

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
ANTH101-011/081
FALL 2010

HOW TO WRITE A DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW

Task: Write two film reviews in which you comment (apply items listed below) on any 4 films viewed in class for each review. See course schedule for due dates for each film review.

The films we view in this class represent a different genre than the “movies” we usually see for entertainment. One type of documentary film is the ethnographic film which informs the audience about some aspect of a particular culture or cultures

Writing a critical film review for ethnographic films is not often easy because you view an ethnographic film in ways different from the way you view a conventional movie. For example, the ethnographic movie does not have a plot or characters. Also, you cannot anticipate action or behavior. Instead, the viewer must interpret and understand the film from an anthropological point of view. An anthropological point of view means that the action, behavior and beliefs and values may not make sense from your own cultural point of view ;but does make sense from the point of view of the culture the film is about.

Critical does not mean negative. Rather it means exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation. The evaluation is not based in one’s subjective feelings. A strong review should not simply state whether you like or dislike a film. A strong review weighs different aspects of the movie and draws a fair conclusion about the merits and flaws of the film. When writing a review be specific, and be objective. Be specific means that it is not enough to say you enjoyed the film; you must say what specifically you enjoyed about the film and why this aspect(s) of the film is important to you.. Being objective means that your subjective feelings about the subject matter, mode of presentation and your personal evaluation of a culture that is different from yours do not belong in a critical film review. For example, the film may bore you but that may not be a factor of the over-all quality of the film. Rather, it may be because you have problems interpreting some aspect of the film because you do not understand the films context or you lack background information about the culture(s).

The most basic purpose of an ethnographic film review is to inform the reader about the film. Ethnographic films focus on message or content not the plot. The aim of your review is to influence the reader as to how they interpret the film which can change their understanding of their worldview.

Your review can expose your readers to important issues you believe are important.

What to Include in a Critical Review

I do not expect that you will address each and every one of the questions listed below. Be selective. The questions you must address are marked with asterisks. You can assume that your average reader likes documentary films and is interested in learning about culture and cultures different from his/her own culture but he/she is not very knowledgeable about culture and different cultures.

*Title, Film Maker, Location; identity of subject group/culture

*What is the purpose of the film?

*What is the film's message?

*Summarize the film's content in three sentences.

*What background knowledge do viewers have to know or believe to understand or appreciate this ethnographic film? (Your answer to this question is exactly the background you will need to inform your reader about).

*How does the film affect your cultural awareness? What insights about your tolerance do you learn as a result of viewing this film?

*What specific aspect in the film do you wish to analyze in detail? (Select one aspect that highlights what immediately stands out to you: scenes, quote, fluency of film, bias, use of imagery, use of sound and music, degree of interest, message, over-all quality of film, information presented, increased cultural awareness and any other aspect that comes to mind). What is your analysis of this particular aspect?

How does the film grab and hold the attention of the viewer?

Is the viewer's world view challenged and /or expanded by the film? Explain.

Evaluate the narrator and narration. Does it add or detract from the film? Why?

Evaluate the flow/structure of the film. Does it compliment or detract from the narration of the film and/or the overall quality of the film? Be specific.

What scenes are particularly noteworthy? What scenes do you think did not add to the overall quality of the film?

What line of discourse in the film do you think is quote worthy and memorable? Why is it memorable?

*Does the film expose the viewer to issues, social, political and/or moral that you think are important?

*What is the context of the issue presented in the film? What must the viewer know so that they can understand the context? Be specific.

*Who should see this film and who should not see this film?

STRUCTURE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Begins with the basics: what is the title of the films, who made the film, the culture presented in the film and short synopsis of the film. The reader must know exactly what they are reading about. Two or three sentences that inform the reader what position you are taking in regards to the films.

BODY

Here you address the questions that must be answered and select one or two other questions. Be sure you inform the reader which aspect of the films you wish to analyze and then give your analysis. Spend some time working out a logical order of the questions you will address in your review.

Summarize your position and demonstrate how your analysis and responses to the questions supports your position. Make Concluding remarks and include any after thoughts.