

DOUBLE FEATURES

BIG IDEAS IN FILM

Discussion Questions

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Yossarian Is Alive and Well in the Mexican Desert

Nora Ephron

Why does Ephron emphasize that Nichols doesn't know if *Catch-22* will be "a good picture," despite the camaraderie and good humor of the cast? (11)

1. Why does Ephron repeat the line "a film is being shot here"?
2. Why does Ephron detail the challenges of shooting in Guaymas, which is "reachable only by boat"? (7)
3. Why does Ephron describe Nichols's "snorts of appreciation" as affecting the actors "in about the same way the bowl of food did Pavlov's dogs"? (10)
4. Why does Ephron include multiple examples of how Nichols directs the actors?
5. Why does Ephron describe the group working on the film as a "squadron of professed lunatics"? (12)
6. According to Ephron, what do the visits of Wayne and Welles reveal about Nichols and the cast?
7. Why does Ephron include Nichols saying it is necessary to "accept that there's a great difference between yourself and the artists who make films"? (16)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Is Nichols's statement that "none of the great movies has been a popular success" true today? (16)
- How important is the creative process in determining the success of a film?
- Can a director serve both art and commerce?

Countercultural Architecture and Dramatic Structure

David Mamet

Why does Mamet emphasize that “the only thing the dramatic form is good for is telling a story”? (22)

1. Why does Mamet begin the essay with a discussion of countercultural architecture?
2. Why does Mamet repeat that viewers want to know “what happens next”?
3. What does Mamet mean when he says the film director’s job is “*to tell the story through the juxtaposition of uninflected images*”? (19)
4. Why does Mamet point to neurosis as an example of the way performance art “works” for viewers? (19)
5. According to Mamet, why is no longer being interested in the story being told in a film a sign that it is “*not correctly designed*”? (20)
6. Why does Mamet believe that failing to respect the rules of storytelling leads to “obscenity” in films? (21)
7. In Mamet’s view, why should dramatic form be structured like “a syllogism”? (21)
8. Why does Mamet think that “to get into the scene late and to get out early is to demonstrate respect for your audience”? (22)
9. Why does Mamet believe that creators cannot successfully use drama “to change people’s lives, to influence, to comment, to express themselves”? (22)
10. What does Mamet mean when he says that “the film business is caught in a spiral of degeneracy because it’s run by people who have no compass”? (23)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree that “the audience can endorse the triviality of modern art, but they can’t like it”? (19)
- Can a film that tells a story successfully also influence the audience’s ideas or express the maker’s ideas?
- How heavily do your favorite films rely on the audience’s need to find out “what happens next”?

Shooting to Kill (selection)

Christine Vachon

Why does Vachon believe that aspiring producers, directors, and writers should treat independent filmmaking “with something like reverence”? (41)

1. Why does Vachon compare low-budget filmmaking to childbirth, in that “you have to repress the horror or you’ll never do it again”? (25)
2. Why is Vachon determined to keep making low-budget films “unless someone gives me \$40 million” to make the kind of movies she’s making as an independent filmmaker? (26)
3. As a producer, why does Vachon both get “a buzz from the power” and sometimes feel “stunned at my powerlessness”? (26)
4. What does Vachon mean when she says that “*you cannot be a producer unless you understand that it’s all your fault*”? (32)
5. When she meets with Shirley MacLaine, why does Vachon feel that MacLaine “doesn’t seem to get what Killer Films—or most independent films—are about”? (35–36)
6. Why is Vachon’s aim to “demystify the process” of filmmaking “without, I hope, demystifying it too much”? (39)
7. What does Vachon mean when she says, “You have to stay sane and also embrace the madness if you want to shoot to kill”? (39)
8. Why is Vachon confident that “as one underground becomes absorbed, another will form to take its place”? (40)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Vachon that “the more you know about the history of film, the better you can imagine its possibilities”? (28)
- Why do Hollywood stars sometimes choose to work on low-budget independent films?
- What role should government play in the funding of the arts?

