

THEMATIC ELEMENTS



Movies are about things—even bad movies are about things. Rambo III is about something. It has a theme, even if it doesn't want to have a theme. . . . You have to know in some way what you are about to do. Even if that theme gets rerouted or ends up in subtext, somehow there has to be some sense of why you are doing this.

——PAUL SCHRADER, DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER

THEME AND FOCUS

In the context of novels, plays, and poetry, the word *theme* connotes an idea—the central idea, the point, the message, or the statement made by the work as a whole. For film analysis, however, that definition of theme is too narrow. The theme of a film is not necessarily an idea at all.

In the context of film analysis, **theme** refers to the unifying central concern of the film, the special focus that unifies the work. As the director Sidney Lumet has observed,

What the movie is about will determine how it will be cast, how it will look, how it will be edited, how it will be musically scored, how it will be mixed, how the titles will look, and, with a good studio, how it will be released. What it's about will determine how it is to be made.¹

A filmmaker may choose to focus on ideas but is just as likely to emphasize one of the four other major elements: 1) plot (2) emotional effect or mood, (3) character, and (4) style or texture. All five elements are present in *all* films; but in any given film, one is predominant. Keeping in mind this broader concept of theme will help us to analyze films ranging from *Capote* to *The Producers* (2005) or from *Sin City* to *The New World*.

Focus on Plot

In adventure stories and detective stories, the filmmaker focuses on plot—on what happens. The aim of such films is generally to provide escape from the boredom and drabness of everyday life, so the action is exciting and fast paced. Characters, ideas, and emotional effects are subordinate to events, and the final outcome is all-important. Events and the final outcome, however, are important only within the context of the specific story being told; they have little real significance. The theme of such a film can best be captured in a concise summary of the plot (Figure 2.1).

Focus on Emotional Effect or Mood

In a relatively large number of films, the director creates a highly specialized mood or emotional effect. In such films, it is possible to identify a single mood or emotion that prevails throughout the film or to view each segment of the film as a step leading to a single powerful emotional effect. Although plot may be very important in such a movie, events are subordinate to the emotional response they produce. Most horror films, the Alfred Hitchcock suspense thrillers, and romantic tone poems such as *A Man and a Woman* can be interpreted as having a mood or emotional effect as their primary focus and unifying element.



FIGURE 2.1 Focus on Plot
Gladiator, *Spider-Man*, and
Hidalgo (2004) are fast-paced
action films that focus on what
happens.



The theme of such films can best be stated by identifying the prevailing mood or emotional effect that the filmmaker has created (Figure 2.2).

In some films, a balanced combination of two emotions may make it difficult to tell which emotion is dominant. *The Squid and the Whale*, for example,

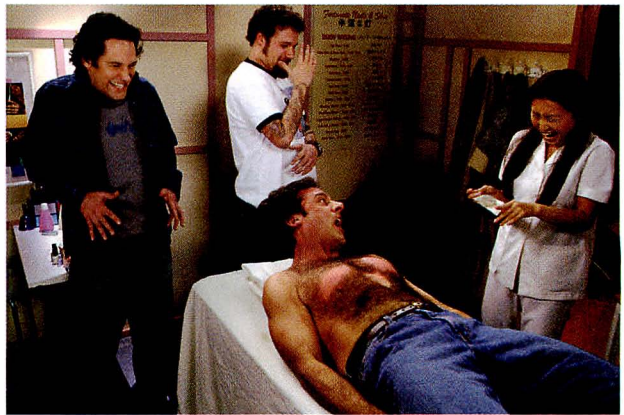
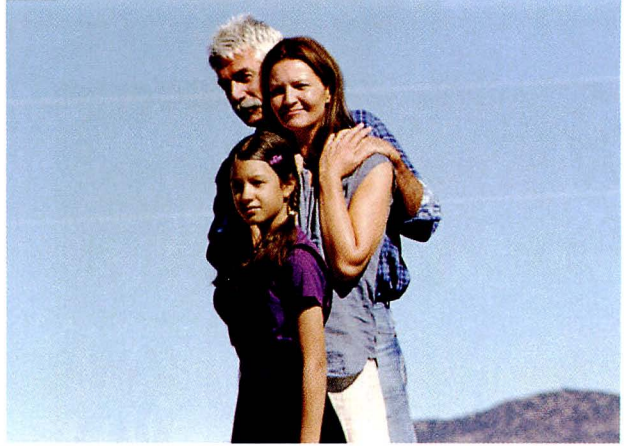


