

# Writing Extended Essays on Films

Miguel Antonio N. Lizada

[Miguellizada@hsu.edu.hk](mailto:Miguellizada@hsu.edu.hk)

# Prologue / Flashback

- **Film Review vs Film Analysis**

- **Similarities:** Requires knowledge of basic film elements and involves critical thinking and analysis beyond impressionistic observations.
- **Differences:** Reviews are commercial in nature while analyses are more academic and typically follow the structure of academic argumentation.

- **Film Analysis vs Literary Analysis**

- **Similarities:** Requires close reading of the work's elements and understanding of contexts. Higher-level or more complex analyses may require the use of critical theory (the "-isms")
- **Differences:** Film analyses not just confined to literary elements such as plot or character but also audio-visual elements and aspects related to production, circulation, and distribution (the industry).

# Act One: Choosing Your Journey

1. Individual Film Analysis
2. Historical Study
3. Comparative Study
4. Auteur Study

# 1. Individual Film Analysis

- Usually focused on thematic concern of the film and how the different elements contribute to the overall meaning (close reading)
- May still incorporate historical and social contexts but the main focus is the discussion of a pertinent theme of the film
- Think of the film's theme as a thesis statement about life, society, or the human condition

# Examples From the Film *Vertigo* (1958)

- Topic or Focus: The Relationship between Fear and Psychological Control
  - Analyze how *Vertigo* delves into fear – both of heights and emotional vulnerability in the character of Scottie using cinematic techniques such as the dolly zoo.
- Male Power and Female Objectification in the Characters of Gavin and Scottie
  - Analyze how *Vertigo* critiques male dominance by showing how Gavin uses Judy and how Scottie attempts to control and reshape Judy into his idealized version of Madeleine using camera angles, framing, and narrative structure among others.

## 2. Historical Study

- Positions the film and its role in reflecting or even influencing the historical events at that time
- May not just refer to historical events but also the different "Waves" and artistic movements at that time
- The focus should not just be on the film as a documentation or "mirror" of events but rather on how the film engages the issues of its milieu or context.

# Examples From the Film *Vertigo* (1958)

- Crisis of Masculinity in Post-Second World War America
  - Analyze how *Vertigo* reflects anxieties about shifting gender roles and masculinity in postwar America. With men returning from war and struggling to reintegrate into society, Scottie's psychological trauma and inability to exert control over his world could be seen as a mirror of the era's crisis of masculinity at that time.
- Cold War Paranoia and the Fear of Deception
  - Analyze how *Vertigo* captures Cold War-era fears of surveillance, deception, and identity. The discussion may include the film's themes of hidden motives, false identities, and manipulation resonate with the paranoia of espionage and double agents prevalent during the 1950s.



### 3. Comparative Analysis

- Involves the comparison and contrast of two or more films that have interesting similarities and differences in terms of:
  - their treatment of a subject matter
  - portrayal of a particular character type or trope
  - Cinematic techniques
  - (combination of the above)

# Examples From the Film *Vertigo* (1958)

- Urban Alienation and Identity Crisis: *Vertigo* (1958) vs. *Taxi Driver* (1976)
  - Analyze how both films use urban landscapes to reflect their protagonists' psychological deterioration. In *Vertigo*, San Francisco's heights and winding roads mirror Scottie's instability, while in *Taxi Driver*, New York's neon-lit streets and isolation symbolize Travis Bickle's descent into violence. The different milieus (San Francisco and New York) can also be included as well as the two auteurs behind the masterpieces (Hitchcock and Scorsese).
- The Use of Dream States to Highlight Psychological Horrors: *Vertigo* (1958) vs. *Black Swan* (2010)
  - Analyze how both films blur the line between reality and delusion through psychological breakdowns. Both Scottie and Nina (*Black Swan*) are driven by obsession and controlled by external forces that reshape their identities. Compare Hitchcock's use of color and surreal dream sequences with Darren Aronofsky's use of distorted mirrors, body horror, and performance pressure to explore psychological unraveling.

## 4. Auteur Study

- Draws on auteur theory which positions the director as a unique and major creative force with their own distinctive approach in terms of thematic treatment, aesthetic style, and even identification with certain artistic movements.
- May be paired with the comparative approach to highlight recurring techniques.
- Be extra careful and ensure that it does not turn into a feature article about the author. There must still be a central argument.

