

How to Critique a Movie:

A short guide for amateur film critics

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1. Introduction

Watching movies is fun, but critiquing movies is a more complex endeavor. What film elements do professional critics actually analyze, and how can an amateur film buff get started critiquing contemporary cinema? This essay discusses some of the key characteristics of non-technical film criticism: the thematic, dramatic (storytelling), and stylistic aspects of the movie, and how to analyze them. (Technical elements such as lighting, sound, and other camera or editing qualities are not discussed.) The science fiction film *Minority Report* is used in each section as an example.

2. Analyzing the Theme

The theme of a film can sometimes be discovered by asking "what was the central point the director was trying to make with this film?" What was the central goal of the film? Boggs and Petrie [1] list several possible goals of a movie, including providing pure entertainment, providing a character sketch of a fascinating personality, or increasing the viewer's awareness of a particular social problem. They ask, "what is the movie about in abstract terms?" and they make the following suggestion for determining the theme:

Frequently, just describing the movie to someone who has not seen it will provide an important clue to the theme, because we tend to describe first the things that made the strongest impression on us. (p. 30)

There also may be additional supporting, or minor, themes found in the movie. If these are not substantive enough to be considered a full theme, they may be called *motifs*. A motif is an idea or symbol which is repeated throughout the movie but does not constitute a full theme of the movie.

As an example, consider the movie *Minority Report*, based on a short story by Philip K. Dick and directed by Steven Spielberg [3]. The central question in this film seems to be "Is it morally acceptable for a government to save numerous lives and prevent crime using a new technology that has been shown to be occasionally fallible and presents violations of basic human rights?" The movie thus explores themes such as excessive government control of individuals, and conflicts between individual rights and group safety. Motifs seen throughout the movie include pervasive and personalized advertising, identity recognition and validation technologies, and various symbols (eyes, glasses)

representing omniscient or all-seeing beings.

3. Analyzing the Story

Analyzing the story is often much easier than analyzing the theme of a film. A story is presented in film through the plot (simple, complex, timeless, believable), the characters (appearance, dialogue, interplay between characters, actions, names), and symbolic elements.

3.1 Plot

Usually the plot is one of the easiest things about a movie to describe. Rather than just rehashing a storyline, however, a critic will investigate specific elements of the plot and whether they work to make the movie better. Examples of such plot devices include the way time is handled in the movie (linear, non-linear) or how the important scenes of climax and denouement (ending) are revealed. Another interesting aspect of plot is its sense of believability: does the plot tell a universal truth (the world as it is), an internal truth about human nature, or a fantastic version of truth "as it never will be" [1]? No matter whether the story is a biography, or a heart-warming romantic comedy, or the latest film adaptation of a children's fantasy novel, the movie must be believable or at least allow the viewer to suspend disbelief in order to enjoy the movie.

Consider the example film *Minority Report*, which is set in the near-future, in Washington D.C. 2042. In this movie, there are numerous scenes including the physical landmarks of the city that a viewer will recognize (monuments, Metro rail, public spaces), as well as new physical features (vertical roads) that do not exist today. The movie also presents a "future vision" of contemporary social problems (crime, drugs) that have escalated over time. That crime has escalated and that new designer drugs are available in 2042 are not unbelievable to a present-day viewer.

3.2 Characters

The way characters are presented in a movie is essential to the analysis of the story. A viewer learns about characters primarily through the appearance and dialogue of the character, and through character interactions in the movie. Clothing, hair, mannerisms, accent, and speech patterns can be immediate cues to the audience for how a character is to be interpreted.

Main characters can also be categorized into protagonists and antagonists; good guys and bad guys. Complex characterizations of "sympathetic bad guys" or "good guys who do bad things" are interesting and can make for more interesting viewing [2]. Characters are often described in other dimensions, such as round (complex) or flat, mythic (underdogs, messiahs), or in terms of their relationships to other characters ("the female love interest", "the buddy movie", etc). Other types of characters include the *stock character* and

stereotype. Stock characters are those with very simple roles that do not require character development (taxi driver, bartender). Likewise, stereotypical characters can be relied upon to behave in an easily understood way, though they may have more dialogue than a stock character. Stereotypical characters move the plot along, without the writers having to spend a lot of time on character development. Critics are often unimpressed when a main character emerges as a stereotype.

