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WRITING YOUR FIRST REVIEWS

Now you understand film history and the basics of how a film is made. You're ready to write your first full-fledged movie review.

THE POINT OF A MOVIE REVIEW

Before you start to write, you need to understand the reason a movie review should exist. At its most fundamental level, the goal is simple:

You are helping the reader decide whether to invest his time and money in watching a movie.

Now the *Film Comment* crowd has a different goal, and that's to analyze film as an art form and to interpret its social significance. This type of writing is meant to be consumed after the reader has seen the film, not before, often exploring plot in detail (spoiling every plot point and even the ending), discussing in depth a writer and/or director's prior works, and most importantly explaining what the movie says about feminism, terrorism, politics, and so on. *Deconstruction* like this is often applied to books, of course, so why not extend it to motion pictures?

If you're reading this book, chances are deconstructing movies for their social context isn't your primary goal. Film school is all about this kind of analysis, but typical readers in mass media have little patience for this type of writing.

Does this mean you shouldn't be looking for themes and offering your perspective on what a film says about life, society, or philosophy? Of course you should. But when it comes to answering the question of whether a film is worth the money, these issues are often secondary.

The best way to do this is to just jump right in and start writing, but first you'll want a framework for structuring your review so it's not just a jumble of random thoughts.

THE SECRET OF A GOOD REVIEW

There is one simple, fundamental rule to writing a good movie review:

BE HONEST

That's it! Whether you are writing your first review or your 3,000th review,

if you aren't honest with yourself, with the film, and with your readers, your review is useless. You can "be nice" about your criticism or you can get really detailed with your complaints, but all of this is meaningless if you don't tell the truth and provide an analysis that comes from your heart.

Keep this one golden rule in mind as you read the lessons in the rest of this chapter, for all of your analyses must absolutely be presided over by honesty.

HOW TO ANALYZE A MOVIE

For starters, rent or attend a movie that you haven't seen before. As you watch it – or after you finish – think about the following questions. If you can write in the dark, jot down the answers on a notepad as they occur to you during the film. Also, scribble any other tidbits (a line of dialogue, a quirky supporting character, a clever plot twist) that strike you as particularly noteworthy. As well, write down anything that strikes you as awkward, hackneyed, or a hallmark of bad filmmaking. Together, all of these notes will form the comments in your review. I'll analyze each of these aspects of critiquing in more detail later in the chapter.

A FRAMEWORK FOR MOVIE REVIEWS: BASIC QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- Did the movie achieve its goal? In other words, did you laugh, cry, or scream in terror like you were supposed to? Compared to other movies in this genre, did you laugh/cry/scream more or less? Why?
- Is the story interesting? Here we're evaluating the script. Are the jokes stale or have you heard the dialogue in a hundred other movies? Is the plot stolen from another film? Can you figure out the ending after 20 minutes? Is the pacing too slow, or is the plot confusing? These are all problems to note. Typically they point to bad screenwriting.
- How are the performances? Is the acting believable? Could you really see these movie stars in these roles in life? Are the performances natural or stilted? Is one a standout above the others or does the entire cast shine? Is one actor miscast – or is the actor successfully exploring new ground? Is an actor being lazy by regurgitating an old character in a new role?
- How's the direction? Directing is difficult to judge, especially for a novice, because directors have a lot of help from supporting crew. Good acting is one sign of good directing, but when actors work well *together*, it's a clearer indication of a good director at the helm. Good directing also comprises the technical side of filmmaking: good shot selection, inventive photography, and

unobtrusive camera movements. Pacing is a critical part of direction, though this often is also a function of the editing and writing of the film: Do scenes begin only when necessary and end before they become boring? Does the movie develop a sense of quickening pace leading up to a climax or is the pace jerky?

- What about the support crew? Do the costumes and sets look authentic? Does the music gel with the rest of the movie? (There is nothing worse than a period piece that is saddled with awful synthesizer tunes.) Do the special effects look good, and is the sound at the right volume level? If you can't hear when you leave the theater, it's too loud. Consider the little details. These may not make or break the movie, but they'll help shade your review when appropriate.
- Was there a worthwhile point to the movie? A message? Anything that you'll remember in a week? Not every film will have a message, but the best movies – even if they're comedies or action films – should be memorable for more than just the laughs and the blood splattering.
- Is it too long? Too short? More importantly, does the length of the film match the importance of the film?
- Finally, how well does all of this come together? This plays back to the first question above: Did the movie achieve its goal? If you answered yes to that question you'll probably give high marks to most or all of the above queries. Did you enjoy the whole movie, not just a few scenes here and there? Does the finished product feel like one movie or a collection of little vignettes? Does it tell one grand story or a few amusing anecdotes?

It's important not to look at this as if it's a checklist, or as if you're grading a test. A film is a collection of elements both good and bad, but ultimately it is a single entity that should be considered as a whole instead of just a bunch of parts. For the most part, you will be able to answer most of these questions rather quickly as you think about the film minutes after you've seen it.

Chances are this is how you look at movies already, even if you don't realize it. When you leave a film, you either liked it or you didn't, pure and simple. If you're pressed, you will come up with certain things that stood out as good or bad, and you'll be able to riff on a good performance or a terrible plot point. Hey, you've got the beginnings of a movie review right there! Add a plot synopsis and a little structure and you'll find you can write a few hundred words of review off the top of your head. Once you go through the steps a few times, you'll find it easier and easier to apply critical thinking to an entertainment form.

CHAPTER 5: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Now that you've analyzed the various components of the film, it's time to add in the supporting pieces of the review and put the entire review together. The first thing I'll analyze is the plot synopsis.

THE PLOT SYNOPSIS

For veteran critics, the plot synopsis is the easiest part of a review, but for novice critics it's a make or break proposition. Write too little about the plot and your readers won't know enough about the movie's story (an especially big problem when the movie in question is not a mega-advertised Hollywood blockbuster). Write too much and you'll not only bore the audience to tears, you'll give away key plot points that "spoil" the movie for readers.

