

Scoring Movies: A Personal Guide to Evaluating Film Content and Visual Storytelling

By Samuel R. Staley, Ph.D.

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I joined the ranks of committed movie reviewers in August 2016 after writing reviews intermittently for four years for the Independent Institute in Oakland, California.

Since then, I have learned a lot about visual storytelling, not the least of which is how subjective the movie critiquing business can be. Few objective criteria are available for the film critic, and personal taste plays a surprisingly important role in any final determination of a film's quality. The tone and structure of a reviewer's rhetoric often seems to suggest a level of certainty in their understanding of the elements that make a good movie. In truth reviewers bring biases and perspectives into their critiques. Most of the time, these biases are hard to identify and unravel, creating a conundrum for potential movie goers.

As a social scientist by training, this level of ambiguity has been problematic. While subjectivity is inherent in the process, transparency in how the final decisions are made can be very helpful to viewers as they evaluate the usefulness of the critique. Thus, this article provides clarity for my readers about what factors underlie my assessments of the quality and substance of the movies on which I choose to comment on or review. It also explores other challenges that have come along with my commitment to become a serious and consistent reviewer, including decisions about audience and their role in the review process, how to interpret my movie reviews, and how they compare to mainstream critics.

Adjusting Expectations

My goals as a movie critic are defined in part by output. One measure of success is audience response. My audience has grown steadily, and audiences seem to be responding positively. My movie reviews at the Independent Institute (<http://blog.independent.org/author/sam-staley>), my primary distribution platform, average about 200 shares via social media and email, with some generating more than 1,000. A few of these reviews have even been translated into Spanish and Portuguese.

However, to stake a claim as a "real" reviewer, I set an objective of writing at least

50 reviews per year or at least 60 film-related articles for blogs and other outlets. I have, in fact, viewed, scored or reviewed 75 movies although I have published reviews for just 47 through November 2017. Thus, I am ahead of my movie viewing, but falling short on writing articles about them.

What explains the lag?

In most cases, events overcame the timeliness of writing the review. This is particularly true for movies that cluster around certain release dates that conflict with the intensive part of

Contact

e. sam@srstaley.com

www.srstaley.com; <http://blog.srstaley.com>

the “day job,” teaching at a university and running an applied policy research center.

Late Fall, for example, is one period where distributors release films to qualify for Academy Award consideration. For example, *Lion* is an excellent story about lost identity and family. I missed this Best Picture Oscar nominee in the theater when it was released, and the review lost its timeliness (although I did see it in a theater in late December). I had the similar problem with *Fences*, the film adaptation of August Wilson’s play that featured stellar performances by Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. The seasonal nature of releases means that some good films slip through the cracks.

I have since shifted my approach to writing longer reviews for the Independent Institute, shorter ones (400 to 500 words) for my personal professional blog (blog.srstaley.com), and created a Facebook Page (@themovieswithsam) so I can expand my Internet footprint. My personal blog also allows me to explore the more creative contributions of film since the blog is more focused on storytelling, author marketing, and fiction writing.

A second source of delay stems from my creative choice to write longer reviews with more depth to more effectively take advantage of the global platform provided by the Independent Institute. Thus, my published reviews are extensive, sometimes exceeding 1,000 words.

In contrast, most professional movie reviews are between 300 and 500 words and conform to the column requirements and conventions of popular news outlets such as newspapers and television stations.

The review length is driven by a decision to provide more than a critique of the artistic content of the films. I examine and analyze the substance of the subject matter, and how the film’s story structure contributes to this content.

Generally, the substantive content component adds between 300 and 500 words to a typical column. If I stayed strictly to the artistic content, such as those on my personal blog, the article length would easily conform to a 500 word limit.

Adding Rigor to Movie Critiques

One consequence of reviewing both substance and creativity is a more complicated analytical process for evaluating a film. Rather than work through immediate impressions, I researched what conventional industry wisdom said about the content typical movie reviews covered and how films were structured. I added other elements based on my experience as a novelist and professional public policy analyst.

For example, as a novelist, I emphasize storytelling elements—plot, character depth and arcs, dialogue, and setting. As a public policy analyst, social entrepreneurship mentor, and social scientist, I am deeply committed to addressing social problems, including openly discussing ethics and policy. I learned that film has traditionally, and is often expected, to embed social commentary or insight into stories. This makes sense as a novelist because conflict

drives a story, and ethical dilemmas are some of the most effective ways to engage an audience because they draw on personal experience to interpret characters and their reaction to events. These elements factor prominently in my mental “map” for critiquing movies.

To discipline my thinking and add more rigor to an inherently subjective process, I constructed a rubric consisting of eight specific elements that can be roughly grouped into four categories (see Table 1).

About 37% of a movie’s overall score in my system is based on *storytelling elements*: the story composition and plot, the plausibility and appropriateness of the dialogue, and the depth of the characters and their story arcs. Another quarter of the scoring is based on what I call *film craftsmanship*: production values, artistic scope, overall film composition within the visual medium of film, and the story’s context within its genre or period. Another 25 percent of the film is scored based on *performance factors* such as the quality of the acting and the ability to engage the audience consistently.