FIGURE 2.2 Focus on Emotional Effect or Mood A wide variety of emotional effects or moods can serve as a thematic concern in modern films. There are movies to scare us, like *The Shining* (top left), movies to make us cry, like *Off the Map* (top right), movies to make us laugh, like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (bottom right), and movies to make us feel romantic, like *The Notebook* (bottom left).

might be classified as a comedy/drama, *The Ice Harvest* as a comedy/horror film. An analysis of such films needs to consider the elements that contribute to each effect and the way the two prevalent emotions play off each other (Figure 2.3).

Focus on Character

Some films, through both action and dialogue, focus on the clear delineation of a single unique character. Although plot is important in such films, what happens is important primarily because it helps us understand the character being developed. The major appeal of these characters lies in the qualities that



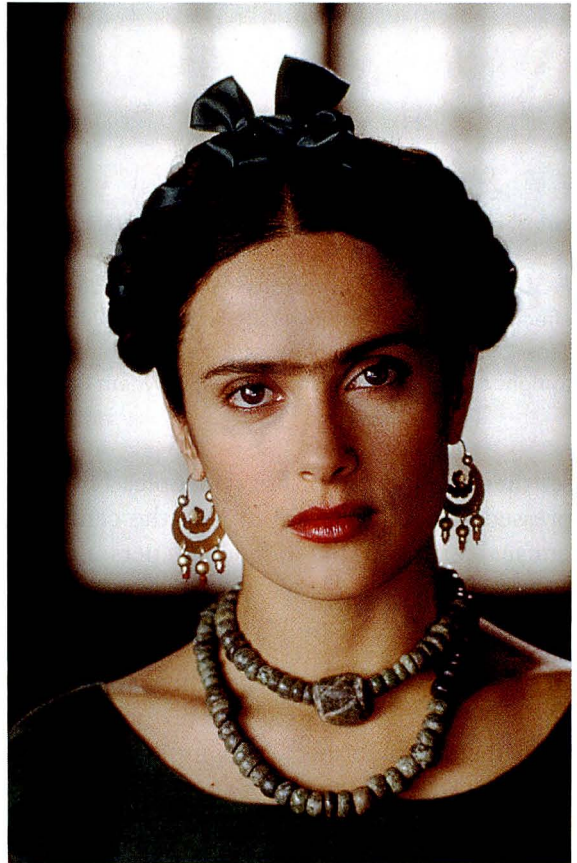
FIGURE 2.3 Mixed Emotions Some films do not focus on building a single emotional effect but instead blend two different emotions in the same story, as does *The Royal Tenenbaums*, with its idiosyncratic blend of comedy and pathos. Pictured here from left to right are Ben Stiller, Danny Glover, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Angelica Huston.

set them apart from ordinary people. The theme of such films can best be expressed in a brief description of the central character, with emphasis on the unusual aspects of the individual's personality (Figure 2.4).

Focus on Style or Texture or Structure

In a relatively small number of films, the director tells the story in such a different way that the film's style or texture or structure becomes its dominant and most memorable aspect, making a stronger impact on our minds and senses than any of the other thematic elements. Such films have a quality that sets them apart—a unique look, feel, rhythm, atmosphere, tone, or organization that echoes in our minds and senses long after we leave the theater. The unique style, texture, or shape permeates the film (not just isolated segments), and all the cinematic elements are woven together into one rich tapestry. Such films are often not commercially successful because the mass audience may not be prepared for or comfortable with the unique viewing experience that they provide (Figure 2.5).