The latter problem is far more common. Novice critics who aren't comfortable writing their analysis fall back on plot summaries just to fill space. A long review *looks* like it carries gravitas. But all too often I read novice reviews that are filled with 500 words regurgitating the plot, followed by 100 words of tepid analysis. It's probably the worst kind of review there is.

A good plot synopsis forms the core of the review. For some readers, that's all they'll want to read, no matter how great your analysis is. (It's a sad fact of life, but it merits consideration: A lot of people just want to know what the movie is about and couldn't care less what you think.) This is why many critics – even the big names – spend so much time droning on and on about the plot points: They know many readers just don't want to hear how good the lighting and editing are. Plus, it's *really* easy to write like this. This, sadly, is lazy film criticism.

The perfect plot synopsis is a taut three to 12 sentences, depending on the complexity of the movie. Your goal is to establish the critical elements of the film without spoiling key plot points or giving away so much detail that the reader will feel like he's seen the movie already. The key elements to set up for the reader include:

- **The setting.** If it's important, where is the action occurring? If it's a period piece, what year are we talking about? Will the action be confined to a haunted house or is this a globetrotting *Indiana Jones* style adventure? With movies like *The Lord of the Rings* series, you'll need to spend extra

time setting up the fantasy world we're about to visit: When you have otherworldly settings, nonhuman sentient creatures, and magical powers, expect to burn a few extra sentences on the setting.

- **The main characters and the stars.** Sometimes you'll want to save the identity of the actors for later in your review, for variety or whatever reason, but you'll always want to identify the key characters in the film in your synopsis. With large ensemble casts like *Gosford Park*, try to focus on the five or six most important characters. You can always drop in supporting players later in your review. The idea isn't to dissect the entire cast list but to paint, with broad strokes, who the movie is about.
- **The plot points in the first act.** As a general rule of thumb, don't synopsise more than the first act (about the first 30 minutes, see Chapter 4) of the movie. In general, the first inciting incident or "twist" is OK to mention (in *The Sixth Sense*, it's OK to say that Cole sees dead people, but I wouldn't go beyond that). Go beyond this point you'll start to *spoil* the film – one of the biggest mistakes you can make in a movie review. Exceptions may be made depending on the film and the importance of surprises in the plot: It doesn't exactly ruin the movie to say that the end of *Short Cuts* involves an earthquake. But it doesn't really make your review better to write about the ending of a film anyway. When in doubt, *less* plot discussion is the best route.
- **The genre of the film.** Is it funny? Is it horror? Is it a funny horror movie? Don't assume that your audience has memorized the trailer. But it isn't necessary to use the words "*Annie Hall* is a romantic comedy" if the tone of your review gets that across.

Once you've gotten these out of the way, you've covered plot. Let's look at a few actual examples to see how a good plot synopsis should look.

Here's an excerpt from *filmcritic.com*'s review of *The Others* (2001), which has a tricky setup.

The Others brings us to the British Isles of 1945, where the repressed, icy Grace, played by Nicole Kidman, cares for her kids Ann and Nicholas (Alakina Mann and James Bentley) in a colossal house, where things are in turmoil. Grace has been told that her husband (Christopher Eccleston), who's fighting in World

War II, is missing and unlikely to return. The house's staff has simply vanished. And to top it all off, Ann repeatedly sees visions of another family who she says used to live in the house.

Ann tries to explain what she sees to her dubious mother, who drums Christian doctrine into her children's heads and has an impatient streak. At first, Grace doubts her daughter. But when doors fly open and unknown screams are unleashed, Grace strives (unsuccessfully) to gain control of the situation. Meanwhile, the new housekeeping staff, led by the friendly Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), acts peculiar. Mrs. Mills tells Ann that she has seen the same visions, and that their presence will lead to some changes in the house.

That's nine sentences that give you the basics of *The Others* and vivid detail but without even approaching the plot twists in the film.

Here's the synopsis from my review of *Fight Club*.

Fight Club is the story of Jack (Edward Norton), a mild-mannered day-job schlub/insomniac. To combat his lack of sleep, Jack takes comfort in various support groups for ailments he doesn't have, where he finds a sudden freedom from life's pressures, surrounded by people on the verge of recovery or the verge of death. Soon enough, Jack becomes "addicted" to the support groups, but things get worse when the freakish Marla (Helena Bonham Carter) tries to take over his space – obviously getting off on the same thrill as Jack.

Soon, Jack is back where he started, and on a flight home from yet another business trip, he encounters Tyler (Brad Pitt), a nutty character reminiscent of The Mad Hatter, William S. Burroughs, and The Unabomber all rolled up into one. When Jack arrives at home, he finds his condo mysteriously blown up, and he ends up moving in with Tyler in a craphole of a house. Tyler takes Jack down a road of self-discovery, mainly through violence, and together they found Fight Club, an underground bareknuckled boxing society – a big step beyond "self-help."

As the movie progresses, so does the darkness of Fight Club. Its membership skyrockets, and its extracurricular activities turn subversive.

That's eight (longish) sentences, but the concepts of *Fight Club* are tricky to get across succinctly. Still, had I wanted to write a shorter review, I could have left out the back story about the support groups and Marla altogether, leaving that part of the movie for the audience to discover. At the same time, *Fight Club* is also a twist-driven movie, and again, this synopsis goes to pains not to give it away.

Here's a shorter synopsis that's just as effective of covering *The Ring* (2002).

Following a number of false starts that establish the film's unbalanced mood, *The Ring* rehashes an urban legend about a videotape. Very few people know its contents, though it's believed that the images found on the tape recap one person's nightmare. Initially I thought that tape was *Police Academy 5: Assignment Miami Beach*, but I was wrong. Once you watch the video, the phone rings and a child's voice on the other end of the line whispers, "Seven days." You now have one week to live.