Laugh, Cry, Believe: Spielbergization and Its Discontents

J. Hoberman

According to Hoberman, what is “Spielbergization?”

1. Why does Hoberman believe that Spielberg’s synthesis of Disney and Hitchcock is key to his “mass-audience psychology”? (46)
2. Why does Hoberman describe Spielberg’s oeuvre as “divided against itself,” with films by “Good Steven” and “Bad Steven”? (46)
3. According to Hoberman, why is Spielberg “something less than *artist*” but “the genius of the system”? (47)
4. Why does Hoberman consider Spielberg a “faithful barometer” of Hollywood’s effort to “be all things to all people”? (48)
5. What, to Hoberman, made Reagan’s funeral a “preeminent example of Spielbergization”? (55)

What kind of responsibility does Hoberman believe that Spielberg’s films have for real-world events?

1. Why does Hoberman suggest that *Schindler’s List* may have provided President Clinton with “a useful model” during the United States’ Balkan intervention? (48)
2. Why does Hoberman ask whether American history would have changed if *Saving Private Ryan* had been released a few years earlier?
3. According to Hoberman, in what way did *Saving Private Ryan* propose “a new *raison d’être* for American foreign policy”? (49)
4. Why does Hoberman characterize Robert Altman’s comments about the 9/11 terrorists having learned from Hollywood movies as “blunt or solipsistic”? (51)
5. On what grounds does Hoberman believe that *The Terminal* “was designed as supremely comforting sociological propaganda”? (54)
6. What does Hoberman mean when he says that “The movies may alter history in its representation—or provide an alternative history. But the only world they really change is their own”? (60)

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Laugh, Cry, Believe: Spielbergization and Its Discontents, *continued*

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Can a film, or filmmaker, change the course of history?
- What responsibilities do filmmakers have to their audiences? To their countries?
- Do you agree with Hoberman that Spielberg is “less than *artist*”? (47)

In the Blink of an Eye (selection)

Walter Murch

Why does Murch describe editing as “not so much a *putting together* as it is a *discovery of a path*”? (63)

1. Why does Murch introduce the example of editing *Apocalypse Now* by saying that it is often “at the edges of things that we learn most about the middle”? (61)
2. Why does Murch highlight the number of “ ‘shadow’ splices” in *Apocalypse Now*? (63)
3. What does Murch mean when he says that discontinuity is “in *and for itself*—by the very force of its paradoxical suddenness—a positive influence in the creation of a film”? (66)
4. Why does Murch believe that the rhythm of blinking is an important part of acting and editing?
5. Why does Murch stress that when cutting a conversation an editor must cut away either before a character stops speaking or after lingering beyond the finished speech, but “*cannot cut in between those two branches*”? (69)
6. According to Murch, why are the “three problems” of editing “wrapped up together”? (69)
7. Why does Murch describe the editor’s job as giving the audience “what they want and/or what they need just before they have to ‘ask’ for it”? (70)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- How might knowing more about the process of film editing change the experience of watching a movie?
- Do you prefer films in which cuts are more, or less, noticeable?

“One Hang, We All Hang”: *High Plains Drifter*

Richard Hutson

According to Hutson, what does the “nihilistic tinge” of *High Plains Drifter* reveal about the United States at that time? (90)

1. On what grounds does Hutson believe that the film’s “important drama is between hero and community”? (75)
2. Why does Hutson think that *High Plains Drifter* forces viewers to side with the drifter, who is “the catalyst, if not the destroyer, of a corrupt social entity”? (76)
3. According to Hutson, how does the film critique the idea that “American democracy was founded, maintained, and continually renewed in these frontier communities”? (76)
4. Why does the “fear of exposure and/or guilt” that bonds the townspeople make them vulnerable to the drifter? (78)
5. In what sense is Callie’s rape “a rape of the community at large”? (81)
6. Why does the paranoia of the townspeople lead them to see the drifter as “a hero or a ghost”? (85)
7. In what way does the drifter/stranger resemble “the returning veteran of the Vietnam War who becomes ‘a threat to the American Dream’”? (87)
8. According to Hutson, why can the film be seen as either giving Vietnam War–era America “a hero who could win” or showing that the “foundational image of the United States as a frontier community had failed”? (89)