FIGURE 2.4 Focus on Character Some films, such as *Ray* (right), *Frida* (bottom right), and *Raging Bull* (bottom left), focus on the unusual aspects of unique people.



Focus on Ideas

In most serious films, the action and characters have a significance beyond the context of the film itself—a significance that helps to clarify some aspect of life, experience, or the human condition. The idea may be communicated directly



FIGURE 2.5 Focus on Style, Texture, and/or Structure Both *Memento* (top) and *Waking Life* (bottom) leave us feeling we have experienced a one-of-a-kind movie.

through a particular incident or stated by a particular character. Most often, however, the idea is presented more subtly, and we are challenged to find an interpretation that we feel best fits the film as a whole. This indirect approach increases the likelihood of varying interpretations, but varying interpretations



FIGURE 2.6 Moral Implications Such films as *Crash* (left) and *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio* (right) lead us to think carefully about the consequences of the moral decisions we make in our lives.

are not necessarily contradictory. They may be equally valid, complementary statements saying essentially the same things in different terms or approaching the same idea from different angles.

Perhaps the first step in identifying the central idea is accurately identifying the abstract subject of the film in a single word or phrase—for example, *jealousy*, *injustice*, *prejudice*. If this is as specific as we can get in determining the theme, we should not despair; some concepts can be stated explicitly but others cannot. At any rate, the identification of the true subject is a valuable first step in film analysis. If possible, however, we should attempt to carry the determination of central idea beyond the mere identification of the subject and see if we can formulate a statement that accurately summarizes the subject that is dramatized in the film and conveyed by all its elements. If such a specific statement of the film's primary concern is possible, the film's central idea might fall into one of the following categories.

1. **Moral Implications.** Films that make moral statements are intended primarily to convince us of the wisdom or practicality of a moral principle and thereby persuade us to apply the principle in our own lives. Such principles often take the form of a maxim or proverb such as “The love of money is the root of all evil.” Although many modern films have important moral implications, very few are structured around a single moral statement, and we must be careful not to mistake a moral implication for a moral statement or judgment (Figure 2.6).
2. **The Truth of Human Nature.** Quite different from films that focus on unique characters are those that focus on universal or representative characters. The characters in such films take on significance beyond them-



FIGURE 2.7 The Truth of Human Nature Films like *Lord of the Flies* (1963) and *Deliverance* take a penetrating look at the nature of humankind when the thin veneer of civilization has been removed.

selves and the context of the particular film in which they appear. These characters are representative of humanity in general, and they serve as cinematic vehicles to illustrate some widely or universally acceptable truth about human nature (Figure 2.7).

- 3. Social Problems.** Modern filmmakers are very concerned with social problems and show their concern in films that expose social vices and follies or criticize social institutions. Although the underlying purpose of such films is social reform, they rarely spell out specific methods of reform; usually they concentrate instead on defining the problem and emphasizing its importance. A social problem film may treat its subject in a light, satirical, or comic manner, or it may attack the subject in a savage, harsh, and brutal manner. The social problem film, unlike the human nature film, concerns itself not with criticism of the human race in general or with the universal aspects of human nature but with the special functions of human beings as social animals and with the social institutions and traditions they have created (Figure 2.8).
- 4. The Struggle for Human Dignity.** Many serious films portray a basic conflict or tension between two opposing sides of human nature. One is the desire to surrender to animal instincts and wallow in the slime of human weakness, cowardice, brutality, stupidity, and sensuality. The other is the struggle to stand erect, to display courage, sensitivity, intelligence, a spiritual and moral sense, and strong individualism. This conflict is best shown when the central characters are placed in a position of disadvantage,

FIGURE 2.8 Social Problem Films Films like *Do the Right Thing* (racial prejudice), *Dead Man Walking* (capital punishment), and *Vera Drake* (abortion) force us to examine current social problems.