When a close friend of the family dies following a viewing, Seattle newspaper reporter Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts) promises the victim's mother she'll ask around about the tape. Rachel watches the tape, receives the phone call, and her personal seven-day countdown to destruction begins. Her only hope of survival is to solve the mystery of the images on screen before her departure time arrives.

The writer spends almost as much time making jokes as he does discussing the plot of the movie. Only one character is introduced, and the rainy Pacific Northwest setting of the film is saved for a more in-depth discussion later in the review.

Some movies (you know the ones I mean) can be easily synopsized in one sentence. Great example from the filmcritic.com archives: "*Scary Movie* is a parody of *Scream*." There's no real "plot" to *Scary Movie*. It exists simply to make jokes about the horror genre. That's all that needs to be said about the plot for the reader to understand fully what the movie is "about." What additional movies the film parodied and whether *Scary Movie* is funny or scary at all is what the bulk of the review covers.

For more examples of good story summaries, pay attention to the plot synopses in the example reviews that continue through the remainder of the next few chapters.

COMBINING THE PLOT SYNOPSIS WITH ANALYSIS

You've analyzed the components of the film and have a solid grasp on the mechanics of the plot. Now it's time to put the two together into a review.

As you get started, you should try to follow a simple template for structuring your reviews. The best reviews don't follow a template, of course, but for a beginner, you should start simple and work your way toward more complicated review structures. (I'll cover some of these in more detail in Chapter 6.)

Here's how a solid, but basic, 600-word review ought to look.

- "The lead" – Also known as a "lede," you want to grab the reader's attention with a powerful statement, a witty remark, a joke, or an obscure fact. Many, many reviewers start off their reviews by jumping right into the plot. This is not only lazy, it's boring. Some critics spend far more time on the lead than they should. (Roger Ebert is notorious for boring us with hundreds of words of personal anecdotes that have little to do with the movie he's reviewing.) Keep it to one paragraph; 75 words is about perfect. Leads are covered in the following section.
 - The plot synopsis – As discussed earlier, 150 to 200 words of plot synopsis is just about right, split into two paragraphs.
 - The analysis – The guts of the review. Spend about 300 words (in three or four paragraphs) discussing your thoughts on the direction, the script, the acting, and the supporting components of the film, as relevant. If you analyze every single bit of a movie, your analysis could easily run to 1,000 words or more, which is certain to bore your audience into oblivion. (Once I read a 3,000-word review of *Final Fantasy: The Enemy Within*, possibly the biggest waste of both the author's and the reader's time I can imagine.)
- So what do you omit? When in doubt, talk about the high points and the low points, erring toward those that support your overall rating. A five-star review might mention six to eight highlights: a key actor, outstanding dialogue (with examples), direction, editing, the score, cinematography, and set decoration. That should be plenty to support your rating. A mediocre or bad movie might merit only four points of analysis: A great actor's work is marred by an inferior script, the editing is too choppy, and the special effects are questionable.

No matter how much you write in this section, the most important thing

to remember is that you communicate your overall impressions of the film through the tone of your analysis. Nothing smacks of amateurism worse than writing about nothing but high points, then slapping the film with a low rating.

- The conclusion – It doesn't have to start with "In conclusion..." but you should come up with some way to wrap up your thoughts quickly and coherently, leading to your overall opinion of the film. Remember that your reader wants to know whether he should spend \$10 on the movie, wait for DVD, or skip it altogether. It's important to understand that's why you're writing this thing in the first place. I'll cover conclusions in greater depth later in the chapter.

THE LEAD

You want to start your review with a bang, not a whimper or a whine. Challenge the reader to sit up and take notice of what you have to say. Online, you can easily find 200 reviews of a movie on opening day. What's going to make yours stand out?

You need to grab the reader immediately with your writing but still stay on topic. Rambling about what you did earlier in the day isn't going to make any sense in the context of a movie review. Leads are impossible to turn into templates, but with practice, they'll come to you. As you watch a film for your review, think about how you'll create a clever intro for the review. Most of the time, it will come to you out of thin air. Sometimes, you'll know exactly how to start your review months before a movie ever comes out. And sometimes you'll dump that idea for something you think of the minute you sit down to start writing.

How about some samples of leads that work?

Here's one that's funny:

A soldier's life has been famously characterized by hours of boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror. Well, *The Alamo* manages to capture half that story.

This lead offers some interesting or insider-ish trivia (albeit, trivia about an uninteresting movie):

In case you've been wondering, *Feeling Minnesota* is a film

"inspired by a line in a Soundgarden song," according to the production notes.

This one delves deeper into a movie's background:

No modern traveler has more notoriety than Merhan Karimi Nasseri, who has been stranded in Terminal One of Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport since 1988. Nasseri was expelled from Iran in 1977 and spent 10 years trying to gain political asylum in Europe. That all came to an end when his bag was stolen in Paris, essentially stranding him at CDG. In 1993, a movie was made about him (*Lost in Transit*), starring Jean Rochefort. Nasseri's life reappears on screen this year in *The Terminal*, courtesy of Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. And shamefully, Nasseri goes unmentioned in the movie's production notes.

Or you might begin with a witty observation about the title:

With a title as curious as *13 Conversations About One Thing*, most moviegoers probably want to know what the "thing" is before plunking down their bucks to see the movie. Well, that "thing" appears to be happiness, and the search for it. But don't let that fact and the peppy title fool you – this film isn't filled with a bunch of inane chick chatter. Writer/director Jill Sprecher's follow-up to her debut *Clockwatchers* has an overall tone of despair and a faint hint of evil, much like that first film. It results in a surprising, bold, satisfying drama with a mildly depressing wave running through it.

Here are two different approaches to *Kill Bill: Volume 1*:

Quentin Tarantino's fourth film, *Kill Bill*, reminds us why we, as a collective moviegoing society, wish he'd work more often than he does. The acclaimed director rocketed to cult stardom with *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, cranked out an overlong homage to film noir in *Jackie Brown*, and then slid off the filmmaking radar for the better part of six years.

And...

