

Movie Review Assignment US Colonial History

Provide a one-page review of one the movies or documentaries listed below. Your review should contain a plot synopsis including character and scene descriptions; assume that the reader is not very familiar with the film. An academic approach, ideally a historical approach, is required. What did you learn from the movie that you did not already know? What parts of the film struck you as historically accurate and what parts fictional to enhance the story plot? How does your own history and perspective affect how you perceive the film? Must be typed. **I can approve unlisted historical films on a case-by-case basis.**

Possible Films (note some of the films carry an “R” rating)

Movie Available at the Library (Close-captioned)

Pre-Columbian

Mayans & Aztecs – Documentary

Ancient Lands of the Americas – Documentary

1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992) – Christopher Columbus

Apocalypto (2006) – Mayan Civilization

Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972) – Conquistadores

The Royal Hunt of the Sun (1969) – the Inca Kingdom

Hiawatha (1952) – North American Indians

Guns, Germs, and Steel (2005 miniseries) – The Spanish Conquest

The Other Conquest (2000) – Aftermath of Spanish Conquest

17th Century

The New World (2005) – Pocahontas & Jamestown

The Crucible (1996) – Salem witch trials; Puritans

The Scarlet Letter (1995) – Puritan New England

The Pathfinder (1996) – Frontiersmen

Penn of Pennsylvania (1941) – William Penn

Mayflower: The Pilgrims' Adventure (1979) – Life on the Mayflower

Keeping the Promise (1997) – Frontier Life

Black in Latin America with Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2012) – Documentary Colonial Spanish America

Citizen Locke (1994) – philosophy of American Revolution (Code 000325)

18th Century

Roots (1977 miniseries) – Middle Passage & Colonial Slavery

Last of the Mohicans (1992) – French & Indian War

Reluctant Revolutionaries (1997) – Leading to the American Revolution (Code 000431)

Blows Must Decide (1997) – the Start of the American Revolution

1776 (1972) – Musical about writing the Declaration

The Patriot (2000) – Revolutionary War

Jefferson in Paris (1995) – French Revolution, Sally Hemings

John Adams (2008 miniseries) – American Revolution, Life of John Adams

Northwest Passage (1940) – Colonial Frontier

19th Century

The Buccaneer (1958) – War of 1812

The Alamo (2004) – 1836 battle of Texas Revolution

Amistad (1997) – 1839 slave ship uprising and trial

12 Years a Slave (2013) – Antebellum Slavery

The Gold Rush (documentary) 1849 California Gold Rush

Santa Fe Trail (1940) – Lead---up to the Civil War

Gods & Generals (2003) – rise and fall of Stonewall Jackson

Lincoln – the Civil War & Slavery

Gettysburg (1993) – decisive battle of the Civil War

Gangs of New York (2002) – Civil War era cities and immigrants

Glory (1989) – Civil War; African-American regiment 54th Massachusetts

Gone with the Wind (1939) – Antebellum and Civil War South

Guidelines for History Movie Review

Developed from:

Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 5th Edition, Bedford St. Martins.

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/bookrevpre.html>

<http://www.angelfire.com/journal2/englishresource/filmreview.html>

Film reviews are an important type of historical assignment because film and other visual texts have become increasingly important historical sources. Film reviews demonstrate your ability to “read” a film critically and analytically. Preparation for doing a film review will make watching a film an active learning exercise. Students sometimes feel unqualified to complete such an assignment; after all, the director of a film is a professional. However, even if you cannot watch a film from the same level of experience and knowledge as the director, you *can* write an effect review if you understand what the assignment requires. If you use film as a historical source, you will need to approach or “read” a film with the same critical and analytical skills that you would apply to a written text.

Just as there are different kinds of written texts, so too are there different kinds of films. The most common types of film historians use are documentaries and feature films. Identifying which type of film you are dealing with is the essential first step in writing a film review.