In *Minority Report*, the main character Thomas A. Anderson is believable as a city police detective in the Department of Pre-Crime. It is his job to organize the arrests of people who were about to commit crimes. Because the character is made immediately likable, the viewer is initially made to sympathize with the mission of the department. As the plot reveals that the protagonist is much more complex than initially presented (i.e. the viewer is shown his depressing home life, his nightmarish memories of his young son's death, and his drug problem), the Department of Pre-Crime similarly becomes more nuanced and the issues surrounding the arrests more complex.

3.3 Symbolism

A film can use symbolism to reinforce its theme or to add depth to the story. Symbols can be repeated for emphasis or can be metaphoric, in such a way that their value in the story exceeds the value normally represented by that object [1]. An object can also be given specific value by a character in order to increase its worth to the viewer. Critical acceptance of symbolism in film will often depend on whether the symbol is new and original or whether it is a cliché [1]. Whether some film element has symbolic meaning can also be over analyzed by viewers, so care should be taken not to misconstrue everything into a symbol with deeper meaning [2].

In *Minority Report*, the theme of government control of individuals is reinforced by repeated reference to eyes. The viewer is treated to obvious and intrusive shots of eyeballs, eyesight, glasses, optical scanning, eye surgery and a mad eye doctor. One of the synonyms for unjustified government control in contemporary storytelling is the notion that "Big Brother is watching you" from George Orwell's novel *1984*. The symbol of the eye can thus refer both to the character's own blindness about what is happening to him in the story and his own role in the downfall of the Department of Pre-Crime, as well as the more obvious metaphor of government control of individuals that the Department of Pre-Crime represents.

4. Analyzing the Genre

The genre of a film can be very important in a critical analysis of a film. If a movie is a "gangster movie" or a "western", that genre classification brings with it an immediate recognition of certain accepted truths about the movie. The genre film can be a success either by following these conventions or by breaking them. As with symbols and metaphors, a genre film that relies heavily on clichés and does not offer anything new

will be unsatisfying to the critic.

Some films can not be described as belonging solely to one particular genre. Many of the films in the science fiction genre, for instance, have major cinematic elements borrowed from other genres: the characters and tone of *Blade Runner* are heavily based on the 1940s film noir genre; *Gattaca* is a futuristic bio-thriller with a set reminiscent of a 1930s romance; *Star Wars* is a sort of sci-fi version of a classic western, complete with saloon scenes and space cowboys.

Minority Report is a science fiction film, because it is set in the future and deals with the ethics of a technological problem in society. As such, it also exhibits another aspect common to science fiction films: the ability to cause viewers to question and "catalogue our culture's major anxieties" [4], which it does by presenting a society's blind (metaphor) acceptance of technology and resulting loss of human rights at the hand of government. *Minority Report* also inherits certain other aspects of the science fiction genre, including an expectation that the audience will suspend disbelief about the pace of technological change, and the intentional inclusion of "gee-whiz" technologies specifically to get a reaction from the audience. The movie is successful in this genre because it presents a believable and scientific picture of life in 2042.

5. Concluding Remarks

This essay presents three non-technical elements of film that can be analyzed by a viewer new to movie criticism: theme, story, and genre. Themes describe the overarching goals or big picture questions that a movie attempts to answer. The story of a movie is comprised of dramatic elements such as plot, characters, and symbolism. The genre of a movie is a descriptor of how the movie relates to other movies like itself- what does this movie have in common with other movies, and what does it take from other genres? The new critic will be able to use these descriptions and the example (*Minority Report*) to make careful critiques of other movies.

6. References

[1] Boggs, J. and D.W. Petrie. (2004). *The Art of Watching Films*, 6th Ed. McGraw-Hill: Boston.

[2] Piper, J. (2001). *Get the Picture? The Movie Lover's Guide to Watching Films*. Allworth Press: New York.

[3] Spielberg, S. (Producer). (2002). *Minority Report* [Motion Picture]. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp.

[4] Telotte, J.P. (1995). *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana, Illinois.