Why does Hutson suggest that the unnamed drifter “may be the embodiment of all the heroes of former Western films, a ghost of a genre”? (85)

1. Why does Hutson believe that “the utter contempt” that Eastwood’s character shows for the establishments he encounters could be “an American form of fascism”? (73, 74)
2. In what way does Eastwood’s character “take on the role of a kind of Hobbesian monarch” in the community? (78)
3. On what grounds does Hutson suggest that Eastwood’s character might act as he does because he is “paranoid about his masculinity”? (81)

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“One Hang, We All Hang”: *High Plains Drifter*, continued

4. In what ways does the drifter’s “unchallenged coup d’état” force the community to reevaluate itself? (82)
5. Why is it the drifter’s “simple will to take action” that allows him to dominate the town? (83)
6. For the townspeople, why does the drifter become “a violent ghost of the community’s repressed conscience”? (83)
7. Why does Eastwood’s nameless character become “an object of projection for everyone” that can dissolve the “false solidarity” of the frontier community? (84)
8. Why does Hutson believe that Eastwood’s comments about the drifter show that Eastwood “is willing to make his favorite spectators into pathetic figures who need a fantasy figure they can never be”? (89)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree that “what makes a Western plausible or entertaining at this late date is pastiche”? (90)
- John Wayne famously told Eastwood that the townspeople in *High Plains Drifter* “did not represent the true spirit of the American pioneer, the spirit that had made America great.” (83) Do you agree with Wayne’s or with Eastwood’s assessment of the “true spirit of the American pioneer”?
- Are there film genres other than Westerns that can “comment on a cultural moment by commenting on other instances of the genre in the long history of the genre”? (91)

Lynch on Lynch (selection)

Chris Rodley, interview with David Lynch

What does Lynch mean when he says that films that reward repeated viewing have something “abstract” in them? (97)

1. Why does Lynch believe that films not driven by narrative can “get down and thrill your soul” more than narrative-driven films? (96)
2. Why does Lynch refuse to explain the meaning of his films?
3. According to Lynch, why is it fruitless for a filmmaker to try to defend a film?
4. What aspects of the Hollywood system make it difficult for filmmakers to “really go all out with cinema,” in Lynch’s view? (98)
5. Why does Lynch see the role of the radiator as an “opening to another place” as so important to *Eraserhead*? (98)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- How can viewers’ circumstances change the way in which they see a film? Why might someone view the same film differently ten years later?
- What can spontaneous bouts of creativity during filming, such as the creation of Lynch’s Lady in the Radiator, contribute to a film?

John Wayne: A Love Song

Joan Didion

According to Didion, why did John Wayne determine “forever the shape of certain of our dreams”? (106)

1. Why does Didion say that “deep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls” she is still waiting for Wayne to say the line about the house at the bend in the river to her? (105)
2. Why did rumors of Wayne’s illness throw “our very childhoods into question”? (106)
3. What qualities made Wayne seem to represent “another world, one which may or may not have existed ever but in any case existed no more”? (106)
4. Why does Didion include information about Wayne’s childhood and how he became a star?
5. Why do the actors and crew spend so much time talking about the time they spent in Durango? Why does Didion call Durango “man’s country”? (109)
6. Why does Didion describe Wayne’s work on *The Sons of Katie Elder* as his “fighting through number 165”? (110)
7. When Didion and her husband have dinner with Wayne and his wife, why does the room become “suffused with the dream” for Didion? (113)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What is the difference between an actor and a star?
- What actors today have an identifiable “code” in the way that Wayne did? (110)

Nonstop Action: Why Hollywood’s Aging Heroes Won’t Give Up the Gun

Adam Mars-Jones

According to Mars-Jones, why is there “now apparently no age limit to an action career in Hollywood” for male actors? (116)