Documentaries:

Documentaries are films that use primary sources (like photographs, paintings and documents) and commentaries on those sources by various authorities (such as historians, biographers and eyewitnesses) to construct a narrative of a historical figure or event. For this reason, documentaries should be considered secondary sources.

Documentaries about events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are able to make use of a unique primary source: footage. Footage is a direct film or videotape recording of an event.

Footage can be produced by professionals, such as television news videographers, or by amateurs, like Abraham Zapruder’s 8mm film of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Footage is a primary source since it records events as they happen.

A documentary filmmaker’s use of primary sources such as footage must be viewed critically. Filmmakers, like writers, choose what to record. Usually, however, they are filming with a particular purpose, and sometimes with a particular audience in mind. Moreover, footage that makes it way to a news broadcast has been cut and edited. In evaluating a documentary that uses footage, it is useful to know why and by whom the original footage was shot and whether and for what purposes it has been edited.

Feature Films

Feature films are films designed primarily as entertainment. They sometimes feature famous actors and always aim at box-office success. Historical rigor is not usually their primary concern, so we should not be surprised to find that such films vary dramatically in the accuracy with which they depict the period, events, and historical figures they ostensibly portray. At one end of the spectrum are films like *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which is based on a true story about a peasant who abandoned his family and the imposter who “returned” and successfully took his place. The director, Daniel Vigne, consulted historical documents, attempted faithfully to recreate the material culture of the period, and make extensive use of the expertise of historian

Natalie Zemon Davis as a consultant. Consequently, this film might be considered a secondary source for our understanding of French peasant life in seventeenth-century France. In contrast, in his 1916 film *Joan the Woman*, legendary director Cecil B. DeMille took serious liberties with the historical accounts of Joan of Arc, inventing a love interest for her and linking her story with the English efforts against the Germans in France during World War One. DeMille's film has virtually no value as a secondary source for the history of Joan of Arc, but it is a valuable primary source for understanding American attitudes towards the First World War and the role of filmmakers in encouraging the United States to join the conflict. This points to an important consideration: all feature films can be viewed as a primary source for the cultural and social history of the period in which they were made. This is not conditional on whether the film's depiction of historical events are correct or not.

General Guidelines for Writing about Film:

- 1.) **Pay close attention to your assignment.** Be sure you have a clear understanding of your purpose and audience. Are you, for example writing a complete movie review or a more formal analysis of only certain elements. Does your assignment ask you to address any specific questions? Is your intended audience a group of general viewers, perhaps other students, or are you writing for a particular audience, such as parents who might wish to know if this film is appropriate for young children or middle-aged newspaper readers? Have a good understanding of the goals for this essay will help you to focus your attention on the parts of the film relevant to your assignment.
- 2.) **Prepare in advance of your first screening.** If you are writing a movie review or formal analysis, you may need to include certain kinds of production information about the film. To save time and stress, obtain the information you need before you watch the film. It might be helpful, for example, to know the names of the director, the major actors, the screenwriter, the studio or film company, and the date of release. You might want to watch the "extra features" or documentaries included in many special edition DVDs before watching the film. Does the movie into a particular genre or category, such as horror, science fiction, mystery, adventure, musical, romantic comedy, or domestic drama? Some combination of genres (comedy-adventure) or a recognizable subcategory of a genre (buddy cups, teen-slasher horror flick, *film noir* mystery)? Some reviewers like to have a brief plot summary before they see the movie; other viewers want to the experience the film free of pre-conceived ideas or expectations. When in doubt, always know thyself.
- 3.) **Try to arrange multiple viewing opportunities.** It's difficult to write any kind of detailed treatment of a film you have seen only once, as most viewers need at least one screening just to take in plot and character development. If the choice of film is yours, you may find it much easier to write about one that is on DVD so that you can see it more than once as well as replay specific scenes for closer study. Multiple screenings may be necessary if you plan to quote dialogue, which must be presented accurately.
- 4.) **Take notes as you watch.** It's easier to take notes while watching a film at home than it is in a darkened movie theater or even in a classroom. As you watch, take notes on the plot or story line, the sequence of events (told chronologically, in flashback, or in some other nontraditional way?) the time and places in which the narrative occurs, the character development and other plot points that seem especially striking. Jot down your reactions to key scene lines of dialogue in the film, and make notes on parts that may be

particular assignment. As the film unfolds, takes notes on the commentary on particular values or cultural assumptions.