<p><i>Storytelling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story composition & plot • Dialogue • Character depth & arc 	37.0%
<p><i>Film craftsmanship</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production values & artistic scope • Story context & composition (including genre, historical accuracy) 	25.5%
<p><i>Performance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entertainment & engagement • Acting quality 	25.5%
<p><i>Social message</i></p>	12.0%

Finally, about 12 percent of the final score is based on the *social message*. Films that

grapple directly with major social dilemmas or problems, such as *Gifted* (guardianship

and parental responsibility), *Lion* (adoption, personal identity, and family), or *The Hitman's Bodyguard* (ethics) will fare better in my scoring system than those that tread lightly on social or moral dilemmas, ignore them altogether, or leave the message ambiguous (e.g., *Logan Lucky*).

Each of these factors is given a score between 1 and 10, although in practice films are scored from 5 to 10. I assign scores the way we conventionally grade in school, where 90-100% would be an A (excellent), 80-89% is a B (above average), 70-79% is a C (average), etc. Very few films that make it to commercial release will be in the C range or lower. Thus, most films tend to score in the B range or higher.

Using a rubric has consequences for how films are judged. In my case, they bring transparency to an opaque and subjective process. Movies scored on my rubric tend to do better if they have strong storytelling elements such as clear character arcs, well

defined and layered characters, conflict that engages the audience, and dialogue that is plausible and believable.

Generally, I consider a movie that scores a 9.0 or higher as very good or excellent, and worth viewing in a movie theater. The film is probably strong on most, if not all, core elements. This score also suggests most adult viewers will enjoy it. A score in the 8 range suggests that the film is uneven, and some viewers might enjoy the theater experience more than others. A science fiction film scoring a 9 or higher is strong enough most viewers will likely enjoy the experience. A score of 8 suggests that, in my view, sci-fi enthusiasts will enjoy the film, but those not interested in this genre will be less entertained. A score in the 7 or lower range suggests the film is weak in a number of areas. My general recommendation would be to wait for the film to be distributed in DVD format, or stream it on-online.

Table 2
Score Mapping and Interpretation

General Rating	Numeric Score	Grade Equivalent	Practical Interpretation
Excellent	9 +	A	Most audiences will enjoy seeing these movies in a theater
Above Average	8 +	B	Select audiences will likely enjoy seeing these movies in the theater
Average	7 +	C	Most audiences will likely prefer to wait for these movies to stream on-line or for the DVD release
Below Average	< 7	D	Most audiences should simply skip these movies

An Audience Viewer's Movie Critic

After a year of reviewing movies seriously, I've come to the conclusion that my reviews are weighted toward audience appreciation and entertainment more than craft and artistic scope. I am a general audience critic rather than a critic's critic or an industry critic.

The rubric is suggestive of this bias. Storytelling components are the most important factors in the rubric, indicating entertainment value will have a strong influence on the overall score.

In fact, some empirical evidence supports this observation. The statistical correlation between my rubric-driven score and Rotten

Tomatoes critics is 0.596.* This is a statistically strong relationship but not a really strong one. The statistical relationship with the Rotten Tomatoes audience score, however, is stronger: 0.668. The correlation between my rubric score and Metacritic.com—an aggregator of movie critics but drawing from a smaller number—is 0.61.†

Of course, Rotten Tomatoes audience reviewers are still hard-core movie goers, so the sample is not what statisticians would call “random”. The mere fact that audiences go to the site to register their views implies a “self selection” bias that is not representative of the general movie-going audience.

Conclusion

The journey into the world of movie criticism has just begun, but several observations about my approach to film criticism and contribution to the discussion of film more general are apparent. The rubric has been especially helpful in clarifying my priorities as a writer and critic. The rubric also provides a way to bring transparency to the subjective task of creative work.

Overall, my critical style has tended to:

- Favor storytelling over artistic innovation;
- Align more directly with general audience preferences than established movie critics; and
- Highlight the content of movies and their stories over style.

Only time will tell whether these observations hold true after another year of robust movie reviewing!

About the Critic

Samuel R. Staley, Ph.D. (www.srtaley.com) is a movie critic for the Independent Institute in Oakland, California and an award-winning novelist. His book *Economics and Contemporary Film* will be published by Routledge in 2018. His novels have won literary competitions in the categories of historical fiction, young adult fiction, new adult/coming of age/romance fiction, and

* A statistical correlation of 1.0 would imply 100% agreement between my scores and Rotten Tomatoes critics while a score of 0.0 implies no correlation. So, this is a relatively strong correlation.

† Metacritic's statistical correlation with Rotten Tomatoes' critics is 0.923 and Rotten Tomatoes' audience is 0.607.

published mainstream/literary fiction. His commentary has appeared in national syndication as well as major publications such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review*, and *Reason* magazine. He is also a self-defense coach with a black belt in To-Shin Do, a contemporary interpretation of Ninjutsu.

Dr. Staley is an accomplished social scientist with more than professional 100 articles, studies, and reports under his belt. He earned his Ph.D. in public administration from The Ohio State University, M.S. in social and applied economics from Wright State University, and B.A. in economics from Colby College. His professional work has been published in leading academic journals, including the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, the *Journal of Transportation Engineering and Policy*, *Transportation Research Part A*, *Housing Policy Debate*, and the *Economics of Education Review*, among many others.

He currently is the Director of the DeVoe L. Moore Center at Florida State University where he teaches courses in social entrepreneurship, urban economics and land use, state and local economic development, and research methods.

Where to find out more about Sam's movie reviews

The Independent Institute: <http://blog.independent.org/author/sam-staley/>

Sam Staley's movie review Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/themovieswithsam>,
@themovieswithsam

Sam Staley's professional writing blog; <http://blog.srstaley.com>

Sam Staley's website: <http://www.srstaley.com/film-reviews.html>

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