The Miramax hype machine was working overtime on *Kill Bill*, breaking Quentin Tarantino's epic pastiche of revenge into two volumes. Rather than serve this quasi-retro samurai saga in one three-hour heap, *Kill Bill* serves itself out in portions. *Kill Bill* reveals Tarantino as a sham auteur ripping off Hong Kong action flicks and 1970s B-movies for their surface frills. He's the cinematic equivalent of karaoke or bad photocopies, mindlessly adopting style while forgetting the basic precepts of storytelling.

Note how the first lead sets up the generally positive tone of the review, right from the first sentence. Likewise, it's clear from the start that the second lead will be a pan, using words like "sham," "mindlessly," and "hype machine." Without actually analyzing anything, both of these leads cue the reader into what he should expect in the following paragraphs.

There's no good rule saying what makes a good lead or a bad one. Funny, serious, wildly insane – you'll find the approach that works for your style, the outlet you're writing for, and the individual movie you're reviewing. Sure there are some general rules of thumb – don't lead your review of a Holocaust documentary with a Nazi joke – but common sense will guide you.

THE CONCLUSION

I've covered how to get started with a review; here's how to wrap it all up.

The last paragraph of a review is where you want to wrap up your thoughts about a movie, leaving the reader with a concise and memorable set of thoughts about the film. If they take away one thing about the film, here's where you want to say it.

Here's where all the criticism that comes before should come to bear upon your final word and rating of a film. It's also where the intangibles come into play. How often did you check your watch? When the end came around, did you want to see more or were you ready to leave? What was the vibe in the audience? If it's a kids' film, did they seem engaged in the movie, or were they wandering around the theater? I don't often use audience response as a metric, but if you're reviewing a film that's not exactly in your ideal genre, your conclusion can add a minor caveat or small support for your comments.

Let's look at some examples: Does James Cameron's masterful direction of *Titanic* overcome its rather poor script? Books could be written about the

cornball dialogue and contrived scenes in the movie, but Cameron works through these limitations so well that you almost forget they're there. *Titanic* has serious faults and delirious highs: Does one side overcome the other? It's up to you to connect the dots and make a complete picture of the movie that transcends the minutiae of what's good and what's bad. How does the movie make you *feel*? There's no science in this. It comes from the gut.

Let's look at a few solid conclusions

Note how Sean O'Connell comes full circle in this conclusion to *Troy* (2004), bringing events on screen back to the audience:

In place of gods and goddesses, *Troy* plugs in the Hollywood equivalent – a golden-haired and Gold's Gym-defined Pitt. Looking very much like the lost Hanson brother, *Troy*'s leading man may be the film's weakest link. Labeled the greatest warrior of his age, Achilles shoulders an arrogance that borders on indifference. In a feeble attempt to create a traditional anti-hero, Pitt casually disrespects authority and wears his "death wish" mentality like a badge of honor. As *Troy* grows in stature and intrigue, Achilles gradually withdraws. The warrior couldn't look more disinterested, and as a result, the audience eventually begins to feel the same way.

Here's a good one that brings the movie together and puts a personal spin on the review:

With *Super Size Me*, Spurlock puts a very human face on questions that concern the nation as a whole. That this face happens to be his own only makes the film more entertaining. I haven't touched a Big Mac since.

I didn't really have anything good or bad to wrap up my review of *American Wedding* (2003) with, so I threw the review into an entirely different direction in the end. Got nothing better to say? Why not jump into another pool?

Finally, let's all speculate what has become of the no-shows at the wedding, including Mena Suvari, Tara Reid, Shannon Elizabeth, Natasha Lyonne, and Chris Klein. Are these kids' stars too big to appear in this film? With movies like *The*

Musketeer, *Van Wilder*, and *Rollerball* among them, all of these actors could use a hit, badly. *American Wedding* may not be a great comedy, but hey, it ain't no *Gigli*.

tone and voice

Tone and *voice* are essentially interchangeable terms, both referring to the general approach you take to writing. You can have an irreverent tone, a serious tone, a jokey tone, or just about anything else tonally. You can organize a career around a certain tone: Chuck Schwartz is known as the “cranky critic,” for example. The idea is to find a voice that works for you, and stick with it throughout your review and from one review to the next. The key to tone in a movie review is *consistency*.

This means you shouldn't start off a review with a fawning, sycophantic voice, then suddenly slam the movie in the end with a low rating and a negative conclusion. Too often critics will rave about points in a movie that ultimately add up to very minor plusses. In the end, they're forced to take back those positive statements and qualify them with the serious negatives about the film. The ultimate effect is very disorienting and reads badly.

You also want to be stylistically consistent from one review to another. Obviously you don't want every review to read identically, but you do want them to feel like they were all written by the same person. You'll have to switch focuses constantly, as I discussed in Chapter 4 in the section on Art vs. Entertainment, but you don't want to swing so wildly that one looks like it's not even from your body of work. Even if you're getting intellectual in a review, try to keep your general stylistic approach consistent.

Tone should also be appropriate for your audience. Even if your reviews are targeted at an adult audience, if you're reviewing G-rated fare, your review shouldn't be littered with profanity. A good rule of thumb is that your tone and language should be on par with the MPAA rating: Feel free to pull out all the stops for NC-17 stuff, but tone it down for the PGs and Gs.

the little things

The experience you gain over the course of writing hundreds of reviews will teach you more than this book can, but here's a collection of general nuggets of writing advice that will hopefully get you ahead of the game.

- **Write the way you talk.** Too many critics revert to stuffy, high school, English-class writing when it comes time to put pen to paper. This is the

worst mistake you can make. Use contractions, slang, and pop culture references. Write as if you're talking about the movie to your best friend, not a professor. He isn't reading your reviews, I promise. Even though you typically don't know the reader personally, you want to make him feel like you do. It builds rapport with the audience and keeps them coming back for more.

