

Teacher's Example *Writing in the Works* Homework Six and Seven

Homework Six

To warm up students for writing cultural commentary as required in the second essay/ book review.

Do one warm up exercise p.456:

Writer's Notebook Suggestion

2. Write two one paragraph dvd rental blurbs, one for a movie I liked and one for a movie I disliked.

The Playboys (1992) starring Albert Finney, Aidan Quinn and Robin Wright, before her Sean Penn *Days*, takes viewers to rural 1950s Ireland, where a much older town cop (Finney) impregnates a young and beautiful village maid (Wright), who bears his child but keeps his identity secret. When a travelling performer (Quinn) comes to town, drama unhinges the town's pent-up tensions. Traditional Catholic beliefs are threatened, and soon the secret is revealed. *Who are the playboys? Those who frolic in wigs and makeup, or men who take advantage of their power? Can't women play, too?* Even though Internet Movie Data Base does not confirm his casting, I swear, a pubescent Matt Damon lurks in the background of this film.

Bottleshock (2008) stars Alan Rickman as a Paris sommelier and Bill Bullman as a California vineyard owner who meet in the 1970s to make fine beverage history. Unfortunately, this film simply does not know how to become the film it wants to be, no matter how hard it tries. *Bottleshock*, which lacks balance, did not hire a name brand female lead and fails to maintain the viewer's attention. When you think about cleaning the bathroom instead of watching, the film's a soaker. If it's time in Napa Valley you're after, rent the much more satisfying *Sideways* (2004), but truthfully the earlier wine film wasn't as good as its hype either. Here's the best idea: *drink* (responsibly, of course) some good California wine and rent better movies about something else. Be sure to put this box down and proceed to another film. I like Bill Pullman in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and Alan Rickman in *Sense and Sensibility* (1995).

mini-essay film commentary

Maslin vs. Ebert on *Fight Club*

Back in 1999, neither Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* nor Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-times* knew enough about then unknown novelist Chuck Palahniuk to properly understand the genesis of the film *Fight Club*. With the benefit of time, *Fight Club* can be seen as part of Palahniuk's pantheon. His odes to the absurdity of reality have marched forth in step ever since (*Choke, Lullaby, Diary*) becoming more familiar over time. Yet when the film debuted, Maslin (more so) and Ebert (to a lesser degree) each still came up with relevant criticism of the film adaptation because David Fincher's direction and the acting (provided by Ed Norton, Brad Pitt and Helena Boneham Carter) remain true to the original material, except for the damn ending.

Maslin has long been a favorite of mine, since 1991 when she seemed to understand *Thelma & Louise* better than most critics. Two likeable women anti-heroes bearing guns against a posse of disparate men confused most critics, but not Maslin, who recognized the film's fiber from the start. She's accurate and unafraid in her response to *Fight Club*, too, calling it a film that "means to explore the lure of violence in an even more dangerously regimented, dehumanized culture" (compared to Fincher's earlier work with Pitt in *Seven*). Meaningful explorations of violence require violence and are worthwhile especially when the film portrays "the curious matter-of-factness of a dream" as it "touches a raw nerve." Maslin reduces a picture masterfully: "The film hurtles along so smoothly that its meaningfully bizarre touches, like Meat Loaf Aday as a testicular cancer patient with very large breasts, aren't jarring at all."

Ebert's reaction was less collected. Calling the film "macho porn," he became a bit reactionary, so much so that he slipped into stereotyping women and men in the audience (which also happened a lot with *Thelma & Louise*). "Women, who have had a lifetime of practice at dealing with little-boy posturing, will instinctively see through" *Fight Club*, he opined, while "men may get off on the testosterone rush." These archaic divisions are not helpful and never absolutely true, so why bother? Yet Ebert makes some good points. He argues that while "sophisticates will be able to rationalize" the film as an argument against violence, Ebert guessed that viewers "will like the behavior but not the argument." Probably. Especially since the movie ends with a major explosion, which is stopped from happening in the book (as I recall). One can never control the message once it's been sent, especially if violence is emphasized, well, then of course violence is emphasized. (Personally, I could never film a violent movie and release it, for fear night terrors and bad karma, which is one reason I'm not a rare female filmmaker.) Though Ebert may have guessed incorrectly about the actors' motivation for doing the film (*avoidance?* I doubt it), he supports the second class position of women in Hollywood despite his tendency to

typecast and overreact earlier in the review. In Ebert's view, Bonham Carter's Marla is angry "because none of the guys thinks having sex with her is as much fun as a broken nose." Touche. What a mixed up world, inside and out of the film.

