

FINAL ESSAY, Part II

Examples

This document contains three examples of how to analyze a critical piece according to Carroll's framework. The second one is an example of a movie review that is too short, uninteresting, or uninformative to be suitable to the analysis you are asked to carry out.

In your final essay, you may **not** use the same reviews as the ones used in this document, though you may use different reviews of the same movie.

EXAMPLE 1

"Obsession Drives Fincher's Look at 'Zodiac' Killer"¹

Partly because of the stylized visuals he brought with him from the world of music videos, and partly because of the violent subject matter in the films *Seven*, *Fight Club* and *Panic Room*, David Fincher is widely considered one of Hollywood's most inventive suspense-film directors. The filmmaker's fan base now amounts to a cult following, with some viewers seeing his movies dozens of times.

[CONTEXTUALIZATION. Here the critic is discussing the director's other movies and their reception.]

And in *Zodiac*, which is based on a real-life, San Francisco horror story, Fincher seems intent on providing his fans with new reasons for multiple viewings.

A murder on a lovers' lane gets *Zodiac* off to a pulse-pounding start. Fincher's camera then takes us on a tour – not of the crime scene, nor of the police investigation – but of the offices of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, on Aug. 1, 1969.

It's not an aimless tour. The camera is charting the arrival that day of a letter that bears a symbol where the return address should be.

The letter claims credit for the murder we've just seen, as well as another one, offering details and demanding front-page play for a weird cipher – a coded message – to prevent further deaths.

The *Chronicle*'s crime reporter, Paul Avery, makes a phone call to the police and confirms that the details are right. And a two-decade mystery begins.

¹ **Review of:** *Zodiac* (2007), 157 min., directed by David Fincher; **Source:** (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7687059>).

The killer would soon be known as the Zodiac, and though all the newspapers give him coverage, he kills again and again, each time sending more ciphers.

The symbols intrigue the *Chronicle's* cartoonist, Robert Graysmith, who hovers around the reporter's desk deciphering and offering explanations he has gleaned at the library.

Watching him, you'll detect something a little obsessive about his interest in the story, which means you're getting the film's drift. The real Robert Graysmith got so caught up in the Zodiac murders that he quit cartooning to write the two books on which this movie is based.

Graysmith's onscreen alter ego, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, seems so tightly wound that the filmmakers thought it worth noting at the end that the real Graysmith now has a healthy relationship with his children – a character reference you won't find in most films.

[The passages above are all broadly concerned with the DESCRIPTION of the movie. A connection is also traced between the movie and the real-life murders that it reconstructs (“*Zodiac*, which is based on a real-life, San Francisco horror story”). This is probably not substantial or relevant enough to be called a CONTEXTUALIZATION.]

Obsession is the movie's theme: a driving force for the killer, the guys trying to catch him, and of course, for the filmmaker, who is nothing if not a stickler for detail.

[This short paragraph is an example of INTERPRETATION. It is nowhere explicitly stated that the movie is about obsession, yet considering obsession as an underlying theme helps us make sense of some of the movie's features.]

In his earlier pictures, Fincher amped up the emotions as he went for your jugular. Here, he's all about what the

police think they know, and why they think they know it: evidence, procedure, reconstruction at the crime scenes.

[CONTEXTUALIZATION. Here the critic is relating the movie to Fincher's previous movies.]

Fincher is so good at keeping info-crammed dialogue crackling, that a whole raft of really smart actors have signed on to work with him: Mark Ruffalo and Anthony Edwards as homicide detectives; Robert Downey Jr., making the crime reporter's boozy paranoia look alarmingly lived-in; Brian Cox hamming it up as showboat lawyer Melvin Belli.

[EVALUATION. There is an evaluative element here: the director's ability in managing dialogue sequences is praised. However, it is worth noting that this is not quite an evaluation of the movie. The critic is simply saying that the movie has one valuable feature, and arguably an important one for a detective movie.]