- **Go easy on the thesaurus.** A lovely turn of the phrase is appreciated, but don't go overboard with flowery language. The goal is to be conversational, not to impress your reader with your grasp of obscure words, especially when you aren't actually saying anything. Trust me: This will turn off more people than it dazzles. For example, don't write “Nicholson imbues his recital with the astuteness of a proficient actor who's countenance informs years of experienced acumen” when really you're just trying to say the acting is good. Better yet, tell us *why* it's good.
- **Avoid jargon.** Try not to use too many industry words like *mise en scene* unless you absolutely have to. Your reader shouldn't need a dictionary to understand your review.
- **Don't write too much about “me.”** This is probably the biggest mistake that amateur critics make: Don't fill your review with comments that begin with “I thought” and “I felt.” People are reading your review not to see what you think, but to see what you think *they'll* think. It's a subtle distinction and it doesn't demand you change much in your writing, except you need to refocus the subject of the review on “you” instead of “I.” In other words: “You'll be bored after 10 minutes” is far preferable to “I was bored after 10 minutes.” This isn't an engraved-in-stone rule, but try to keep it in mind; it greatly improves readability and your audience will identify better with the writing. In simplest terms, cut out the word “I” from your review and it will be far stronger.
- **Don't forget the supporting data.** At filmcritic.com, we include special areas for director, writer, producer, and cast list. We also add the MPAA rating, the website for the movie, and, of course, a star rating. Some reviewers add the running time of the film, more details about the MPAA rating (profanity, violence, nudity), the release date, and so on. Pick what you want to include, and standardize it every time.

- **Be funny.** The bulk of film criticism just doesn't work for the ultra-serious. Make jokes. Have fun. It's a movie, for God's sake.
- **No spoilers!** Do not spoil the plot of the movie by revealing more than the most basic of plot points. Ever!
- **Less is more.** Brevity is the soul of wit, as Shakespeare famously said. And he was right: The longer your review, the less likely people are to read it to the end. I've found that 600 words is just about perfect, but you'll find that the more movies you review, the longer your typical review will get, as you have more background in the field upon which to draw.
- **Read other people's reviews.** Find critics you like and read their work religiously. The more you read, the more you'll write like they do, and the more you'll like your own writing.
- **Ask for feedback.** Get others to comment on your early reviews and break bad habits before they set in.
- **Write every day.** Or as much as you can, really.
- **Be honest.** My number one rule. I'll keep hammering on this throughout the book.

STRUCTURING THE REVIEW

Now I'll give you some complete sample reviews of various types and formats. I'll start with a few simple ones that provide the components of a review in the expected order, then gradually delve into more complex structures in which the components become blended. Your first reviews should attempt to mimic these early examples. I have tried to use examples from recent films, as the movies are more likely to be fresh in your mind.

Sample #1: Dawn of the Dead (2004), ★★ ★1/2, by Annette Cardwell

Here's a very well-written review that is nonetheless straightforward in structure. In this review, Annette Cardwell starts with a fun intro sentence, then discusses the original movie and its updating. A quick three-paragraph plot summary follows (watch for the interesting language she uses and the shout-out to *The Breakfast Club*). The remainder of the review comments

on the action, the acting, and the photography – while staying within the confines of what we expect from horror movies. Her conclusion appeals to both genre fans and casual moviegoers alike. Annette gave the film 3.5 stars on our five-star scale.

When there's no room in Hell, the dead walk to the mall. That was the message of horror master George Romero's 1978 anti-consumerism flick *Dawn of the Dead*. This 2004 remake by first-time director Zack Snyder takes away a lot of the social message, and fills it instead with plenty of head-blasting zombie-killing mayhem and a surprisingly unpredictable storyline that – while far from perfect – is a lot of fun to watch.

The plot loosely follows the Romero original. This time around, the star of the survivors' crew is Ana (Sarah Polley), a nurse who wakes up from a romantic night with her boyfriend to a nightmarish world gone undead. Her neighbor's cute kid has turned into a flesh-eater, and has taken a big bite out of her sweetheart, turning him into one of her vicious kind. And, all over her idyllic suburban Wisconsin town, the dead are walking again; they're hungry, and they can run like the dickens.

Ana stumbles across some other "living": a cop (Ving Rhames), a recovering bad boy (Mekhi Phifer), his pregnant gal pal (can you see where this is headed?), and a level-headed everyman (Jack Weber). They make for the safety of a well-stocked shopping mall, holing up with three security guards and hoping to be rescued by the military. Not a bad way to spend a zombie crisis! Much like the original, Snyder's version shows our castaways indulging in the consumerist joys of the shopping mall and the company of each other – kind of like an apocalyptic *Breakfast Club*.

After more survivors make their way to the mall, it soon becomes clear to nurse Ana how the zombie disease spreads: by bite; and the only cure is a shotgun blast to the head or via a little taste of fire. So what do they do now? Wallow in their mall bounty until they're starved out? Or find a way to escape? And to where?

The new *Dawn* isn't short on fast-paced, extremely gory

action, especially in the several awe-inspiring scenes of zombie masses overrunning city, state, country, and possibly even world. But there are also an excellent handful of comic touches thrown in, helping to keep the movie from droning downward into cliché. For example, there's the rooftop conversation using dry-erase boards between Rhames and a gun-store owner islanded across a mall parking lot, followed by that same gun-store guy's sniper-style shooting game, picking off zombie celebrity look-alikes for points. In total, this update has all the brutality of such recent undead favorites as *28 Days Later*, but still maintains the humor that Romero worked into his *Dead* trilogy. Romero fans shouldn't be too let down by that mix.

The talented cast, which includes such proven performers as Polley (*The Sweet Hereafter*, *Go*) and Rhames (*Pulp Fiction*, *Out of Sight*), are only icing on the cake. Let's face it; zombie flicks don't pose a serious acting challenge for some of these folks. But in the end, they help build the suspense and sustain the humorous elements. Much of *Dawn* wouldn't have worked well without their efforts.

And finally, Snyder keeps the whole thing visually fresh with a range of shooting, from slick, commercial-like filming to *cinema vérité*-style grainy DV. He even ventures to expand the movie into its closing credits (rather nastily, I might add), which further keeps this film from ever being dull.