- 5.) **Make more notes immediately after the screening.** While the film is fresh in your mind try to answer questions for yourself. Did you like or dislike the film? Do you have a mixed reaction to the film? What were the best or worst parts? Try to have specific reasons for your opinions. Try to use your critical thinking to ascertain what is the film “about”? That is, what larger themes, values, or ideas does this film communicate to its viewers? Even movies that are offered as “purely entertainment” have a point of view to the action that is presented in their stories. Is the film positive, satiric, or cynical about it that you agree or disagree with the stances taken in the film?
- 6.) **Review your notes in light of your assignment’s purpose.** At this point you have enough ideas to draft a tentative thesis (and perhaps an essay about your particular assignment? Often movie review essays clarify two or three main points about the film. To help you select important points, try rearranging your notes into useful groups. Which idea is the most promising in order to illustrate and support your thesis?
- 7.) **Watch the film again with a more analytical eye.** During this screening perhaps with repeated viewings of particular scenes, you can focus attention on those specific aspects of the film you want to write about. Concentrate on the most powerful images that you remember from the first viewing. Why is the film titled as it is? Asking “why” as you watch the film a second time may uncover interesting questions about the film that you want to answer.
- 8.) **As you begin to draft, be aware of certain conventions particular to know about the film.** For example, most movie review essays will include a brief summary of the movie’s story. It may be clearer for people who have not seen the film to read the summary in a paragraph near the essay’s beginning, though in other essays the plot may be effectively interwoven throughout the discussion of your essay. Special note: if presenting a complete plot summary would give away the ending, the name of the villain, or other information that would ruin the experience for a potential moviegoer, you can acknowledge that you are holding back certain information. Or you can adopt the hand phrase “spoiler alert,” which professional reviewers use to warn readers to skip the next sentence or two if they wish to remain in the dark about a particular section of the movie.
Another consideration for the writer is whether to use “I” in a movie review essay. Although some famous movie reviewers consistently use “I” in their review, most do not, so ask your instructor which choice is preferable for your assignment. (In most cases, I prefer a review mostly in third person with only “first person” permissible in the conclusion.)
- 9.) **Use clear, precise language.** As you draft and revise, assume that your audience had not watched the film and consequently cannot visualize what you have seen. Make your discussions as clear as possible, using detailed and expressive language to re-create the images you are recalling. For ease of discussion, writers on film sometimes make use of a few cinematic terms to help communicate what they saw. Be careful that your essay does not become overly technical.
- 10.) **In your final draft, it’s wise to recheck the film to ensure your accuracy.** Make sure you have the characters’ names right and that any lines you have quoted are correctly transcribed. Remember that the film titles should be underlined or printed in italics, not placed within quotation.

Format of a film review

A good film review has four main parts:

1.) Credits:

First page of the review should have: title and year of the film, genre, director, screenwriter, composer, main actors.

For example look at www.rottentomatoes.com or www.imbd.com

2.) Plot: Synopsis or summary of plot

Examine Place and time of the movie (Where does the movie take place? Is the story chronological or flashback?) , background (society, country, kind of people), Genre (horror, comedy, drama).

3.) Characters: Psychical, psychological, age, national, social/personal background.

4.) Conclusion: What message is being told? What was the director's purpose or intention or theme of the film? Compare with other realities you know (your country, historical event, theme or event, or compare with another film by same director. Provide your own opinion.