All of them are sharp and period-perfect in a film that doesn't just get the '70s cars and sideburns right, but that actually brings back the style of '70s detective flicks.

[CONTEXTUALIZATION. The movie "actually brings back the style of '70s detective flicks". This is not an example of CLASSIFICATION, as the critic is not saying that it is a movie of that genre, but simply that it shares aspects of their style.]

There are no tidy, last-minute plot twists to make you feel good in Fincher's *Zodiac*, just focus – to keep an audience focused – and the most disciplined filmmaking you've seen in forever.

[EVALUATION. The reviewer stresses Fincher's ability to keep the audience focused. The subsequent praise of his filmmaking is another evaluative element. What are the grounds of this evaluation? Presumably classification could contribute to it (if the movie had been explicitly classified as a thriller/detective movie, it would be clear that it is part of its goal to keep the tension going, and thus that being able to keep the viewer focused is going to be part of the artist's achievements.) But there is no such explicit classification in the piece. Another option is to consider the evaluation as partly grounded in the interpretation that is being offered. The critic interprets the work as being about obsession (the killer's obsession, but also, and perhaps predominantly, the obsession of wanting to find out who the killer is. If exploring the psychology of obsession is the point of the movie, then keeping the audience focused seems an important step towards achieving that goal: obsession is constant focus on a topic.)]

EXAMPLE 2

"*Signs* (2002)"²

'You're gonna feel pretty silly when [it turns out] this is all make-believe,' Gibson comforts his seriously spooked dog. You can be sure one of them's barking up the wrong tree, and it's not the mutt. Writer/director Shyamalan reads 'make-believe' as an injunction, not an escape clause. He wants us to believe in something so badly, anything will do. Gibson plays a Pennsylvania farmer, an ex-priest who lost his faith when his wife died in an auto accident. He lives with his two kids and his brother (Phoenix) in a wooden house surrounded by corn as far as the eye can see. When crop circles appear in his field and all over the world, he clings to denial for dear life. Is this a prank, a conspiracy, a miracle - or could it be The End? Shyamalan is technically a superb film-maker, for all that he's picked up most of his tricks from Spielberg and Hitchcock. The teasing first hour or so tingles with eerie suggestion and ominous disquiet. The film gets darker as the weight of what's transpiring hits home. The climax is pure horror - basement black. Of course, they blow it, big time. The denouement's an embarrassment and you hate yourself for being sucked in. But Mel did warn us.

[This piece is a bit too short, and more importantly, the critic produces a negative evaluation in the end, but does not reveal her motivations for it.]

² **Review of:** *Signs* (2002), 106 min., directed by M. Night Shyamalan; **Source:** <https://www.timeout.com/movies/signs>.

EXAMPLE 3

"1917 is an immersive, technical feat with emotional stakes to match"³

A movie made to look like one continuous shot sounds like a gimmick, but when it's employed to such great effect, as it is by co-writer and director Sam Mendes in his war film 1917, it marvels.

[We could say that this is an example of EVALUATION. The critic is commenting on the director's achievements (and thus on the work's success value): it is hard to make a good movie that is made to look as one continuous shot. This evaluation is grounded in the DESCRIPTION of the work as looking like a work that is shot in one take, but it could also be considered as grounded in a CLASSIFICATION of the work as a member of the category "movies that appear to be shot in a single take"].

The movie opens in Australia this week fresh off the back of its double Golden Globes wins for best drama and best director. It's an immersive, visceral and meticulously crafted film that has the emotional stakes to match.

The story is simple, and it's the contained discipline of the narrative that enables Mendes to pull off his ambitious technical feat without getting bogged down in too much scale.

Set during World War I, the film follows one mission entrusted to two young soldiers, Schofield (George MacKay) and Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman).

They're to deliver a message to the 2nd Battalion of the

³ **Review of:** 1917 (2019), 119 min., directed by Sam Mendes; **Source:** <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/movies/new-movies/1917-is-an-immersive-technical-feat-with-emotional-stakes-to-match/news-story/4b9579dd48581ebb690ea1942fcc5abb/#1>.