1. Why does Mars-Jones describe Ford’s playing Han Solo in a new film as “a melancholy prospect, like someone dressing up in late life to match a graduation photograph”? (116)
2. According to Mars-Jones, why could actors like Humphrey Bogart and Spencer Tracy have a career in which “maturity was their present tense”? (117)
3. What does Mars-Jones mean when he says, “The flesh-and-blood person is surplus to requirements once an icon has been created”? (118)
4. On what grounds does Mars-Jones believe that we fans “do not feel sympathetic when our idols reveal themselves as mortal—we feel betrayed”? (119)
5. How does Mars-Jones answer the question of what gives Liam Neeson such “durability” as an older action hero? (120)
6. Why does Mars-Jones describe gravitas as “a sort of abstract firepower that does not need to pull the trigger”? (122)
7. What does Mars-Jones mean when he says, “A shrewd film star is both a work of art and its curator”? (124)
8. Why does Mars-Jones conclude that gravitas “is the best we are going to get” in terms of maturity on the screen? (125)

Why does Mars-Jones question whether gravitas is “even possible for women in the movies”? (122)

1. For women, why is there no facial mark, like Liam Neeson’s broken nose, that “communicates, however misleadingly, fearlessness and lack of vanity”? (120)
2. Why can men live off “the interest of the time and effort invested in making movies,” while women are “always spending the capital” of their looks? (120)

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Nonstop Action: Why Hollywood’s Aging Heroes Won’t Give Up the Gun, *continued*

3. According to Mars-Jones, why does female gravitas “necessarily” have “a charge of wariness”? (123)
4. Why does Meryl Streep’s “disinclination to establish a consistent persona across a range of roles” disqualify her from gravitas, in Mars-Jones’s judgment? (123)
5. What enables Judi Dench to be “defined not by being looked at but by looking”? (123)
6. Why does Mars-Jones describe as “cheeky” Almodóvar’s casting of his mother as a newscaster in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*? (123)
7. Why does Mars-Jones cite Marlene Dietrich as the prime example of a star being both a work of art and its “curator”? (124)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Mars-Jones that “film is porous,” in that real-life events in an actor’s biography affect how we see his or her films? (125)
- How potent a taboo do you think aging onscreen is today?
- Which actors do you believe have gravitas? What differentiates them from actors who don’t?

Willing

Lorrie Moore

At the end of the story, why doesn't Sidra want to go back to California?

1. Why does Sidra feel bad that it wasn't her naked hip that appeared onscreen?
2. Why does Sidra leave Hollywood to go home to Chicago?
3. Why does Sidra decide that "she hadn't been given the proper tools to make a real life with"? (128)
4. Why does Sidra tell Tommy, "I don't have *talent*. I have willingness"? (131)
5. When Walter says it's a "great country," why does Sidra respond, "Where do you live, . . . and how do I get there?" (133)
6. While she is dating Walter, why does Sidra think that now she is "somewhere else. Another world she no longer liked"? (135)
7. When Walter says it might be best for her to go back to LA, why does Sidra feel she is turning into a bird and "flying up and away"? (143)

Why does Sidra decide to date Walter?

1. During their first encounter, why does Sidra ask Walter about the last movie he saw?
2. Why does Sidra think of herself as "willing to give it a whirl" even though Walter can sense that she doesn't respect him? (135)
3. When Charlotte warns Sidra not to let Walter humiliate her, why does Sidra say, "I'm a very average person"? (136)
4. Why does Sidra get so angry about Walter's stock recommendation mistake?
5. Why does Sidra insist on knowing whether Walter had oral sex with the woman he went out with?
6. At the end of the story, why does Sidra feel that she is "gone, gone out the window, gone, gone" while Walter is talking to her? (143)

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Willing, *continued*

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What do people mean when they say that someone “should be in the movies”? (132)
- To what extent is Sidra’s story a criticism of Hollywood?

