

## "Preparing to Be a Film Critic"

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*This lecture is designed to help students prepare to be film critics by helping them understand the difference between a personal response based on likes/dislikes vs. a critical response based on objective criteria when evaluating a film. A version of this lecture also appears on Critical Commons:*

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/lectures/lecture.2014-07-07.4483705949>

### Introduction

On one level, you can argue that film critics give their personal opinions concerning a film or scene. However, critics use objective criteria on which to base their opinions instead of personal taste. A critic can say "Even though I didn't like it, this is a quality film."

During this lecture, you will learn to distinguish between personal taste and objective criteria. You will also learn strategies to provide focus for a film analysis by placing the film in its socio-historical context.

### Question #1

- What is the best film you have ever seen?

For me, the answer is *Citizen Kane* (1941) which I first saw as a high school student in Leeds Birds' drama class. The film begins with the death of Charles Foster Kane and his last word, "Rosebud." The action of the film revolves around a reporter who tries to figure out the significance of Rosebud.



[Watch excerpt from Citizen Kane](#)

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/clips/open-sequence-for-citizen-kane-1941>



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## Question #2

- What is your favorite film?

If I am forced to list only one favorite film, it would be *Freaks* (1932). Although it is often classified as a horror film, I view *Freaks* as the tale of unrequited love and betrayal. I am especially impressed with the loving cup sequence and reviewed it in "[“We Accept Her One of Us’: Family of Choice in Freaks.”](#)" However, determining a favorite film is really dependent on context. For example, my answer would change based on circumstances.



[Watch loving cup scene from \*Freaks\*](#)

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/clips/freaks-1932-loving-cup-scene/view>

## Additional Questions

- What is your favorite film for...
  - Watching with friends?
  - Watching with your parents?
  - Watching with your brother(s) or sister(s)?
  - Watching with your partner?
  - Watching tonight?

It is unlikely that I would answer *Freaks* for any of these questions; even the one for watching with my partner who also enjoys the film. Although we might enjoy watching *Freaks* together some evening, this is not the film we would choose to enjoy together on any given evening. In fact, most nights we would choose to watch some mindless television program such as *Worlds Dumbest...*; a program that plays in the background and is not too demanding.



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[Watch segment from World's Dumbest...](#)

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/clips/sobriety-test-disaster>

### Criteria and Context are Crucial for Judging a Movie

When approaching film from a critical perspective, we need to understand the objective criteria from which we are going to judge the film. For example, in *Legacy of Blood*, Jim Harper argues that “Critical reception was apathetic, but fans were in general agreement that *Jason X* [2001] had supplied exactly what they had expected it to: A ludicrous plot, a young, attractive and mostly stupid cast, complex death scenes and gratuitous nudity.” Given the objective criteria of what fans wanted, *Jason X* is a higher quality film than is *Citizen Kane*.

Without objective criteria, it is not possible to give a useful critical response. The problems with the lack of criteria can be seen in Time Magazine’s list of top 100 movies where decisions were not based on objective criteria. As Mark Coatney explains, “Our critics had different sets of criteria and we kind of merged the two.” As a result, the list lacks credibility.



[Watch CNN Interview with Mark Coatney](#)

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/clips/time-100-best-films-cnn-interview>



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## Personal vs. Critical Response

Even without knowing much about film terminology and expectations, it is often possible to identify quality elements within a film. For example, most of my students can identify that *Frauennot — Frauenglück* (1929) as a quality film. As you watch the first section of *Frauennot — Frauenglück*, identify elements of quality within the film.



[Watch section from \*Frauennot — Frauenglück\*](http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/clips/frauennot-frauengluck-excerpt/)  
<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenberg/clips/frauennot-frauengluck-excerpt/>

## Focus in Film Analysis

When analyzing a film, you cannot discuss everything in a film or a scene. Generally, you need to provide some type of focus. That focus might be as simple as analyzing a scene in terms of camera angles or sound. But often, you need to set the film in a socio-historical context. For example, *Frauennot — Frauenglück*

- Silent Films
- Films by Sergei M. Eisenstein
- Russian Films
- Technical Issues such as montage
- Hygiene films
- Ideology
- Women's Issues
- Abortion in Film

## *Kid 'In Africa*

*Kid 'in' Africa* (1933) is a short film starring Shirley Temple and Danny Boone, Jr. The premise of the film is that Madam Cradlebate has gone to Africa to civilize the cannibals; something she is able to do with



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the assistance of Dipertzan. While watching this short film, assume that you are going to be asked to do an analysis in which you discuss Kid 'in' Africa in some type of socio-historical context. In what ways might you be able to approach the film.



[Watch Kid 'in' Africa](#)

<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/stevenlberg/clips/kid-in-africa-1933>

In my commentary to the film, I listed some possible approaches. You should wait to read my list until after you have completed your list. If you come up with ideas I didn't consider, please e-mail me at [sberg@schoolcraft.edu](mailto:sberg@schoolcraft.edu) and I will add your suggested approaches to the commentary. I will, of course, give you full credit for your ideas.

## Conclusion

When writing a film analysis, it is important to realize that you are not being asked to give your personal opinion. Instead, you are to use objective criteria to support your position. You also need to consider the socio-historical aspects of the film so that you can have a focus for your analysis.



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