FIGURE 2.9 The Struggle for Human Dignity In *The Insider*, a network television producer (Al Pacino) struggles to protect the sense of identity and dignity of a former tobacco company executive (Russell Crowe) who is his journalistic source.

having been dealt a bad hand in some way, so that they must play against tremendous odds. The conflict may be external, with the character struggling against some dehumanizing force, system, institution, or attitude. Or the conflict may be internal, with the character struggling for dignity against the human weaknesses present in his or her own personality (Figure 2.9).

A triumphant victory is sometimes, but certainly not always, achieved. However, the struggle itself gives us some respect for the character, win or lose. Boxers are often treated in films with the dignity theme. In *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) achieves his dignity by leading the dock workers to rebel against a corrupt union, but Malloy's summary of his boxing career echoes clearly his personal struggle: "I could'a had class . . . I could'a been a contender . . . I could'a been *somebody!* . . . Instead of just a bum, which is what I am." Sylvester Stallone takes the character of Terry Malloy and gives him the chance to be "somebody" in each film of the *Rocky* series. In *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, over-the-hill fighter Mountain Rivera (Anthony Quinn) fails to achieve dignity but wins respect for his effort. Recently, protagonists in two popular boxing



FIGURE 2.10 The Complexity of Human Relationships Meryl Streep, in *The Hours*, attempts to comfort her former lover (Ed Harris) who is dying of AIDS (top left). Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal play illicit lovers who lose all for love in *Brokeback Mountain* (top right). Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek, as the parents in *In the Bedroom*, confront their separate and mutual grief after the violent death of their young son (bottom).

narratives—Hilary Swank in *Million Dollar Baby* and Russell Crowe in *Cinderella Man*—have constituted studies in this theme.

5. **The Complexity of Human Relationships.** Some films focus on the problems, frustrations, pleasures, and joys of human relationships: love, friendship, marriage, divorce, family interactions, sexuality, and so on (Figure 2.10). Some show the gradual working out of a problem; others help us gain insight into a problem without providing any clear resolution. Although a great many films of this sort deal with universal problems in the relationships between men and women, we must also be on the lookout for unusual treatments such as *Midnight Cowboy* (a “love” story about two men).

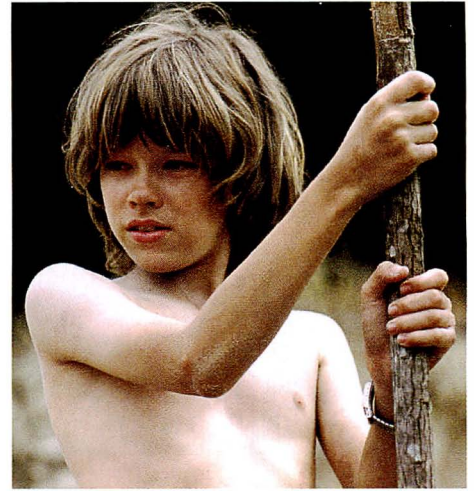


FIGURE 2.11 Coming of Age In movies like *American Graffiti* (left) and *Undertow* (right), young people go through experiences that cause them to become more aware or more mature.

- 6. Coming of Age/Loss of Innocence/Growing Awareness.** The major character or characters in such films are usually, but not always, young people going through experiences that force them to become more mature or to gain some new awareness of themselves in relation to the world around them. Such concepts can be treated comically, seriously, tragically, or satirically. The central character of these films is always dynamic—that is, different in some way at the end of the film from what he or she was at the beginning. The changes that occur may be subtle internal changes or drastic changes that significantly alter the character’s outward behavior or lifestyle (Figures 2.11, 2.12).
- 7. A Moral or Philosophical Riddle.** Sometimes a filmmaker may purposely strive to evoke a variety of subjective interpretations by developing a film around a riddle or puzzling quality. The filmmaker attempts to suggest or mystify instead of communicating clearly and attempts to pose moral or philosophical questions rather than provide answers. The typical reaction to such films is “What’s it all about?” This type of film communicates primarily through symbols or images, so a thorough analysis of these elements will be required for interpretation. After even the most perceptive analysis, a degree of uncertainty will remain. Such films are wide open to subjective interpretation. But the fact that subjective interpretation is required does not mean that the analysis of all film elements can be ignored. Individual interpretation should be supported by an examination of all elements (Figure 2.13).

