Film Analysis Handbook

Comprehensive, easy to understand and clearly organised, the Film Analysis Handbook is a useful resource for any teacher of A Level Film Studies or GCSE Media Studies.
Author: Thomas Caldwell
Published by: Insight Publications, Australia
Price: 44 AU dollars
Reviewed by Sue Heffernan Smith

Comprehensive, easy to understand and clearly organised, the Film Analysis Handbook is a useful resource for any teacher of A Level Film Studies or GCSE Media Studies. Starting from an assumption of no previous knowledge, students are taken from basic concepts and terminology through to writing analytical essays on film texts. Thomas Caldwell, whose background is film criticism and secondary school teaching, clearly pitches his book as a traditional and straightforward primer. He does not get involved with alternative or new wave views on how film should be approached. He goes with what will equip students to answer exam questions. Therefore, the layout highlights key terms and there are activities which would be suitable for use in the classroom, as well as worksheets and a glossary. There is detailed explanation of the technical aspects of production. This is valuable as it is not only the student, but often the teacher, who has little practical knowledge of the subtleties of cinematography when approaching a course on film. Photo illustrations are used, with varying degrees of success, to show how graphic and spatial editing considerations work in practice. Meanwhile, the more basic checklist of types of shot, edit and camera movement is presented in an easy-to-understand format. Activities include thinking about how elements of cinematography can combine to produce particular shots which the film maker wants to achieve, eg to show a person whose life seems to be rushing past them, or to show two people falling in love. These activities are set out as charts which would be easily photocopiable so that they could be used after discussion or note-taking sessions to reinforce understanding or provoke further discussion. The book includes wide ranging examples from contemporary, ‘classic’, cult, blockbuster and arthouse films. These are all listed at the end of the book, along with a comprehensive general index. However, Caldwell – clearly a real film ‘buff’ – resists any inclination to spend much time on any of these films. This decision perhaps weakens the book, as the writing is enlivened where he discusses them. Caldwell stresses the point that films are culturally significant, and that to be able to analyse them, the student needs to be able to ‘read’ them, visually and aurally. The author then takes the reader on an easy to follow journey through some of the significant areas of film analysis. Throughout the book, there are contemporary examples and the chapters are set out with bullet pointed statements allowing for easy reference. Chapters include mise-en-scène,cinematography, editing, sound, narrative and genre. A section on intertextuality is helpful, in broadening the scope of discussion and introducing critical responses before the author offers model answers to assist students to write about film. The made up films used for these final examples do not work as well as the preceding comments on a range of real texts which give the book a certain critical weight. Overall, this book is a solid and easy to follow guide. It is engaging and up to date. I recommend it as a valuable addition to any Film Studies teacher’s resources. At present it is only available direct from the publisher at www.insightpublications.com.au.