# Examples From the Film *Vertigo* (1958)

- **The Use of Space and Setting as Psychological Landscapes: *Vertigo* (1958), *Rebecca* (1940) and *North by Northwest* (1959)**
  - Focus: Investigate how Hitchcock creatively meditates on his characters' psychological states through his extensive use of physical locations. In *Vertigo*, San Francisco's steep heights and spiraling structures mirror Scottie's mental descent. Similarly, Manderley in *Rebecca* becomes a haunted, oppressive space symbolizing the protagonist's insecurity, while *North by Northwest* uses vast landscapes to heighten tension and disorientation.
- **Doppelgängers, Identity, and Duality in Hitchcock's Films: *Vertigo* (1958) *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *Psycho* (1960)**
  - Focus: Explore how Hitchcock seems fond of using themes of duality, mistaken identity, and doppelgängers. In *Vertigo*, Judy and Madeleine are two sides of the same woman, while *Strangers on a Train* plays with the idea of exchanged identities, and *Psycho* presents Norman Bates's split personality.

# Strategies when choosing the Topics for the Essay

- For the Individual or Single Film Analysis, choose films that:
  - offer further nuance to the theme or concept in focus (nuance = layers, complexities, if not contradictions)
  - utilize a cross-section of different cinematic techniques to highlight the theme
- For Historical Study, choose films that:
  - have significant stylistic innovations
  - reflect social and political themes of their time.
  - can be analyzed in relation to the context of their film movement.
  - Example: Taxi Driver (1976), dir by Martin Scorsese

# Strategies when choosing the Topics for the Essay

- For Comparative Analysis, choose films that:
  - have both commonalities and contrasts in terms of theme, time period, director, etc.
- For Auteur study choose films in the auteur's oeuvre that:
  - have style, themes, and storytelling approach that are recognizable and consistent
  - reflect the auteur's contribution to cinema

# Act Two: Treading the Path

# The Structure of a Film Analysis Essay

Follows the structure of a typical academic essay:

- Introduction
- Body (Actual Analysis)
- Conclusion



# Introduction

A good introduction provides the following information:

- Pertinent and relevant background information on the film(s) and/or issue
- A “bridge” that links the background to the thesis statement
- The thesis statement

A hook (a creative way to open the essay) may also be written but not required

# Introduction: Background setting (Single Film)

- Production information such as the director, screenplay and story writer, dates released (in domestic and international markets)
- Awards won (selected)
- Any pertinent information such as
  - Being the first film to do or feature something
  - Controversial issues highlighted
  - Social or political impact, including censorship
- Include a brief synopsis (not summary!) of the film!

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is recognized in the canon of world cinema as a psychological thriller par excellence. During its initial release in 1958, *Vertigo* initially received mixed reviews and was largely ignored at the Academy Awards. It was later reappraised, eventually dethroning *Citizen Kane* in the 2012 Sight & Sound critics' poll as the greatest film of all time. Set against the backdrop of a dreamlike San Francisco, *Vertigo* follows retired detective Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), who suffers from acrophobia and is hired to follow the enigmatic Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak). The film gained prominence for its now-famous use of the "vertigo effect" (a dolly zoom technique used to create a dizzying sense of depth) to highlight the protagonists' psychological dilemma. The film touches on many things, some of which were contentious but relevant issues at that time. These included themes of obsession, male control over women, and psychological manipulation.

## Introduction: Background setting (Historical Study)

- Similar to the single or individual study but the highlight is on the historical context or place in the cinematic wave or movement

- (Add to the previous sample)
- Produced a decade after the end of the Second World War, *Vertigo* creatively meditates on the crisis of masculinity in America in the character of the emasculated and seemingly troubled Scottie, a man whose authority, physical prowess, and psychological stability are repeatedly undermined by both the characters and the film itself.

# Introduction: Background setting (Comparative Study)

- Provide the relevant information but also identify similarities or connections such as:
  - Production (including director)
  - Country or region of origin
  - Period of release
  - Story elements or characterization
  - Issues highlighted
  - Combination of the above

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) are two renowned masterpieces in World Cinema that explore the psychological deterioration of their protagonists through the extensive use of alienating urban landscapes. Despite being released nearly two decades apart, both films depict protagonists who struggle with fractured identities and illusions of control. Moreover, in such films the city operates as an extension of their characters' unraveling minds. *Vertigo*, set in the fog-laden, vertiginous streets of San Francisco, mirrors Scottie Ferguson's (James Stewart) psychological instability, while *Taxi Driver* uses the neon-lit, crime-ridden streets of 1970s New York to reflect Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) increasing paranoia and violent impulses. Finally, both films engage with broader social anxieties of their respective periods – *Vertigo* with the postwar crisis of masculinity and *Taxi Driver* with the post-Vietnam disillusionment and urban decay.