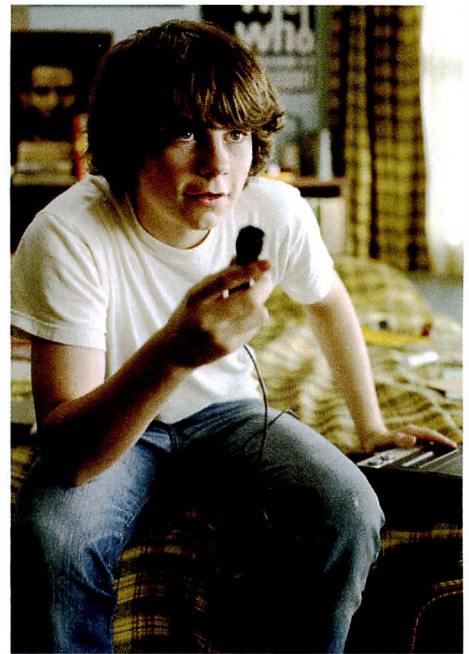


FIGURE 2.12 Compounding the Problems Coming of age is always difficult, but it is almost overwhelming when, like the title character (Jamie Bell) in *Billy Elliot*, you love ballet but your father hates it—or when, like the fifteen-year-old journalist (Patrick Fugit) in *Almost Famous*, you are caught between the demands of a stern mother and those of *Rolling Stone’s* editors.

IDENTIFYING THE THEME

Identifying the theme of a film is often difficult. The theme is not likely to reveal itself in a flash of light midway through the screening. Although simply watching a film may give us a vague, intuitive grasp of its basic meaning, accurately stating the theme is quite another matter. Sometimes we cannot do so until we leave the theater and begin thinking about or discussing the film. Frequently, just describing the movie to someone who has not seen it will provide an important clue to the theme, because we tend to describe first the things that make the strongest impression on us.

Identifying the theme can be considered both the beginning and the end of film analysis. After seeing a film, we should make a tentative identification of its theme to provide a starting point for close analysis. The analysis itself should clarify our vision of the film and show all its elements functioning together as a unique whole. However, if our analysis of the individual thematic elements does not support our original view of the film’s theme, we should be prepared to reconsider our opinion in light of the new direction that our analysis indicates.

Plot, emotional effect or mood, character, style or texture or structure, and ideas are the central concerns of most films. There are exceptions, however—



FIGURE 2.13 A Moral or Philosophical Riddle In *Persona* (top left), *Fight Club* (top right), and *Being John Malkovich* (bottom), directors Ingmar Bergman, David Fincher, and Spike Jonze suggest multiple meanings that mystify us.



films that do not focus exclusively on any one element and films that focus on more than one. In our efforts to identify theme, we must also be aware that certain films may possess, in addition to the single unifying central concern that we define as *theme*, other, less important, areas of emphasis called **motifs**. These are images, patterns, or ideas that are repeated throughout the film and are variations or aspects of the major theme. Above all, we should remember that the statement of the theme cannot convey the full impact of the film itself. It merely clarifies our vision of the film as a unified work and enhances our appreciation of its thematic elements as they function together in a unique artistic whole.



FIGURE 2.14 Themes Limited in Time and Place *Wild in the Streets* (left) and *Easy Rider* (right) dealt with problems and issues that seemed very relevant in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but many of their concerns may seem old-fashioned today.