The only warning I offer is that this is one gruesome blood-fest. Snyder establishes very early on, prior to the opening credits (set tidily to the musical stylings of Johnny Cash), that he's not afraid to let the blood packs splatter. But once you get used to the carnage, you may just find yourself on a rather terrifying yet thrilling little ride. And if you're already a die-hard zombie movie fan, you'll leave your memories of the Romero version behind, just to indulge in the delights of Snyder's wild, new, imaginary interpretation.

Sample #2: The Day After Tomorrow (2004), ★★, by Sean O'Connell
In this review, Sean O'Connell references another then-current release (*Shrek 2*), and pokes fun at a "serious" film for being unintentionally ridiculous. Note his reference of an obscure TV show (*Riptide*) for comic

effect, and he pokes fun at his own inability to comprehend the movie's plot. Use of quotes from the movie adds a unique touch to the review, and note the final paragraph, which earned us hate mail from a high school teacher, who sent a photo of the girls on his academic decathlon squad. Structurally, this review is a little more nebulous than the *Dawn of the Dead* review, but the components are still in the traditional order, by and large.

Move over, *Shrek 2*. DreamWorks' ode to ogres in love produced its fair share of guffaws, but it can't hold a candle to Roland Emmerich's latest world-in-peril thriller *The Day After Tomorrow*, clearly the funniest film you'll see this year.

Laughs may be unintentional, but they come at a fast and furious clip. A news chopper flies alongside multiple tornadoes marauding Los Angeles but remains airborne and unscathed. Survivors holed up inside of New York's public library are advised to "ride out" a pending ice age, which I thought typically lasted thousands of years. A Rhode Island-sized block of ice breaks off its glacial base, and the crack just happens to run through the middle of climatologist Jack Hall's (Dennis Quaid) Antarctic camp. And former *Riptide* star Perry King plays the President of the United States! C'mon people, that's funny.

These disastrous scenarios come courtesy of some abrupt climate shifts that Hall shouts about in his best Chicken Little voice. Global warming, it seems, is melting the Earth's ice caps, which in turn are affecting the temperatures of ocean currents that create our warmer climate regions. Resulting storms that resemble hurricanes are sitting squarely over the planet's northern hemispheres. Hall states that a series of recent climate shifts mirror prehistoric patterns that signaled the start of an earlier ice age, and he predicts that a similar freezing will occur in the next 7 to 10 days.

It didn't make much sense to me as I watched it, and it makes less sense as I type it out. But who cares, right? So long as major cities get some massive face lifts, summer movie junkies should be mighty pleased. Emmerich delivers plenty of gawk-worthy popcorn goodies in his Weather Channel upgrade. Snow falls in New Delhi. Hail the size of basketballs bombards

Tokyo. And in Manhattan the sewers back up, causing a debilitating stench ... so nothing new there.

Tomorrow should be a lot more amusing that it actually turns out to be. The already-slow-moving production pauses frequently for philosophical ramblings on our abuse of the environment. Emmerich stacks the odds against his characters in such a clumsy fashion that laughs build instead of tension. It's hard to get all worked up over rain, sleet, and snow. Doesn't the post office deal with this on a regular basis?

Sensing a potential dissatisfaction in his CGI situations, Emmerich oversteps the boundaries of credibility and makes potentially threatening scenarios seem silly. A thrilling race to retrieve penicillin from an ocean liner grows ridiculous when *Tomorrow* tosses escaped wolves into the mix. The "outrunning the ice" sequence defies all forms of logic, especially when you notice that certain characters aren't even wearing gloves in what's supposed to be subzero weather.

When it comes to developing credible human relationships, Emmerich as screenwriter proves he's all wet. Quaid gets credit for keeping a straight face while burping out phrases like "super cool air from the upper troposphere." His typically frigid performance, however, ices over any chemistry felt between he and his alienated wife (Sela Ward) and stranded son Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal).

Oceans rise and temperatures drop. Impressive set pieces are frozen over or totally submerged. In between each death-defying sequence, Sam puts the moves on Laura (Emmy Rossum), the hot chick on his academic decathlon team. Wait one second. I'm willing to believe an ocean liner floating down Fifth Avenue. But a gorgeous brunette like Laura participating on the academic decathlon squad? My imagination can only stretch so far.

Sample #3: The Terminal (2004), ★★★, by Christopher Null

The Terminal presents a mediocre film, which is tough to write about. Note in this review how good points are balanced with bad points, and how plot summary is occasionally blended with analysis on the fly. I discussed the lead of this review earlier in the chapter. Of special note is the paragraph

discussing theme (third from the end), and the commentary on Kumar Pallana's supporting performance, both of which would go unmentioned in a shorter review with less depth.

No modern traveler has more notoriety than Merhan Karimi Nasseri, who has been stranded in Terminal One of Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport since 1988. Nasseri was expelled from Iran in 1977 and spent 10 years trying to gain political asylum in Europe. That all came to an end when his bag was stolen in Paris, essentially stranding him at CDG. In 1993, a movie was made about him (*Lost in Transit*), starring Jean Rochefort. Nasseri's life reappears on screen this year in *The Terminal*, courtesy of Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. And shamefully, Nasseri goes unmentioned in the movie's production notes.

In *The Terminal*, Spielberg gives us Hanks as Viktor Navorski, a visitor from the fictitious country of Krakhozia in Eastern Europe. Hanks, made up to be pasty and lumpy, puts on a mush-mouthed accent reminiscent of Yakov Smirnoff, and finds himself landing at New York's JFK on a mission we won't discover until the end of the film. We know only that it involves a Planters peanut can.

Too bad for Viktor that his visa is denied once he lands in the U.S. — his country's government has been overthrown during the course of his flight. The U.S. no longer recognizes his passport, and his country no longer exists. Viktor can't come into the U.S., nor can he return home. Homeland Security agent Frank Dixon (Stanley Tucci) has no choice but to sequester him in the airport's international terminal, strictly forbidding Viktor from setting foot outside.

