Major Project: The Critique Paper

The Scenario
You are a movie critic, writing for a major newsmagazine. Consider your audience and the biases and assumptions of the average moviegoer. Also consider your own likes and dislikes in film and what sort of value you put on the qualities of a film.

1. Choose a feature-length documentary film (no shorts, TV episodes, or the like; at least 70 minutes long) and watch it. Take good notes (DVD or download is preferable to a film currently in theaters, since it is harder to take notes there). Do not read other critiques or reviews of this film (if you need help with model structure, look at a review of another movie, but you are encouraged to approach this from your own common-sense perspective rather than imitating someone else).

2. Write a critique of the film, letting your audience know what you think of it. You may assess the film’s value as you see fit, but you must back yourself up with evidence and solid logic. Remember that part of evaluating an expository work includes certain elements: summary, discussion of author purpose, evaluating the quality of evidence, evaluating the author’s point-of-view, explaining what you think and backing it up with examples, etc.

3. Your final draft will be 750-1000 words, so plan your initial drafts accordingly. Your critique may be supported by any relevant evidence: narrative aspects of the film (if it has stories or anecdotes), quality of evidence, its emotional weight, production qualities (sound and visual details), social impact of the film’s message, and so forth. Do not pad with extraneous material (especially summary): give detailed examples when necessary in order to bolster your central thesis. In other words, show us why this film is (or is not) important and why we should want (or not) to see it.

4. Project Due Dates
   - Sections 005 and 008: We will be peer editing this exercise on February 15, so bring at least two copies of your draft to class. Your final draft, typed and formatted, along with all previous drafts and peer editing material, is due February 20.
   - Section 901: We will be peer editing this exercise on February 15, so bring at least two copies of your draft to class. Your final draft, typed and formatted, along with all previous drafts and peer editing material, is due February 22.
   - Section 902: We will be peer editing this exercise on February 20, so bring at least two copies of your draft to class. Your final draft, typed and formatted, along with all previous drafts and peer editing material, is due February 27.
Recent Documentary Films to Consider

If you are unfamiliar with documentary filmmaking, the list below might help you come up with a choice for this paper. There are many classic older documentaries, but I offer these suggestions because 1) they are all recent, well-received by critics, and easily accessible, and 2) they all deal with American themes (a focus of our course). You do not have to choose from this list. **If you are unsure about your choice of film for your critique, please consult with me.** Take some time to browse the USF Library collection to find something that catches your eye. Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu also have a good collection to choose from if you want to watch online (anything from the Criterion Collection is particularly recommended).

- **Capturing the Friedmans** (2003): Andrew Jarecki investigates a troubling case of molestation and its effect on an American family.
- **Crumb** (1994): Terry Zwigoff follows the life and career of one of America’s most idiosyncratic comic artists.
- **Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room** (2005): Alex Gibney investigates one of the biggest financial meltdowns in American history.
- **Grizzly Man** (2005): Werner Herzog studies a man who wants to get close to nature—with tragic results.
- **Hoop Dreams** (1994): Follow two high school students on their separate quests to become famous basketball players.
- **Metallica: Some Kind of Monster** (2004): Joe Berlinger follows the famous metal band as they record _St. Anger_ and nearly self-destruct in the process.
- **Murderball** (2005): Enter the rough world of quadriplegic wheelchair rugby.
- **Rize** (2005): David LaChapelle surveys the dance subcultures known as krumping and clowning.
- **Sicko** (2007): Michael Moore checks into whether America has a health care crisis.
- **Spellbound** (2002): Eight kids strive to win a national spelling bee.
- **Super Size Me** (2004): Morgan Spurlock takes on America’s love affair with fast food.
- **The Devil and Daniel Johnston** (2005): Jeff Feuerzeig chronicles an influential musician’s battle with mental illness.
- **The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters** (2007): Two video gamers compete to become world champion at Donkey Kong.
- **The Thin Blue Line** (1988): Errol Morris investigates the case of a man convicted of killing a police officer—and proves he is innocent!
- **Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price** (2005): Robert Greenwald checks out the business practices at one of America’s largest retailers.
- **When the Levees Broke** (2006): Spike Lee looks at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- **When We Were Kings** (2006): What made Muhammad Ali and George Foreman’s 1974 bout in Zaire such a cultural watershed?
- **Who Killed the Electric Car?** (2006): Chris Paine investigates the conspiracy that stopped a major technological innovation.
- **Wordplay** (2006): Why are crossword puzzles such an obsession for so many Americans?
How to Analyze Television and Film