EVALUATING THE THEME

Once we have identified the theme, it is important to make some kind of evaluation of it, especially in a serious film that attempts to do more than simply entertain. For the most part, theme evaluation is a subjective process, and any attempt to provide systematic guidelines for making this kind of value judgment would be prejudicial. A few generalizations, however, are permissible.

One standard commonly applied in theme evaluation is **universality**. A universal theme is one of lasting interest, one that is meaningful not just to people here and now but to all human beings in all ages. Therefore, a theme with universal appeal may be considered superior to one with an appeal strictly limited in time and place. Four social problem films illustrate this point. Those strictly limited in time and place like *Wild in the Streets* (the generation gap of the 1960s) and *Easy Rider* (a grab bag of 1960s problems) had a powerful impact on young film audiences when they were released but seem dated today (Figure 2.14). However, *On the Waterfront* (union corruption in the 1950s) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (the plight of migrant farm workers in the 1930s) speak to us in loud, clear voices today, despite their age. Migrant farm workers still have problems, and corrupt unions still exist; but those films have universal appeal because of the real and powerful characters portrayed, the heroic struggles waged for human dignity, and the artistry with which both films were made.

There is, of course, no real formula for the classic film, the kind we never grow tired of seeing. The classic film has a sense of rightness to it time and time again. Its power does not fade or diminish with the passing years but actually grows because of its universal themes and motifs. *The Grapes of Wrath* is not

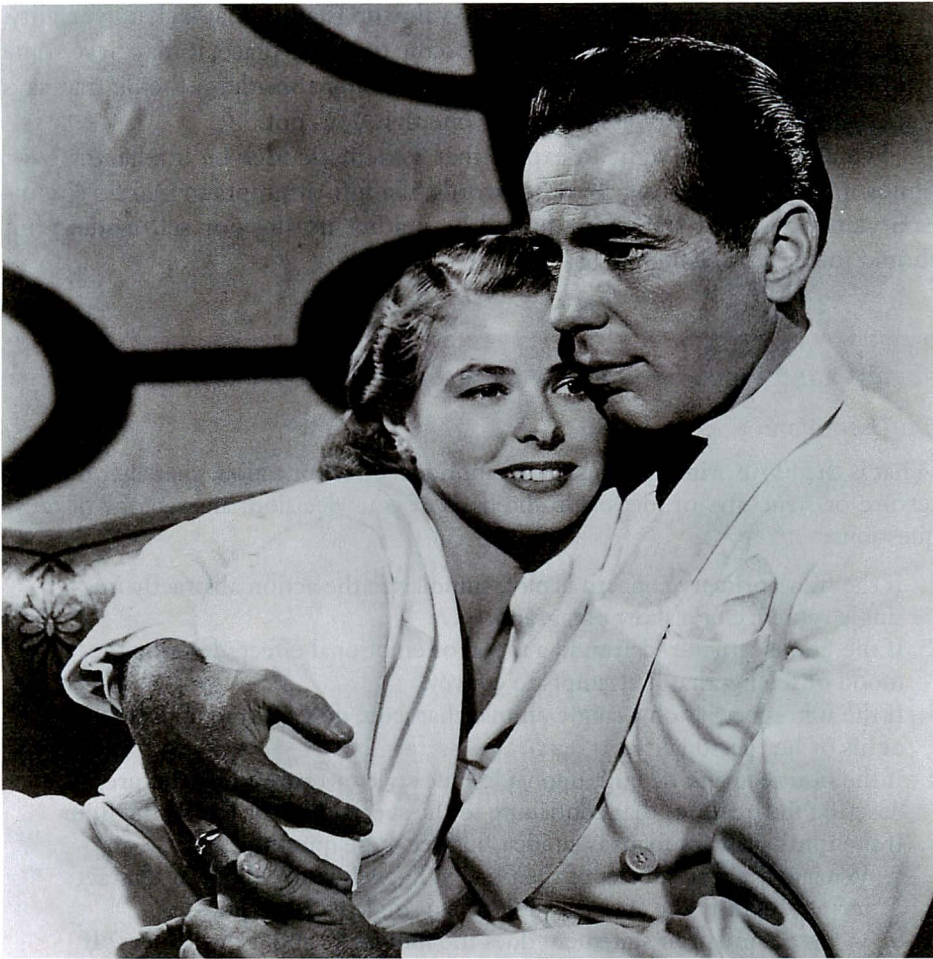


FIGURE 2.15 Universal Themes Although the specific problems forced upon Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) by World War II have long since disappeared, *Casablanca* lives on because of strong universal themes that reach beyond the romantic love story at its core.