Furiosa: The Virago of *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Jess Zimmerman

Why does Zimmerman believe that “film as a whole can benefit” from the blurring of masculine and feminine qualities represented by Imperator Furiosa? (146)

1. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, why is it important that “the wives’ manifesto precedes them” onscreen? (146)
2. In what ways does Zimmerman see Furiosa “annexing the territory of men”? (146)
3. What qualities lead Zimmerman to describe Furiosa as a “virago”? (147)
4. What distinction is Zimmerman drawing between a female hero defying expectations and reshaping them?
5. According to Zimmerman, how does the virago expose “the fact that ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ are consensual fictions, designed to keep both women and men in their place”? (148)
6. Why does Zimmerman trace the “long pedigree” of the virago in literature? (149)
7. Why does Zimmerman describe the virago being “unsexed” as both a relief and a limitation? (151)
8. Does Zimmerman think the Return of Kings contributor is correct when he says that box office success for *Mad Max: Fury Road* will drive action films to make feminist statements?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Zimmerman that “art moves faster than politics, always”? (152)
- What other film characters would you describe as viragos?

Scary Movies

Kim Addonizio

Why does adult grief make the speaker feel the same “helpless” fear she did as a child at a horror movie?

1. As an adult, why does the speaker expect a Cyclops to drag her “from my kitchen / to the deep cave that flickered / into my young brain one Saturday”?
2. Why doesn’t sitting between her older brothers at the horror movie keep the speaker from feeling afraid as a child?
3. What does the speaker mean by being “pumped up / on candy and horror”?
4. Why does the speaker visualize death as “cruising his panel truck / of packages through your neighborhood”?
5. Why does the thought of the dead friend still getting phone messages and mail make the speaker “feel as afraid as I was / after all those vampire movies”?
6. What does the speaker mean by the concluding line, “and I know better”?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Why did certain movies scare you as a child? Do any movies scare you today?
- Why do many people watch horror movies even though they may feel “helpless” during them?

Skyspot

Manuel Muñoz

At the end of the story, why does the narrator think of *Nashville*'s last shot as he holds hands with Quetz?

1. Why do the narrator and Quetz like the aerial shots in films best?
2. Why does the narrator ignore Quetz when he says the narrator can “break into movies” in LA? (161)
3. Why does the narrator remain silent when his father tells him about the affair with Mrs. Santos?
4. After his father watches the end of *Nashville* with him, why does the narrator have “absolutely no idea” what his father is angry about? (165)
5. Why does the narrator describe scenes from *Nashville* between describing what has happened in his own life?
6. When Quetz asks the narrator to hold his hand, why does the narrator say, “I wish I had a camera”? (168)
7. When he looks up at the sky, why does the narrator feel that “I want the looking up, the open space sudden, mine”? (168)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- In your experience, are films more likely to help people escape from their problems or to confront them?
- What films or directors have changed the way you look at everyday life?

Edward Hopper's *New York Movie*

Joseph Stanton

What does the speaker mean by saying that “we are no safer here” than the usherette?

1. Why does the speaker say the man and woman in the theater are “as neat, respectable, and distinct” as the empty chairs?
2. Why does the speaker call the theater audience “an accidental / fellowship, sheltering from the city’s / obscure bereavements”?
3. Why does the speaker describe the movie “as if it were a destination / we were moving toward”?
4. What does the speaker mean when he says that the usherette “finds / a reverie that moves through / and beyond the shine of the silver screening”?
5. Why does the speaker describe the usherette as both “the star of Hopper’s scene” and “a play of light”?
6. Why does the speaker imagine the now elderly usherette dreaming “a New York movie” that raises possibilities that “time has served to lower”?
7. What does the speaker mean when he says that “we do not reign here, except in dreams”?
8. Why does the speaker conclude by noting that Hopper has placed “a slab of darkness and an empty chair” at the center of the painting?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree that films raise possibilities that are lowered by the passage of time?
- Look at an image of Edward Hopper’s *New York Movie*. Does seeing the painting alter or add to your interpretation of the poem?

Why We Crave Horror Movies

Stephen King

According to King, why do we crave horror movies?