## Introduction: Background setting (Auteur Approach)

- May be biographical in approach but highlighting the major achievements and contributions of the auteur as well as the focus of the topic in question



Regarded as an auteur that masterfully crafts in inner world of people in psychological turmoil, Alfred Hitchcock is known for most distinctive auteur signatures is his use of space as both setting and spatial articulation of his characters' psychological states. This is especially apparent in *Vertigo* (1958), *Rebecca* (1940), and *North by Northwest* (1959), where geography and architecture become metaphors for inner turmoil. In *Vertigo*, the towering heights and winding streets of San Francisco parallel Scottie Ferguson's (James Stewart) spiraling descent into obsession and madness. *Rebecca* uses the imposing, gothic estate of Manderley to externalize the unnamed protagonist's (Joan Fontaine) feelings of insecurity and entrapment under the shadow of her husband's deceased wife. Meanwhile, *North by Northwest* exploits the vast, open landscapes of America to emphasize Roger Thornhill's (Cary Grant) disorientation as he is pursued across the country, with no stable identity or refuge.

# Introduction: "Bridge"

- The "bridge" marks the transition between the background and the thesis statement by setting the focus of the essay.
- It identifies something that stands out from the background and should not come out of nowhere.
- It must also state the relevance of the topic. Why is it important to explore and discuss this topic?

# The Thesis Statement

Should appear at the end of the introductory paragraph.

Should state the:

- Main argument of the essay
- Division of the subsections

- [...] Produced a decade after the end of the Second World War, *Vertigo* creatively meditates on the crisis of masculinity in America through the character of Scottie, a man whose authority, physical prowess, and psychological stability are repeatedly undermined by both the characters and the film itself. This essay will focus on how Scottie's experiences reflect the post-World War II crisis of masculinity, exploring how his insecurities and psychological collapse mirror broader societal shifts in gender roles and expectations during the era. The essay begins by first exploring how the character of Scottie exhibits the psychological distress brought about by this crisis of masculinity and then links these to the larger historical context of the time.

Body Paragraphs

# Organizing the Body Paragraphs

- May begin with a short summary of the film(s). Include only the major events and keep it to one or two paragraphs only.
- The discussion can be arranged chronologically, thematically (issue-based), or based on character studies (especially when doing comparative analysis)
- Screenscaps or photos may be used

## Body Paragraphs:

### Chronological (Scene by Scene)

1. Select scenes based on their ability to build on the thesis statement.
2. At least one scene per act with the scene of the third act being the most important because the film's resolution articulates the film's main point or "thesis statement."

# Body Paragraphs:

## Thematic / Issue-based

1. Choose issues that the film actually spends time engaging and discussing.
2. Especially helpful when doing a comparative analysis.
3. When doing a comparative analysis, it is best to not discuss the films separately. It is preferable to group them according to issues.



## Body Paragraphs: Character Analysis

- Characters may be discussed as case studies but there should still be some connections and referencing between sections to prevent them from merely being cataloguing

# Proper Argumentation

- 1.Paragraphing basics
- 2.Tense use
- 3.Combining cinematic techniques with insights
- 4.Showing not telling
- 5.Describing action in the film

# Paragraphing Basics

- As in a typical academic essay, a paragraph should ideally have the following components:
  - Topic sentence (Topic + controlling idea)
  - Supporting details
  - Concluding sentence
- One idea = one paragraph
- Use signposting devices for transition

# Tense Use

- Always use **the present tense** when describing action in the film and currently relevant theories or ideas.
- Use the past tense when describing prior events in the film and historical events.

# Combining cinematic techniques with insights

- As it is a film analysis, important insights and ideas should be paired with cinematic techniques. These may include camera shots, angles, and framing, cinematography, composition, sound.

# Showing, Not Telling

- While not necessarily a work of creative writing, film analysis essays also benefit from effective descriptive writing especially when the photos and screenshots of the film are not available.
- In this case, apply the basic principle of showing and not telling.

