

Breaking Away: Cultural Film Analysis & Memo

Films are a useful way of identifying cultural values and behaviors. In fact, S. Kracauer claims that “the films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media (*Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, 1947.).

Breaking Away (1979) is considered one of the top 100 American films for a number of reasons. One reason may be deep insights provided by the “outsider status” of Director Peter Yates, an Englishman, and Steve Tesich, the Serbian immigrant who wrote the screenplay.

(1) The viewing task. Most mainstream films can be viewed as narratives, similar to stories, with protagonists and antagonists who are expected to develop, change and struggle over time. *Breaking Away* is a compelling story with the usual narrative elements. But more salient for our purposes, the film provides many interesting examples of American cultural values, themes such as the American Dream, and behaviors revealed in daily life; class distinctions; social roles related to age, gender and friendship; family structures; and institutions such as religion, education, entertainment. These patterns are reflected in all aspects of the film, including the portrayal of inanimate objects and the sound track.

Before you watch the film, choose 3-5 American cultural features among the many we have analyzed in the class materials that interest you. This subset of features of interest can serve as your analytical focus as you watch the film.

Use the *Film Analysis Viewing Guide* provided to keep track of the cultural features that you consider in your analytical memo.

(2) The writing task. Present your cultural analysis of the film in memo format. A memo follows strict content and format conventions. (See the annotated model of a cross-cultural analysis of the film *Lost in Translation* below to guide your memo writing.)

Your memo must provide the following:

- A very short (no more than ~100 words) summary of the movie plot.
- An analysis of 3-5 of the most salient cultural features in the film, with concrete examples
- A description of one scene that demonstrates particularly well an aspect of the American culture and communication that we have addressed in 21G.221.
- Several explicit references to course materials, tied into your analysis/examples and documented appropriately.

Length of memo: 2-2.5 pages (single-spaced)

Due: Week 9

Film Viewing Guide for Cultural Film Analysis

Choose up to five (one/column) cultural values, themes and behaviors that we have been examining in class e.g., social relationships. As you watch the film, note in the columns specific examples from the film.

Relationships e.g., the couples				
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