If you are analyzing visual media, you should consider the following suggestions to help you organize your notes prior to your writing project. In any analysis of a show or film, you will need to use a semiotic approach: observe the signs in the show/film in addition to the particular words of the script. Pay attention to language (including diction and emotional tone), behavior and appearance of the characters, appearance of the sets, the use of lighting and framing, and the situations in which the characters are placed. Remember to look for non-verbal signs as well as verbal ones. Once you have watched the show/film (jotting down observations as you notice them), prepare yourself with the following steps as part of your pre-writing process:

1. List any background information a reader will need. For example, describe the show/film. What is the basic plot? What is the show about?

2. List any necessary background on the characters. For example, describe the main characters using demographic characteristics (age, class, education, gender, ethnicity, etc.), supporting your points with evidence.

3. List the values or themes supported in the show/film (gender roles, definitions of success, moral/ethical arguments, standards of beauty or happiness, etc.), including the consequences of the characters’ actions. Use specific examples as evidence.

4. Describe the intended audience for the show/film, using demographic characteristics. What evidence led you to conclude this group was the intended audience?

5. State what this show/film reveals about contemporary culture: values, goals, acceptable roles in society, etc. List evidence to support your conclusions.

6. Now turn to your specific writing project. State your claim/thesis, along with your plan to support it: preview the organization of your writing project. You may find that you have more information prepared from steps 1-5 than you will need for the final project: you are not obligated to use every observation you have made, but you will find any writing project much easier if you have plenty of options (as opposed to scrambling to review the show/film to find more evidence at the last minute).
Film Review Samples and Other Assignments

For February 8 (Sections 005 and 008), February 15 (for 901), or February 20 (for 902):

1. In order to show you samples of professional film critiques (as opposed to the sort of "let's summarize the whole plot and add a sentence about whether I liked it" kind of reviews you did as a kid), I have selected a sampling of reviews of Michael Moore’s 2002 documentary Bowling for Columbine. I chose this approach, because 1) Moore’s film fits our general theme of American society and politics, 2) the film itself was and still remains highly controversial, leading to a variety of polarized views that tackle not only the content of the film but the broader social issues – and the filmmaker himself (which might suggest ways you can talk about a film beyond just its surface), and 3) the wide range of opinions – and styles – provides us with some interesting models.

Read and write summaries (one substantive paragraph apiece) of the key arguments in the 5 film reviews of Michael Moore’s 2002 documentary Bowling for Columbine. Consider what position each critic takes on the film. Is the review predominantly positive? Negative? On what grounds does each critic favor or oppose Moore’s film?

2. Also, please read chapters 4-6 in Lies My Teacher Told Me and chapters 3, 4, and 11 in “They Say/I Say” and respond to the following questions in writing:
   a) Using the material found in Chapters 4-6 of Lies My Teacher Told Me, summarize Loewen’s critique of how race and racial politics are depicted in history textbooks.
   b) Focusing either on the case of John Brown or Abraham Lincoln in Chapter 6 as your primary example of what is good and/or bad in Loewen’s book, offer your critique of Loewen’s book so far. You may quote him where necessary, but remember to clearly distinguish between Loewen’s words and ideas and your assessment of them (that is, “he says” versus “I say”).