# Describing action in the film

- Describing action (or narrative writing) in film mainly involves two things:
  - Describing what is actually happening in the film
  - How the cinematic techniques are used
- Some useful links to describe movements in film:  
[https://www.spellzone.com/blog/boost\\_your\\_vocabulary\\_150\\_movement\\_verbs\\_to\\_elevate\\_your\\_writing.htm](https://www.spellzone.com/blog/boost_your_vocabulary_150_movement_verbs_to_elevate_your_writing.htm)
- <https://archiewahwah.wordpress.com/2019/04/16/movement-verbs-list/>

# Some Useful Verbs in Describing Camera Action

1. **Panning** - Moving the camera horizontally from left to right or vice versa.
2. **Tilting** - Moving the camera up or down vertically.
3. **Tracking** - Moving the camera to follow a subject.
4. **Dollying** - Moving the camera toward or away from the subject.
5. **Zooming** - Changing the focal length to move closer to or farther from the subject.
6. **Crane-ing** - Moving the camera up or down using a crane.
7. **Handholding** - Operating the camera without stabilizers for a raw, shaky effect.
8. **Steadicaming** - Using a stabilizing rig to achieve smooth movement.
9. **Swiveling** - Rotating the camera on its axis.
10. **Whipping** - Moving the camera rapidly from one direction to another (whip pan) .
11. **Compositing** - Combining multiple visual elements into a single frame.



# Some Useful Terms when Describing Editing Techniques

1. **Cutting** - Transitioning from one shot to another.
2. **Jump-cutting** - Making abrupt cuts to create a jarring effect.
3. **Dissolving** - Fading one shot into another.
4. **Fading** - Gradually transitioning to or from black.
5. **Montaging** - Assembling a sequence of short clips to show passage of time.
6. **Cross-cutting** - Cutting between different scenes happening simultaneously.
7. **Superimposing** - Layering one image over another.
8. **Match-cutting** - Transitioning between shots with a visual or thematic link.
9. **Splicing** - Physically joining pieces of film (in traditional editing).
10. **Compositing** - Combining multiple visual elements into a single frame.

Hitchcock's elaborate and extensive application of the dolly effect exemplifies this trauma best. When Scottie follows "Madeleine" to the spiral staircase in the bell tower, Hitchcock employs the now-iconic dolly zoom effect, distorting the depth of field and creating an unsettling visual experience that mirrors Scottie's acrophobia. The wide-eyed shock paired with his paralysis highlights this impending encounter with his troubled past and problematic present. The camera then proceeds to stretch and contracts the staircase, generating a surreal effect, almost nightmarish effect of making the space appear to elongate infinitely beneath him. More than representing Scottie's fear of heights, the technique externalizes his growing sense of powerlessness, ultimately immersing the audience in Scottie's subjective experience and aligning them with his disorientation and vulnerability. The staircase, both physically and metaphorically, represents Scottie's inability to overcome his trauma, reinforcing his powerlessness over both his fears and the women he seeks to control.

In *Life of Pi*, the harmonious use of visual and auditory cues develops this notion of existential meditation. As Pi reclines beside Richard Parker, the camera slowly cranes upward, revealing a seamless blending of sky and sea, creating an illusion of infinity. The alternating usage of long take and wide-angle shots ultimately mirror Pi's inner surrender to the immensity of the universe. This sense of surrender is accentuated by the use of an ambient soundtrack that synergizes the soft lapping of water and Pi's measured breathing. This surreal calm, interrupted only by the gentle rise and fall of the boat, transforms the scene into a visual hymn to faith and metaphysical resilience.

# Conclusion

- A good conclusion restates the main arguments of the essay, paraphrases the main supporting details in the body paragraphs and, if possible, makes a creative but critical close.
- Unlike most of the essay, the concluding paragraph is mostly written in the past tense.

This essay **positioned** *Vertigo* as an audio-visual meditation on postwar American masculinity in crisis. Through its portrayal of Scottie's emotional unraveling, physical paralysis, and obsessive need to control the idealized image of Madeleine, the film **exposes** the fragility of male authority in a milieu. As the essay **has demonstrated**, Scottie's vertigo is not simply a fear of heights, but a metaphor for his disorientation in a society that no longer guarantees male dominance or emotional certainty. His failure to "rescue" Madeleine, his reliance on illusion, and his ultimate descent into madness reflect the broader anxieties men faced in reconciling their wartime identities with postwar domestic expectations. By aligning Scottie's personal collapse with the historical moment of cultural transition, *Vertigo* becomes a powerful study of masculinity undone – not just by love or loss, but by a world where certainty itself has grown unstable.