Viktor, who barely speaks English, quickly comes to understand his predicament, and soon enough he's taken up residence in part of the terminal under construction. He learns to read and subsist on quarters refunded from the Smarte Carte machine. He becomes friends with the local shopkeepers and airport staff, and he falls for a sexy but scattered flight attendant (Catherine Zeta-Jones) who happens through.

Months pass. Will Viktor ever get out of the terminal? Dixon, who's up for a big promotion, wants him out of the airport

by any means necessary, eventually goading him into trying to escape so he'll get arrested. In one of the more interesting character spins in the film, we learn that figuratively, Dixon is as much a prisoner of the terminal as Viktor. Their sparring leads to some of the movie's more memorable moments.

It's strange and unfortunate then that those memorable bits are so few and far between. Spielberg's ballyhooed terminal set, built from scratch and shiny as hell, is nothing more than a giant vehicle for product placement for some 35 real-life stores. (I was initially shocked to see a La Perla lingerie outlet in the terminal, but it turns out there really is one in Munich International. Amazing. But why couldn't they get the real CNN to appear on the airport TVs instead of the phony "GHN" network?)

Consumerism aside, the main problem is the coldness of Viktor's story. We don't feel *for* him, we simply pity him like someone with a severe speech impediment. Viktor's not really a hero. He's not fighting for anything aside from the contents of that peanut can (which turns into a thin subplot at best), and his romance with Zeta-Jones borders on the absurd. He's just going with the flow, doing what he's told. The result is an extremely hollow movie that goes on for far too long (two hours, feels like three) and chases about three too many, go-nowhere subplots. Blame it on a lackluster script if you will (Jeff Nathanson wrote *Catch Me If You Can* but also penned *Speed 2*); this story would have worked better as a broad comedy instead of a mopey think piece mixed with a romance.

Thankfully, flashes of humor in the film flirt with brilliance. Hanks delivers a few good belly laughs, but it's Kumar Pallana (*The Royal Tenenbaums*) who steals the show as a paranoid Indian baggage handler. He's both rude and hysterical in every scene. Pallana needs his own sitcom, stat.

Buried in *The Terminal* you'll find a theme or two. One is rather clever, about how The New America is obsessed with keeping foreigners out of the country while in reality they're running the infrastructure at our airports. The second is a little less successful, about how you can feel alienation and loneliness despite being surrounded by throngs of humanity. Unfortunately, there are probably no two people alive who have

less business exploring a story about alienation than Hanks and Spielberg, who thrive on acceptance by people – and get it at every turn.

The film is very well made, and from Spielberg we'd expect nothing less. It unfortunately comes with all of his baggage and nothing groundbreaking to speak of. When we enter the terminal for the first time, a voice-over may as well boom out, "*Look at the masterful set I built!*" All of Spielberg's other hallmarks are in place too, right down to the intrusive John Williams score. After two outstanding flicks (*Catch Me* and *Minority Report*), I suppose he deserves a meatball.

Ultimately, two hours in *The Terminal* closely resembles two hours in a real airport terminal. It's also not unlike the experience of talking to a foreigner who barely speaks English: Strangely intriguing, but kind of sad and deeply frustrating.

Sample #4: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), ★★★★★, by Sean O'Connell

Sean O'Connell takes a more blended approach in this review, alternating regularly between synopsis and analysis throughout, painting a more abstract picture of the film. Interestingly, he doesn't even introduce the main characters until the fifth paragraph. This film earned the site's highest rating, so watch for how the review cues you to that consistently with positive language.

Jim Carrey fans who roll in the aisle and clutch their sides every time the lanky megawatt talks out of his rear will despise the first 30 minutes of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. They shouldn't be able to form an opinion on the remainder of the film because most of them will have walked out by then.

Carrey traditionally makes silly comedies for his loyal supporters and risky pictures for his critics. His career path to date has alternated every bombastic *Bruce Almighty* with a tragic *The Truman Show*, and whatever Carrey camp you subscribe to will help you determine whether or not *Sunshine* is worth your time.

An opinion on screenwriter Charlie Kaufman also helps. Kaufman's complicated credits include head-scratchingly gifted gems like *Being John Malkovich* and the flawed yet intriguing

Adaptation. His latest is another trademark odyssey into the brain that makes an extended stop at the human heart, something we don't expect from this clinical and cynical scribe.

When couples split, they tend to focus on the negatives in their failing relationships. Typically a string of bad experiences led them to the break-up point, so those unpleasant memories remain fresh in the mind. Lacuna Inc. helps ease that pesky heartache. The Manhattan-based company specializes in a medical procedure that can erase specific memories from someone's brain. Miss your dead dog? Can't stand the thought of your ex-lover? Have any trace of those memories wiped clean.

He doesn't know it yet, but introverted Joel (Carrey) has been erased from the mind of his impulsive girlfriend, Clementine (Kate Winslet). The couple has been on the rocks as of late, and Clem's tired of dealing with Joel's "boring" ways. She just didn't let Joel in on her decision – he has to find out through mutual friends. Shocked by the notion, Joel reluctantly visits Lacuna head Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (a very vanilla yet God-like Tom Wilkinson) and signs himself up for the same operation.

After laying its rocky groundwork, *Sunshine* sets up shop in Joel's house-of-mirrors mind as two preoccupied lab technicians (Mark Ruffalo and Elijah Wood) erase his memories of Clementine. The operation simultaneously releases *Sunshine* from the confines of reality, encouraging Kaufman and director Michel Gondry (who previously worked with Kaufman on *Adaptation* and *Human Nature*) to be as creative as they wish without the burden of having to make excuses for wandering too far from the straight path. Kaufman cooks up a fascinating premise of mending broken hearts, but Gondry deserves extra credit for conjuring the right images to match the story's wickedly clever asides.

