

The Director's Style Analysis

Every artist, no matter if it is a writer, painter, sculptor, carpenter, director, or chef, has his or her own distinctive style that comes through in their work. It is part of who they are, what they are interested in, what they want to say, and how they work. With this approach you will be looking at multiple films by one director in order to discover a unique signature of that director's style. Then you will develop an argument about how that stylistic detail appears in that director's works, how it stays consistent or changes over time, and how that detail allows viewers to more deeply understand either the director or his/her films.

A few tips to help you in this process:

- You need to examine a **minimum of 3 films** by one director in order to establish a pattern. If a particular detail only appears in two films, that detail might just be a coincidence. Once that detail appears in a third, fourth, fifth film, it becomes a pattern of that director's style.
- For a 7-9 page essay, the **maximum number of films you look at should be 5-6**. Trying to look at more films for an essay of this length will water down your analysis and it will just become a list.
- This approach was developed by French film theorists in the 1960s. They called it "auteur theory", "auteur" being the French word for "author" with the idea being that a director is the true author of the film as a whole. If you want to look into the theoretical approach further, search for "auteur theory"—numerous books exist on the theoretical approach.
- Many people do not think much about the director when watching a movie (they do not appear on screen, after all), so you might not know off the top of your head many directors by name or what films they have made. One way around this is to pick a film you might want to examine. Then go onto IMDB and look at who the director is. Then click on the director's name and look at the other films that person directed.

- If a director made a trilogy or series, do not just pick the movies in that series to examine. You will not be saying anything of worth by pointing out similar details that appear in a trilogy. For example, director Robert Zemeckis directed the *Back to the Future* trilogy. Pointing out that the films all contain a theme of manipulating time to suit the demands of the present is not all that useful. However, if you observe that same theme in *Forrest Gump*, *Cast Away*, and *Polar Express* (all films by Zemeckis as well), now you are on to an idea that might allow viewers to understand those other films in a deeper or interesting way.
- As always, keep your focus as narrow as possible to allow yourself the time and space to dig deeply into your topic and develop a cohesive analysis.
- The similar stylistic detail can come from any of the elements of film that we have studied this semester (character types, irony, symbols, structure, aspects of cinematography like camera angles, lighting, set design, musical score, theme, sound effects, editing techniques, etc.).
- One detail you might observe immediately in a director's films is that a certain actor appears consistently. For example, Tom Hanks appears in numerous films by Zemeckis, or Johnny Depp appears in most of Tim Burton's movies. Stay away from this consistent detail as there is really not much to say about it (Depp and Burton are friends, so Burton casts Depp because he likes to work with him). Instead, if you notice this consistency and want to write about it, think about the character type that actor portrays.
- Make sure that the films you are examining are actually directed by the artist you are studying. Often directors will be producers or actors or cinematographers or screenwriters for movies, but only when they are in the director role do they have the freedom to craft their art and display their distinct artistic voice.