1. Why does King analyze several types of horror films, including horror movies driven by economic, political, and scientific fears?
2. According to King, why does “one generation’s nightmare” become “the next generation’s sociology”? (182)
3. How does King see horror movies like *The Exorcist* capitalizing on “the unease generated by changing mores”? (188)
4. When describing “universal” fears, why does King say that “we’re all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better”? (192)
5. According to King, why have horror movies “always been the special province of the young”? (192)
6. Why does King describe “the best horror films” as being “reactionary, anarchistic and revolutionary all at the same time”? (194)
7. According to King, how do horror movies “keep the gators fed”? (194)

How does King differentiate between “horror for horror’s sake” and “art”? (171)

1. Why does King begin by comparing the sophistication that “a genuine fan of horror films” develops with that acquired by “a follower of the ballet”? (171)
2. Why does King say that if horror films have “redeeming social merit,” it lies in their “ability to form liaisons between the real and the unreal”? (172)
3. According to King, why will a good horror film “put the pressure on at as many points as it can”? (174)
4. What does King mean when he says that in horror films “logic goes a long way toward proving morality”? (175)
5. Why does King point out in *The Amityville Horror* the “one quiet phrase of pure music in a film that is otherwise all crash and bash”? (177)

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Why We Crave Horror Movies, *continued*

6. According to King, why do blockbuster films “always break the demographic hammerlock that is the enemy of intelligent filmmaking”? (189)
7. Why does King describe films that deal with universal fears as crossing “into the taboo lands for sure”? (192)
8. How does King reconcile the claim that the best horror films are art with the statement that they have “a dirty job to do”? (194)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with King that horror films are “innately conservative, even reactionary”? (193)
- Which horror films do you believe deserve to be considered art?

Matinée

Robert Coover

Does this story depict two people in a variety of scenes, a variety of people being watched by two people, or something else?

1. Why are none of the characters in the story referred to by name?
2. Why does the story repeat settings, lines, and references to specific movies?
3. Why do characters often leave a movie if they know “how it turns out”? (197)
4. Why does the story feature confusion between the role of a prostitute and a suburban housewife?
5. In the last paragraph, why does the woman’s struggle to remember if she has actually seen the hotel room before make her wonder if she “has seen too many movies”? (204)
6. Why does the story end with the film breaking in the projector?

What are the characters looking for in the movies they watch?

1. Why, when she enters the old movie house, does the first female character hope to “experience once again the consoling power of sudden uncomplicated love”? (195)
2. Why is the first male protagonist so “absorbed in the film” on TV that he doesn’t notice the woman who has sat down beside him? (197)
3. Why does the “spark-to-fire lady” think of the plot of a different movie while watching another one on the TV in the hotel room? (197)
4. Why can’t the female character in the “love hotel room” decide whether *Matinée* is a romantic movie? (199)
5. Why does the female character in the last paragraph tell the man that he is “chasing phantoms”? (205)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- To what extent do the movies you have watched affect the way you experience your daily life?
- Are movies more likely to enrich our lives or to distract us from them?

The Last Movie

Rachel Hadas

What connection does the speaker see between *Othello* and the death of the other character in the poem?

1. Why does the speaker begin with the date and a description of *Othello*'s "black and white grid of rage"?
2. Why does the speaker tell us that "all the rest was flashback" after the film's opening?
3. Why do the two people "lurch" out onto the street after the movie?
4. Why does the speaker see the alternatives for the other character as attempting "to rise to rage and grief. Or you can yield / to the cozy quicksand of the bed"?
5. At the end of the poem, why are the "anecdotes" and "comforts" of the "walls of books" described as having turned into "black glass"?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What moviegoing occasions do you recall most strongly, and why?
- If you are feeling sad or angry, would you prefer to see a movie that intensifies your feelings, or one that takes you out of them?

Some Months After My Father's Death

Sheryl St. Germain

Why is the speaker “soothed” by the character in *Twelve Angry Men* who reminds her of her father, even though she considers the character “despicable”?

1. Why does the speaker call Henry Fonda “the tight-lipped moral one”?
2. Why does the speaker list the “weaknesses” of the character who resembles her father?
3. Why does the speaker watch the movie “again and again”?
4. Why does the speaker find the character’s “shrugging of the shoulders at every crucial question” a comforting reminder of her father?
5. Why does the speaker conclude by saying it is “strange” that we can prefer the familiar, “however terrifying”?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What do some people enjoy watching the same films again and again?
- Do you agree that the familiar is comfortable, even when it is also terrifying?