I agree with both of these critics: the film is slick and well done, but I side with Ebert over the long haul on this one. *Fight Club* the movie starts stronger than it finishes. Violence and gore can be worthwhile, but special effects don't fool me.

Homework Seven

Write a profile of your nonfiction book author, topic or related figure based on research. Write a mini-essay. Later you might use this work for your second essay/ book review.

Notice how research begins by creating a Works Cited listing for each source. Do this work electronically, and you can copy and paste a Works Cited page together easily when needed for the paper. **NOTE:** The listings I've gathered below are not edited and perfected. They are based on my memory of proper MLA form and can be edited later. However, at least, I won't lose any sources. When researchers use a pathway like Google, which I used for these sources, the researcher must create her own Works Cited listings. (Compare: When students use the OCC library databases, listings are supplied. See **Homework Eight.**)

Works Cited

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"Douglas Brinkley." (faculty page) James A. Baker III Institute on Public Policy. Rice University. Web. Accessed Sept 2009.

Plotz, David. "Douglas Brinkley: John Kennedy Jr.'s Most Prolific Mourner." *Slate*. Web. 23 Jul. 1999.

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Douglas Brinkley: Star Historian

Douglas Brinkley, author of *Rosa Parks: A Life* (2000), (who is not the son of television anchor David Brinkley), is a prolific historian, James A. Baker II Institute on Public Policy Rice University professor, author of stacks of books, media personality who has appeared on *Comedy Central* and National Public Radio, husband and father of three. The man's on mission to accomplish much in his lifetime, much like the subjects he profiles. An impressive list of prestigious universities are listed on his resume including Ohio State University, Georgetown University, U.S. Naval

Academy, Princeton University, Hofstra University, Tulane University, and University of New Orleans. According to his Rice University profile, Brinkley writes for *Vanity Fair*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review* and *American Heritage*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. The university proudly boasts *The Chicago Tribune* labeled Brinkley "America's new past master." Brinkley has written about a stunning collection of standout Americans including Henry Ford, Teddy Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, Hunter S. Thompson and Gerald Ford.

In August 2009, on "The Daily Show" John Stewart heaved Brinkley's latest tome and joked that it should be read then folded out into a bed. He can laugh at himself briefly, but Brinkley takes history seriously, and thinks you should, too. David Poltz, writing for *Slate*, explains (inadvertently) why Brinkley was invited to appear on Stewart's show: because he's the people's historian. "Brinkley abhors the narrow academic history that has dominated universities," Poltz explains. "He scorns scholarly monographs and favors a democratic, populist history." One of Brinkley's early moves was to pack some students in a bus and road trip through history, visiting the Grand Canyon and Route 66, making pilgrimages to the haunts of Ken Kesey and Jack Kerouac, two seminal American 1950-60s road-trippers. Poltz comments, "The Majic Bus illustrates both the charms and flaws of Brinkley's notion of public history. . . . Brinkley is a cheerleader for American history. Everything is a celebration." Poltz does not care for Brinkley's unrelenting enthusiasm, but readers of his individual monographs might.

Brinkley brings to history, as exemplified in *Rosa Parks*, respect and curiosity for the female experience. He told NPR's "Morning Edition" that one of the highlights of Henry Ford's contribution to the Americana was his willingness to employ African Americans and eventually women. Brinkley described Ford as a "suffragist" who recognized the possibility of women's liberation through mobility. Ford was a visionary. Preferably women would do the family shopping in a Ford automobile, he thought.

Brinkley is poised to become a major historian in the footsteps of his mentor Stephen Ambrose (*Band of Brothers*). Even Poltz allows that Brinkley "writes more journalism than most hacks, and certainly a lot more *good* journalism than most hacks." That's about as good as the critics will allow.