Devonshire Regiment to call off a planned attack against the retreating German troops. The Germans have set up an ambush and 1600 men, Blake's brother among them, are about to be killed if Blake and Schofield don't get there in time. They're relatively junior but they're fast, and one of them is great at navigation. So they're sent over the lines, across No Man's Land and beyond.

MacKay and Chapman are not household names, yet, with MacKay about to star as Ned Kelly in Justin Kurzel's *The True History of the Kelly Gang* out this month and Chapman best known for playing the doomed Tommen Baratheon in *Game of Thrones* as well as Billy Elliot on stage in London.

But the pair of youngsters anchor this film with committed performances that demanded a vigorous physicality, and emotional range. Schofield is the quiet one, having suffered through the nightmare of the Somme, while Blake is younger and more effusive.

[This paragraph contains DESCRIPTION, as well as an EVALUATION of the performance of the two leading actors (it is worth noting that this is not an evaluation of the work itself, though it may contribute to it).]

While there are specificities to each character, they also stand in for the everyman caught up in the scourge of global conflict.

[This could be considered an INTERPRETATION, in that it is suggested by the critic that the two soldiers the movie focuses on are a symbol of what WWI was like for most other soldiers who fought it.]

More recognisable names - Colin Firth, Andrew Scott, Mark Strong, Benedict Cumberbatch and Richard Madden - pop up momentarily for single scenes through 1917, but it's a movie where the performances belong to MacKay and Chapman. Mendes isn't new to the one-take - he concocted that seemingly one-shot opening sequence in the previous Bond movie, *Spectre*, about the only thing redemptive in that disappointment.

[This relates the movies to the director's other movies, so it is a case of CONTEXTUALIZATION.]

Mendes' movie also isn't a true one-shot take. Like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* and Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's *Birdman* before it, *1917* hides its edits, sometimes zooming in on someone's back or plunging into a waterfall. The longest take is actually about eight or nine minutes.

[The start of this passage is also an example of CONTEXTUALIZATION, although in this case the movie is being related to movies from different directors.]

But the effect works really well, mostly. In a scene like Schofield and Blake's perilous crossing of No Man's Land, the tension is wrought so tight that when one of them slips on the mountains of mud, expect audible gasps in the theatre. Because the camera never leaves the two characters, you are plunged into their experience. And that experience is intense.

One of the biggest challenges of one-shot takes is keeping the look dynamic when we're so used to the frame oscillating between close-ups, mid-shots and wide shots.

Mendes, in collaboration with acclaimed cinematographer Roger Deakins, has managed to thread a kineticism throughout the film, the camera weaving in and out of tight spaces and across impossible landscapes in a choreographed dance with the actors. You'll feel your adrenaline pumping.

[The first paragraph above ("But the effect") could be considered a case of EVALUATION. The critic is praising the movie's ability to generate certain emotions through skilled cinematography. Insofar as this passage explain how the movie achieves one of its goals (it achieves the arousal of tension in the viewer through the technique of the continuous shot), it could be considered a

case of ANALYSIS.]

There's only a moment or two when the effect veers into video game territory, which almost speaks more to how cinematic gaming has become than any wrongfootedness on Mendes' part.

[This is an interesting passage. It would be too much perhaps to say that this is a CLASSIFICATION of the movie as being stylistically "videogame-like", but it is perhaps fair to say that it is a CONTEXTUALIZATION of the movie with respect to other video products, such as videogames.]

Deakins has also breathtakingly lit each individual sequence, especially a night-time chase through a burnt-out village with its stone ruins transforming into a ghostly labyrinth as buildings burn in the background. *1917* is truly a magnificent filmmaking accomplishment, one that impresses not just with its technical prowess but also with its tender and compelling story.

[This final passage is a conclusive EVALUATION of the movie. Note that it is probably the most explicit positive evaluation in the whole review, but not the most interesting, in that there are fewer reasons offered, when compared to the previous ones.]