The Birds (selection)

Camille Paglia

Why does Paglia conclude that at the end of *The Birds* Melanie “has been whipped back to her biological place in the pecking order”? (223)

1. Why does Paglia liken the attack Melanie undergoes in the attic to a “crucifixion”? (215)
2. According to Paglia, what is the significance of the bird attack starting “literally from the moment Melanie crosses her legs”? (217)
3. Why does Paglia describe the attic bedroom where Melanie is attacked as “gang-raped even before the mass assault begins on Melanie”? (220)
4. What does the “strobe-like effect” that Paglia notes in the attic scene contribute to its meaning? (220)
5. Why does Paglia compare Melanie during the attic attack to a “strung-out partygoer” and Patty Hearst? (220)
6. In Paglia’s view, why is it important that seeing the catatonic Melanie sitting in the car “often evokes laughter from an audience”? (222)
7. Why does Paglia describe Melanie at the end of the film the kind of “damaged goods” that Lydia prefers? (223)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Paglia’s interpretation of *The Birds*’ final scenes?
- Is it more powerful for a film to have a clear conclusion or to end ambiguously?

Your Childhood Entertainment Is Not Sacred

Nathan Rabin

According to Rabin, why do some adults react to film and television remakes with “a real sense of hurt and injury, even betrayal”? (225)

1. Why does Rabin differentiate between objecting to a remake of something that was “genuinely good” and a remake of a show like *Scooby-Doo*? (225)
2. What is it that Rabin believes motivates adults to defend “the entertainment they worshiped during a precritical phase of their thinking”? (225–226)
3. Why is Rabin in favor of remakes that allow young audience members to relate “immediately” to older stories? (226)
4. Why does Rabin emphasize that “we all better stop being terrified of difference if we’re ever going to evolve as a culture”? (227)
5. Why does Rabin end by asking those worried about remakes to “allow the possibility, radical as it may seem, that these new versions of old favorites might be just as good as the movies we loved as kids”? (227)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Why do some fans defend their childhood entertainment memories so passionately?
- What film from your childhood would you be most skeptical about seeing remade? Why?

Pygmalion's Ghost: Female AI and Technological Dream Girls

Angelica Jade Bastión

Why does Bastión conclude that both *Ex Machina* and *Advantageous* show the “impossibility” of a future in which technology allows women to “reassert and play with their own identities”? (239)

1. Why does Bastión describe Pygmalion's creation as “a dream girl with no dreams of her own”? (229)
2. How does Bastión see both films as demonstrating “the inherent horror of the Pygmalion myth”? (230)
3. Why does Bastión disagree with Haraway's optimistic vision of women's use of technology, even though she describes Haraway's words as “revelatory”? (231)
4. In what ways does Bastión see *Ex Machina* as reaffirming “age-old biases about ambitious women”? (234)
5. Why does Bastión describe *Ex Machina* as not “so much a woman's fable of coming into her own, as a man's nightmare”? (235)
6. According to Bastión, how does *Advantageous* show that “technology doesn't free us from patriarchal systems, but reaffirms them”? (236)
7. Why does Bastión say that “embodying the perfect creation in *Advantageous* isn't a boon, but a death sentence”? (239)
8. Why does Bastión argue that the two films reveal the same unlikelihood of a feminist future enabled by technology, even though she sees *Advantageous* as questioning sexism and racism in a way that *Ex Machina* doesn't?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Haraway that cyborg imagery “can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves”? (231)
- Which science fiction movies do you think have done the most to question traditional gender roles?

