watching *The World Is Not Enough,* you would be able to see that too. It's a poor movie that simply fits too many stereotypes to give it any depth. Every Bond movie proves to be the same as the one before it, lacking any real plot and providing a couple hours of pure action scenes.

The World is Not Enough stars Pierce Brosnan as James Bond, and Denise Richards as a nuclear physicist named Christmas Jones. Directed by Michael Apted, the movie is based on the heir to an oil fortune who needs protection from her father's killer, Renard, a man left with no physical feeling from a bullet lodged in his brain. Bond swoops in as the protector and not only helps to keep her away from the bad guys, but ends up in her bed as well. When it turns out that the heiress is working for the other side, everything turns around on Mr. Bond. Deceit and murder run rampant throughout the movie, as you would expect in any 007 film.

The characterization in the movie is typical; beautiful, sexy people capable of doing anything. First we have the fact that no matter what type of situation the characters get into, their makeup is never smudged, and their hair is never messy. They can go from being drowned in a submarine one minute, to drip dry the next. Second, the characters all have lots of money, which provides them with lavish clothes, and all the suits and ties you could wear in a lifetime. Bond wears a suit in almost every scene, which manages to go without ever getting a stain or tear. Furthermore, because of all their amazing fortune with money and good looks, they are able to get whatever they want. Bond gets all the women, and the seductress is able to escape death countless time thanks to her pretty smile.

The setting again is like any other in a Bond movie. Everyone lives in huge houses on the countryside with beautiful, rolling hills as the landscape. No weeds, no dirt, just perfection. The houses are ornate and contain anything you could ever want. I don't think an action movie would be complete without some docks and boats as well. There are many scenes set on boats and ships, and of course, someone is always drowning. It makes you wonder why they don't wear life vests.

The docks are always dimly lit and set in murky water. No matter how beautiful that countryside was, the water is always scary and dirty. We also can't forget the underground secret labs in the desert, but have no fear because they are in this movie also. Huge machines and tanks cover the desert. They are cold, and never comfortable, the only purpose they serve is to carry out secret missions without anyone discovering them.

There was nothing new about the action scenes in the movie, and they were all overly predictable. Everyone carries at least one gun, and has more than enough bullets to kill an entire army, without even reloading. Guns and bombs are always plentiful for use whether by the bad guy or the good one. With all the gun toting shooters running around, all the main characters somehow manage to dodge the bullets. Nobody important to the plot is ever shot or hurt in anyway until the end of the movie. Even when someone does get hurt in one scene, they are magically healed in the next. Another thing that bothered me about the scenes, was the fact that nobody ever killed each other, even after a long discussion about it. If you were holding a gun to your enemies head, would you choose to talk about your problems, or get rid of them? There were many missed opportunities for the movie to end, which would have been a nice relief. Had Bond killed Renard when he first had the chance, the movie could have ended an hour early.

This movie wasn't a complete flop, the actors did their best to make it into something good, but being a Bond movie just gives it a certain style that is unescapable. Every scene in the movie was filled with stereotypes and unrealistic events. If you could look past all that, the movie might be enjoyable. I thought if they had added some new ideas into the movie to make it exciting, it would have been a much better film. After watching countless Bond movies, it's just not fun anymore. If the writers made the people in the movie a little more real to life, and the action scenes a little less predictable, this could have been a much better movie.

I do recommend it to action fans, but not anyone who wants a movie with depth.