Skeletal Structure of the Film Review

1. Title – catchy, can indicate if review will be positive or negative, you can play with words to make it funny or different
2. Paragraph 1 – Opening paragraph – can start to summarize film and give early suggestions about your general view of it (positive/negative)
3. Paragraph 2 – Start or continue summary of film, don't give details about the ending or else no one will go and see the film!!
4. Paragraph 3 and 4 – positive things you thought about the film, what did you like? Why? Use descriptive words, think about the story, setting, effects used, music used
5. Paragraph 5 and 6 – negative things you thought about the film, what didn't you like? Why? Comment on the same type of things that you mentioned in paragraphs 3 and 4
6. Paragraph 7 and 8 – Characterization – talk about the characters, did you like them? Did the actors play them well? What was it about their portrayal that you liked or didn't like? Other impressions of the characters, will certain audience members be able to relate to certain characters? How? Will certain audience members not like certain characters? Why not?

7. Paragraph 9 – Final comments – general comments that summarize your view of the film, you may want to say something inspiring to get the reader to want to go out and see the film or you might say something that would want them not to go and see it! After the paragraph you would give it a star rating out of 5 to indicate your rating for it.

Make sure your essay has:

Start with a good lead. You want your reader to be interested in what you have to say. Grab her in that first or "lead" paragraph in one of several ways: Start with a great quote from the movie, and explain how it reflects the movie; refer to the reputation of the actor or director and compare it to how he or she did in this movie; compare this movie to another well-known film in a few sentences or two; explain what your expectation was, and then if it was fulfilled or not. Then end that first paragraph with your opinion statement.

- Evaluated the plot, discuss important turning points in the film, important scenes which reveal character, the opening and closing scenes and the importance of subplots;
- If the movie contains actors, as most do, detail who is starring in the movie and how well you think they acted;
- Analyzed the setting and what it tells you as a viewer;
- Analyzed characters, their dialogues and other interactions;
- Give details about how well the movie was shot and directed;
- Describe the musical score or music of the movie and how it impacts the film.

Final Tips:

- Be honest and open-minded.
- Since you are sharing your ideas and impressions, be ready for negative responses. It's okay because other people have made up their mind, too.
- Be interesting, informative and creative.

Prewriting Questions for Book, Movie, or Play Reviews

The following questions are designed to help you generate and focus your ideas when writing a book, movie, or film review. You won't need to answer all of these questions for your paper, but many of the answers will help you discover information and focus your thinking.

What questions

- What are you reviewing? What is it about? What's the plot?
- What's the theme?
- What is the author's/director's purpose?
- What genre or classification does it fit?
- What is the tone? What is the point of view? What's the mood?

When and Where questions

- When was this done? Or when does the action take place?
- Where was this done? Or where does the action take place?

Who questions

- Who wrote it, directed it, or acted in it? What else have they done?
- Who are the main characters?
- Who's the intended audience?
- Who has said what about this? Why?

How questions

- How does it convey its main point, mood, or theme? How did the audience react to it?
- How well does it fulfill its purpose?

Evaluation questions

- Did I like this in general? Why?
- Did I agree with the main theme/purpose? Why or why not?
- What specifically did I like/dislike? Why?
- Did the author/actors/director do a good job? Why or why not?
- How could it be improved? Why would particular changes help?

After you have answered these questions, begin selecting and organizing the information that you'll include in your paper.

Common words and phrases used in film reviews that you might want to use in your own reviews

spectacular visual effects, excessive violence, breathtaking, evocative, mood, atmosphere, poorly, unsuccessful, detail, scenery, irresistible, perfect, moments, plot, this movie has been compared to ____ because, wonderful, hilarious, momentum, unexpected plot twists, unbelievable, phenomenal, hype, suspense, disappointing, confusion/confused, fake, imitation, genre, unoriginal, typical, thrilled, was a very moving portrayal, quality of the film, I was impressed by, credible, cliché, a mixture of, classic, captivating