A logical plot progression adds an intriguing twist. The Lacuna techies work backwards on Joel, starting with his break-up and careening towards the day he first met Clem. Of course, Joel's memories of his lost love improve with each revelation, though we're never sure whether these are accurate interpretations of their early relationship or affectionate recreations Joel keeps in his head. Either way, the comatose Joel

changes his mind (literally) mid-session and wants to hold on to his fondest Clementine memories – which means he has to somehow outrun the scientific process. Here Kaufman is given the opportunity to address fate, explaining that Joel's efforts are unnecessary, for he and Clem are destined to meet again. But he chooses not to make things that simple, leaving it up to his audience to noodle through these concepts on our own.

The highest compliment I can pay *Sunshine* is that it makes complete sense from start to finish – high praise indeed for an idea this convoluted. We patiently wait for Kaufman's complex combination of raw emotions and forensic science to collapse in on itself, yet it never does. Kaufman's script and Gondry's cast maintain an amazing sense of continuity, even as the brilliant story dips and slides into surrealistic mental realms. Ultimately though, it's Carrey and Winslet's spot-on tender performances that help solidify Joel and Clementine's bond, even as we realize that despite their penchant for meeting up, they have little hope of ever staying together.

Sample #5: Requiem for a Dream (2000), ★1/2, by Jeremiah Kipp

Finally, here's the text of Jeremiah Kipp's controversial 1.5-star review of *Requiem for a Dream*. Note how he doesn't offer a block of text about the plot anywhere; it's dribbled out piecemeal in paragraphs 2, 5, 6, 7, and 9. It doesn't even follow the narrative chronologically, and yet he manages to paint a picture of the film that not only provides a vivid picture of the plot, it makes a very strong case for why he didn't like the film. Whether you agree or not with Jeremiah's review, it's easy to see the picture he paints of the film through the combination of a plot synopsis with thoughtful analysis. The reference to Pasolini may be a bit much for amateur critics, but it's an excellent way of recalling classic cinema in a modern context.

Imagine *Trainspotting* without any trace of humor and you're on the right track. Picture Pasolini's *Salò: 120 Days of Sodom* shot by some MTV music video kid interested in the novelty of his new camera. Darren Aronofsky (*Pi*) stacks one degrading sight atop another without implicating the viewer, nor providing any framework or reference for his visual rape of his audience – all smoke and mirrors disguising a great, vapid emptiness.

For starters, I've never seen Coney Island junkies who look as pretty as Harry (Jared Leto) and Tyrone (Marlon Wayans), who bear a passing resemblance to the kids from Calvin Klein ads. They're drug dealers who have high aspirations, saving their earnings for a better tomorrow. Placing all their cash in a locker, they sit under the boardwalk smoking up and dreaming their grandiose dreams. Too bad they get high too often off their own supply. The good times can't last forever.

The drug use scenes are done in vivid smash cuts showing dilating pupils, squeezing needles, the sizzle of white powder cooked in a spoon. We never see these kids shoot up – rather, we see abstract images. Every time this technique appears, it's too flashy and aware of its own experimental filmmaking approach, a purely stylistic flourish.

Kronos Quartet wrote the driving, thumping, angry, brutal violin score which drums like a hammer and chain beating you into submission. Harry, Tyrone, and their ambitious if drug-addled friend Marion (a very good Jennifer Connelly), who could be a great designer were it not for her plunge into addiction, eventually become slaves to their own destructive destinies. They run out of money, and in the second half of the movie they move through a bleak winter, suffering the eternal torments of the damned.

Each situation is set up so neatly, we're certain where the path will lead. Harry sports a nasty welt on his arm which doesn't look so good. Tyrone discovers that maybe that trip to Florida to track down some fresh supply was a bad idea – since them southern boys don't like colored folk. Marion eventually telephones a sadistic pimp (Keith David) and sells her body for drugs.

The movie's first scene involves Harry stealing his mom's television set. She can always go right down the block in half an hour and buy it back. That's their adorable dog and pony show, and poor Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn) is too nice, too soft around the edges, so apathetic she won't do anything about it. Her husband is dead, and Harry is all she's got left.

Burstyn is so good, so unglamorous, and so believable as a Brighton Beach Jewish mama, that she shines through Aronofsky's bag of tricks and delivers a strong, sad, comic

performance. At first, Sara seems to share the addiction of the film's other characters, endlessly watching her television, but when she gets a surprise phone call asking her to appear on a TV show she realizes she's too overweight to fit into the red dress her husband once admired her in. She goes on a diet.

Unfortunately for the audience, midway through we realize that Sara's in trouble. She's gone to a quack doctor for some diet pills, which turn out to be speed. She's gnashing her teeth in no time, and the worst is yet to come.

Sara's refrigerator starts roaring like a lion as the images become fuzzy and, well, straight out of Terry Gilliam's superior *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In short order, Sara wears the same junkie shoes as her younger co-stars. While it's painful to watch a harmless old woman descend into the circle of hell, she could easily have escaped it by going to *another* doctor for a second opinion.

Some critics are sure to fawn over *Requiem*. It goes further than most films into uncomfortable territory, and the spinning visuals are technically accomplished. I'm sure Aronofsky's courage will be extolled – yes, it's so bold to show human misery without sympathy or understanding.

I'm not against violence or torture onscreen. The best film to compare *Requiem* to is Pasolini's *Salo*. Wisely, Pasolini used restraint with his camera and simply filmed people being sexually abused and beaten without showy fanfare. *Salo* creates a hollow, disturbing feeling of helplessness.

Ultimately, Aronofsky lacks that crucial insight when showing the nature of horror. His gaze feels inexperienced. Perhaps young filmmakers should not attempt to tackle the bleak world before they have had a chance to go through it themselves. (*Salo* was Pasolini's final film; Mike Leigh's bleak *Naked* was made when he was middle-aged.)

Once we get past the notion that addiction is a horrible thing (which I don't believe is news to anyone who will watch *Requiem for a Dream*), the question remains: What purpose does this film serve? Let me know if you figure it out.