simply about migrant workers forced to leave the Oklahoma Dust Bowl in the 1930s. It is about the common man, the downtrodden, the underdog, about courageous men and women, about people who endure and constantly struggle to preserve their dignity. In the same way, *Casablanca* is more than just a story about two people losing and then finding each other in a world too chaotic for romantic dreams. It is a story about a beautiful woman and a mysterious man, about war, responsibility, courage, duty, and most of all, about doing the right thing. Such classics endure because of their strong, universal themes (Figure 2.15).

This does not mean that we place no value on themes that lack universality. Even if a theme's appeal is limited to a specific time and place, it may have some relevance to our own experience. We will naturally consider a theme that says something significant to us superior to one that does not.

We also have the right to expect that a thematic idea be intellectually or philosophically interesting. In other words, if a film attempts to make a significant statement, that statement should be neither boring nor self-evident but should interest or challenge us.

ANALYZING THEME

On Theme and Focus

What is the film's primary focus: plot, emotional effect or mood, character, style or texture or structure, or ideas? On the basis of your decision, answer one of these questions:

1. If the film's primary concern is plot, summarize the action abstractly in a single sentence or a short paragraph.
2. If the film is structured around a mood or emotional effect, describe the mood or feeling that it attempts to convey.
3. If the film's focus is on a single unique character, describe the unusual aspects of his or her personality.
4. If the film seems to be built upon a unique style or texture or structure, describe the qualities that contribute to the special look or feel of the film.
5. If the film's primary focus is an idea, answer these questions:
 - a. What is the true subject of the film? What is it really about in abstract terms? Identify the abstract subject in a single word or phrase.
 - b. What comment or statement does the film make about the subject? If possible, formulate a sentence that accurately summarizes the idea dramatized by the film.

On Identifying the Theme

1. Although a director may attempt to do several things with a film, one goal usually stands out as most important. Decide which of the following was the director's *primary* aim, and give reasons for your choice.
 - a. providing pure entertainment—that is, temporary escape from the real world
 - b. developing a pervasive mood or creating a single, specialized emotional effect
 - c. providing a character sketch of a unique, fascinating personality
 - d. creating a consistent, unique feel or texture by weaving all of the complex elements of film together into a one-of-a-kind film experience
 - e. criticizing society and social institutions and increasing the viewer's awareness of a social problem and the need for reform

- f. providing insights into human nature (demonstrating what human beings in general are like)
 - g. creating a moral or philosophical riddle for the viewer to ponder
 - h. making a moral implication to influence the viewer's values or behavior
 - i. dramatizing one or more characters' struggle for human dignity against tremendous odds
 - j. exploring the complex problems and pleasures of human relationships
 - k. providing insight into a growth experience, the special kinds of situations or conflicts that cause important changes in the character or characters involved
2. Which of the items listed in the previous question seem important enough to qualify as secondary aims?

On Evaluating the Theme

1. Is the film's basic appeal to the intellect, to the funny bone, to the moral sense, or to the aesthetic sense? Is it aimed primarily at the groin (the erotic sense), the viscera (blood and guts), the heart, the yellow streak down the back, or simply the eyes? Support your choice with specific examples from the film.
2. How well does your statement of the film's theme and focus stand up after you have thoroughly analyzed all elements of the film?
3. To what degree is the film's theme universal? Is the theme relevant to your own experience? How?
4. If you think the film makes a significant statement, why is it significant?
5. Decide whether the film's theme is intellectually or philosophically interesting, or self-evident and boring, and defend your decision.
6. Does the film have the potential to become a classic? Will people still be watching it twenty years from today? Why?