# Act Three: Learning from the Mentors

Giving Feedback and Suggestions for Improvement

# Overly Long Background or Summary

- A case of essay padding (to reach the word count limit) or simply lack of focus
- Lengthy background information on the film or summary
- Points for improvements
  - Be selective of the details that are helpful for the argument of the essay
  - Focus only on the major plot points or the major events for each acts.
  - Split and spread the summarizing across the essay for better application

# Unclear Thesis Statement / Superficial Insight

- Thesis statements can be too general or vague which can lead to a superficial analysis
- Point for Improvement:
  - Push the student to “dig deeper” or “move to a higher level” (whichever analogy works for you)



# Impressionistic or Film Reviewer-Type of Language

- Using adjectives like “great,” “memorable,” “funny,” or “fascinating” to describe things that are happening in the film.
- Making speculative remarks such as “It will make the audience laugh ”or “It will definitely be a memorable film for migrant families”
- Point for Improvement:
  - Impressionistic remarks are good starting points that can be pushed further into something analytical.

Original Thesis Statement or Argument	Argumentative and more analytical
<p>Scottie is a man ruled by his fear.</p>	<p>Scottie's actions, psychological deterioration, and mental breakdown reveal how his fear of heights extends beyond a physical phobia and in fact reveals a deeper psychological wound associated with emasculation.</p>
<p>The dolly effect makes the audience feel disoriented and chilly, making it more memorable for the audience</p>	<p>The use of the dolly effect in Vertigo externalizes Scottie's psychological instability, visually reinforcing his descent into obsession and helplessness and aligns this disorientation with the gaze the audience casts.</p>
<p>Madeleine is really a mysterious and deceptive woman.</p>	<p>Drawing on the trope of the femme fatale, Madeleine is carefully constructed through illusion and deception, reflecting the film's meditation on psychological manipulation and emasculation of male subjects.</p>

# Moralizing or Looking for Life lessons in the Film

- May be applicable to single film analysis or even auteur study ("Director X wants Americans to feel patriotism in his films").
- Points for Improvement:
  - Granted that some films may indeed have a more didactic message, the students may instead focus on how the "lesson" is presented as a privileged social value.

Moralistic Statement	Argumentative and more analytical
<p><i>Life of Pi</i> teaches us that you must always have faith.</p>	<p><i>Life of Pi</i> demonstrates how faith operates not only as a belief but as an ethics for survival, ultimately shaping human's capacity to endure and reshape realities.</p>
<p><i>Schindler's List</i> shows us that if you do a good deed, it will come back to you.</p>	<p><i>Schindler's List</i> challenges the notion that self-interest is a natural human instinct by illustrating how compassion and altruism are equally innate in our moral configuration as human beings.</p>
<p><i>The Truman Show</i> tells us that humans are always nosy people, and we should not be like that.</p>	<p>As a film that anticipated the rise of reality television, <i>The Truman Show</i> critiques society's obsession with spectacle and surveillance and reveals how excessive voyeurism strips one of agency in maintaining autonomy of one's identity.</p>

# Minimal to No Use of Cinematic Language

- In these situations, students may generally stay in the “literary” aspects of the analysis (plot, character analysis).
- Points for Improvement:
  - Encourage the student to go back to the scene and identify which cinematic technique can help build the scene.
  - Another helpful technique would be to consider alternatives: how would the scene have been different if it were shot from a different angle? Using a different color palette?

# Epilogue: Enter the Machine

Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Essay Writing

# Some Uses and Precautions Regarding the Use of AI

- Brainstorming for ideas
- Learning tool = explaining certain concepts and providing examples
- Generating a working bibliography
- Proofreading but not rewriting

# Reminder on the Use of AI in SBA

- Students are asked to keep a clear record of the AI generated texts they have made reference to for their teacher-assessor's checking if necessary. For example:

AI tool used:	ChatGPT
A short description of actions:	I input the prompt 'Symbolism in <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> ' on 11 July 2023.
Summary of output*:	ChatGPT provided four examples: the mockingbird; the Radley Place; the tree in the Radley yard; and the snowman. An explanation of each of these was given.
*The output from the AI tool should be saved. Your teacher might inspect the output for checking.	

Reference:

HKEAA, Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination Information on School-based Assessment (August 2023) (p.11)

[https://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/Media/Leaflets/SBA\\_booklet\\_eng.pdf](https://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/Media/Leaflets/SBA_booklet_eng.pdf)

- Please also refer to p.85-86 of *CDC-HKEAA Literature in English Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 - 6) 2023* ([https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/kla/eng-edu/Curriculum%20Document/LiE\\_CAGuide\\_2023.pdf](https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/kla/eng-edu/Curriculum%20Document/LiE_CAGuide_2023.pdf)) for details.



- Glossary of Film Terms:  
[https://www.westga.edu/academics/university-college/writing/glossary of film terms.php](https://www.westga.edu/academics/university-college/writing/glossary%20of%20film%20terms.php)