The Solace of Preparing Fried Foods and Other Quaint Remembrances from 1960s Mississippi: Thoughts on *The Help*

Roxane Gay

According to Gay, why does *The Help* show that “we are nowhere” in “acting right about race”? (247)

1. Why does Gay know she will be upset by *The Help* from “the moment [she] saw the first maid’s uniform grace the screen”? (242)
2. On what grounds does Gay characterize *The Help* as “science fiction”? (243)
3. Why does Gay see the film as “an embarrassment of riches for fans of the magical negro trope”? (243)
4. Why does Gay praise the acting in the film and say “the cast is not the problem here”? (244)
5. Why does Gay call it “obscene to imagine” that the character of Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan could save the African American maids by getting them to talk about their work? (246)
6. At the end of the movie, why does Gay feel that her heart has been flattened into “cardiac jerky”? (246)
7. Why is Gay most troubled by the “white wish fulfillment” she sees in *The Help*? (247)

Why is Gay “conflicted” about whether white writers should be “working through racial difference”? (249)

1. Why does Gay admit that there were times when she “laughed or was moved” during *The Help*? (248)
2. Why does Gay say, of being troubled by the fact that *The Help* was written and directed by white people, “I know it’s wrong but I think, ‘How dare they?’ ” (248)
3. Why does Gay say that writing difference “requires a delicate balance, and I don’t know how we strike that balance”? (248)
4. Why does Gay remark that she writes across difference all the time and that “the joy of fiction is that, in the right hands, anything is possible”? (249)

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The Solace of Preparing Fried Foods . . . , *continued*

5. Why has the experience of watching *The Help* made Gay feel she is “far less tolerant” than she should be of white writers imagining African American experience? (249)
6. Why does Gay say that “Kathryn Stockett tries to write black women, but she doesn’t try hard enough”? (249)
7. At the end of the selection, is Gay asserting that writers should stick to “strictly writing what they know”? (249)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Can a film be a “good movie” if you need to watch it without thinking about it? (244)
- What determines whether a writer or filmmaker can responsibly work across racial difference?
- How prevalent today is the “magical negro” trope that Gay describes in filmmaking?

Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth (selection)

A. O. Scott

Why is Scott “grateful” for the media storm that followed Samuel L. Jackson’s critical tweet about Scott’s review of *The Avengers*? (253)

1. Why does Scott call the insults he received from Jackson’s Twitter followers “canonical”? (253)
2. Why does Scott describe the criticism he faced for the review as making him “a make-believe martyr for a noble and much-maligned cause”? (254)
3. Why does Scott direct a question to himself about whether he’s “hypocritical” and unwilling to take the kind of criticism he dishes out? (254)
4. Why does Scott believe that *The Avengers* is “an extremely interesting and complex artifact, and that its successes and limitations are worth puzzling over”? (256)
5. What does Scott mean when he says he appreciates “the double standard that Jackson invokes as he places *The Avengers* simultaneously beneath . . . and beyond” criticism? (256)
6. Why does Scott see criticism of popular art as a necessary antidote to being “lulled into passivity” as consumers of culture? (257)
7. Why does Scott analyze and praise *Ratatouille* at length?

Why does Scott believe it is the critic’s job to “refuse to look at anything simply as what it is”? (255)

1. Why does Scott accept “provoking people to question our competence, our intelligence, our very right to exist” as a major part of being a critic? (252)
2. Why does Scott see Samuel L. Jackson’s tweet about Scott’s *Avengers* review as raising the “valid and vital question” of what the job of the critic is? (254)
3. According to Scott, why do we judge whatever we encounter, “whether or not it’s our job”? (254)

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Better Living Through Criticism, *continued*

4. Why does Scott link passively consuming culture to being politically “conscripted into a polarized climate of ideological belligerence”? (257)
5. Why does Scott describe the critical impulse as “thinking against our own prejudices”? (258)
6. According to Scott, why must a critic’s assessment start with “a sincere and serious commitment”? (260)
7. What does Scott mean when he says that a “neutral—or skeptical, or just curious” perspective that is outside fandom is the only thing there is room for in criticism? (261)
8. Why does Scott raise the possibility that he’s “not really sure” who he’s talking to? (262)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- How would you distinguish between criticism and fandom?
- Are some works “critic proof”?
- How should we choose which art to engage with in a time of abundance?