VIDEO EXERCISES

Watch the first 5 minutes of any two of the following films: *Billy Elliot*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Rookie*, *Shane*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The World According to Garp*. Then answer these questions.

1. From the 5-minute segments you have just seen, can you make intelligent guesses about each film's primary concern?
2. What does the music suggest about the emotional quality of each film? Will the film be happy, sad, or bittersweet? Funny, serious, or a mixture of the two?
3. What do you learn about the characters introduced in the beginning? Which of the characters are point of view characters (characters with whom we identify and through whose eyes we experience the film)? Which of the characters will we end up viewing more objectively, from a distance?

Focus on Plot

Black Hawk Down (2001)
Die Another Day (2002)
The Fast and the Furious (2001)
Freaky Friday (2003)
Gladiator (2000)
The Hunt for Red October (1990)

Independence Day (1996)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)
The Road Warrior (1981)
Spider-Man (2002)
Titanic (1997)

Focus on Emotional Effect or Mood

Bang the Drum Slowly (1973)
De-Lovely (2004)
The Piano (1993)

Psycho (1960)
The Silence of the Lambs (1991)
Somewhere in Time (1980)

Focus on Character

Ali (2001)
A Beautiful Mind (2001)
Capote (2005)
Cinderella Man (2005)
Coal Miner's Daughter (1980)
Crumb (1994)

Elizabeth (1998)
The Great Santini (1979)
Grizzly Man (2005)
Patton (1970)
Raging Bull (1980)
Zorba the Greek (1964)

Focus on Style, Texture, or Structure

The Age of Innocence (1993)
Brazil (1985)
Days of Heaven (1978)
The English Patient (1996)
Fargo (1996)
McCabe & Mrs. Miller (1971)

Memento (2001)
The New World (2005)
Pulp Fiction (1994)
Raising Arizona (1987)
The Saddest Music in the World (2004)
3 Women (1977)

Focus on Human Nature

Deliverance (1972)
Groundhog Day (1993)
A History of Violence (2005)
House of Sand and Fog (2003)

Lord of the Flies (1963)
Nine Lives (2005)
Requiem for a Dream (2000)
Shane (1953)

Struggle for Human Dignity

The Grapes of Wrath (1940)
Il Postino (The Postman) (1994)
The Insider (1999)
Mad Hot Ballroom (2005)

On the Waterfront (1954)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)
Rent (2005)
Schindler's List (1993)

Complexity of Human Relationships

In Her Shoes (2005)

The Hours (2002)

Junebug (2005)

Magnolia (1999)

Midnight Cowboy (1969)

Terms of Endearment (1983)

Three Colors: Blue (1993), *White* (1993),
Red (1994)

The War of the Roses (1989)

When Harry Met Sally . . . (1989)

The World According to Garp (1982)

Coming of Age/Growing Awareness

About a Boy (2002)

Almost Famous (2000)

Bee Season (2005)

Billy Elliot (2000)

Empire of the Sun (1987)

Finding Nemo (2003)

Hearts in Atlantis (2001)

A Little Princess (1995)

Sixteen Candles (1984)

Summer of '42 (1971)

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)

Winter Solstice (2005)

Y Tu Mamá También (2001)

Moral or Philosophical Riddle

Being John Malkovich (1999)

Blue Velvet (1986)

Fight Club (1999)

Northfork (2003)

Run, Lola, Run (1998)

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Waking Life (2001)

Focus on Social Problems

Bully (2001)

Dead Man Walking (1995)

Falling Down (1993)

Far From Heaven (2002)

Mississippi Burning (1988)

Natural Born Killers (1994)

Norma Rae (1979)

The Rainmaker (1997)

Welcome to the Dollhouse (1996)