

BLM 2 – How to Write a Film Review

Adapted from www.firstfilms.ca

Like filmmaking itself, reviewing movies is an art. Once you learn the basics of a movie and its genre, you can make an informed review. As with criticism of any art form, opinions are subjective. One reviewer, for example, might call *Dances with Wolves* (1990) an, “honest portrait of native culture,” while another reviewer might call it, “a tired old story where the white man saves the day for the hapless Indians.” Both statements have some validity, as long as the reviewer can back them up with logical and informed arguments. Below is an outline of a favourable review and a not-so-favourable review for *Dances with Wolves*:

Favourable Review (example)

Title: Remember to give your review a catchy title: (e.g., “*Dances with Wolves* Still Busts a Move with Modern Audiences”)

Introduction: Did you like it? Show, don’t tell. Be sure to mention the title of the film, its release date, and the director and/or main actors.

E.g., I’m used to those old cowboy and Indian movies where good and bad were colour coded. White was good, and brown was bad. *Dances with Wolves* (1990) by director Kevin Costner, was different....

Plot: Provide a brief outline of the plot. You can choose whether to give “spoilers.”

E.g., *Dances with Wolves* tells the story of a Civil War veteran named John Dunbar (Kevin Costner). After miraculously surviving the war (and despite his attempted “suicide by cavalry charge” depicted at the beginning of the film), Dunbar is posted to the frontier– “Indian” territory (“Indian,” though not the preferred term, is used throughout the film) where he is eventually adopted into Sioux culture. ... (continue summarizing the main plot points of the film).

Point #1, #2, #3: These points are your critique of the film – your opinions, backed up with concrete details.

E.g., The cinematography is breathtaking. Costner and his cinematographer, Dean Semler, are especially gifted at explaining things visually. They include the rolling hills of South Dakota and the war-weary rundown forts of the frontier like they are characters within the story. Many of their most important points are made with varied camera shots that convey emotional detail to the audience....

E.g., The standard narrative is flipped. The audience figures out that the Sioux are not the savages; instead, the white men are the bloodthirsty killers. This reversal of stereotypical roles was largely something new for western audiences...

E.g., Kevin Costner can dance around a fire. Today it might seem like a bad attempt at cultural appropriation, but at the time, 1990, Kevin Costner doing a war dance around a fire seemed oddly compelling. He was a white leading man paying homage to his new mentors...

Conclusion: Reiterate your opinions. Remember, for the purposes of your EFP film review, you need to focus on the depictions of First Nations in the film you are reviewing, so that should be the focus of all of your points, and your conclusion. In *Dances With Wolves*, for instance, there are some fantastic performances by First Nations actors (Graham Greene as Kicking Bird, Tantoo Cardinal as Black Shawl, and Rodney Grant as Wind In His Hair, to name just a few). Consider the discussion of this film in *Reel Injun*, though: this film is essentially the story of a white soldier, and the Sioux are the background – it is not the story of the Sioux themselves.

E.g., Made for white people but refreshing than what Hollywood usually serves up in this genre, really nice to look at....

Final Note: Remember that the focus of this film review is the authenticity (or lack thereof) of the portrayal of First Peoples, so be sure to fully discuss possible stereotypes, etc., and consider whose story is being told.

Unfavourable Review (example)

Introduction: Wow, I never knew that Kevin Costner could save the Sioux Nation from evil white men by inspiring the Sioux believe in themselves again.

Plot: *Dances with Wolves* (1990), directed by Kevin Costner, is about a fictional character, 1st Lt. John J. Dunbar, who is transferred to the western frontier to fortify Ft. Sedgewick. Dunbar arrives to see his is alone at the broken-down fort. He slowly meets his Sioux neighbors.....

Point #1: The cinematography is wonderful but the story sounds like an excerpt from my grandmother's Readers Digest. The events seem contrived and Costner's relationship with the Sioux Indians seems sanitized...

Point #2: ...ground-breaking for white people in the 1990s. I get it: *Dances with Wolves* was not a movie about evil savages getting what was coming to them for burning chuck wagons or scalping the wrong white person. It does break some stereotypes, but the focus of the film is not on the Sioux – this is not their story – it is Dunbar's story. And it is still filled with some of the usual clichés about First Nations people...

Point #3: I can't believe my film teacher admitted that he once thought Kevin Costner doing some Sioux dance around the fire was cool....

Conclusion: White Messiah, holds attention, polished, clearly Hollywood.