Annotation manual for formal and functional zones in film reviews

- For functional zones. The main distinctions in functional zones are DESCRIBE, COMMENT, or DESCRIBE+COMMENT. When looking at the subcategories of each, think of the main intention behind the entire paragraph. There may be some BACKGROUND information, but if the main intention is to comment on the actors, then use DESCRIBE+COMMENT-ACTORS-CHARACTERS, rather than BACKGROUND, even if the description part is longer.

For example, the following paragraph has some background information (about Universal Pictures), but its main purpose is to provide an overall negative evaluation of the movie under review, therefore it receives a COMMENT-OVERALL label.

(1)   Universal Pictures, one of the big losers at the box office in 1998 (until the success of *Patch Adams*, the studio was swimming in a pool of blood-red ink), has started off 1999 in less-than-stellar fashion. Despite protests of confidence in the production, the Universal Honchos elected not to offer any advance screenings for *Virus*. Loose translation: "We know this is a really bad film, but we hope to sucker as many people into theaters as possible on opening weekend, so we don't want critics trashing it beforehand." I generally go into this sort of movie with a sense of profound skepticism. Once in a rare while, I find myself pleasantly surprised. This was not one of those occasions. Put plainly, *Virus* is 95 minutes of unrelieved tedium.

Note that a + sign in a label means both exist (i.e., DESCRIBE+COMMENT).

1.2 Full lists of zones

Tag	Subtag
Describe	Plot
	Character
	Specific
	General
	Content
Comment	Plot
	Actors+characters
	Specific
	General
	Overall
Describe+Comment	Plot
	Actors+Characters
	Specific
	General
	Content
Quote	-
Background	-
Interpretation	-

Table 1. Functional zones

Category	Tag
Structural elements	Tagline
	Structure
	Off-topic
Information about the film	Title, Title+year, Runtime, Country+year, Director, Genre, Audience-restriction, Cast, Credits, Show-Loc+Date, Misc-Movie-Info
Information about the review	Source, Author, Author bio, Place, Date, Legal notice, Misc-review-info, Rating

Table 2. Formal zones

2.1.3 SPECIFIC

A description of any other specific aspect of the movie. The aspect can be optionally recorded in the comment field. An example is the below, which is a description of the "mature" elements of a movie (and not the audience-restriction formal zone, see 3.2.7).

(4)   "Drive Me Crazy" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It includes some importunate back-seat groping, some excessive drinking and its consequences, and schoolyard language that seems intended to spare the film the dreaded G rating that might have alienated the teen-agers who are its most likely audience.

2.1.4 GENERAL

A description of more than one aspect of the movie in a single paragraph. Note that if the main purpose is to describe the movie as whole, the CONTENT tag should be used, and if the plot or characters are the main emphasis, those tags should be used instead.

2.1.5 CONTENT

What the movie is about, in abstract terms. It is different from plot in that CONTENT should be able to be rephrased as "This movie is about X…", without much more detail.

(5)   The film is dense with people and events that dramatize forgotten aspects of history -- including the intensity of the abolitionist battle decades before the Civil War, the horrific cruelty of the

2.2.4 GENERAL

Opinion on various aspects of the film combined. The following example contains extensive commentary on both the special effects and the script.

(7)   Although *Virus* fails in almost every conceivable area - characterization, acting, script, musical score, and cinematography - the special effects are surprisingly effective. The problem is, they're visuals in the service of nothing - eye candy with no purpose other than to show off how good the effects team is. The strength of the visuals shouldn't be a surprise, since director John Bruno, making his debut at the helm, has a special effects background (he worked on films like *Ghostbusters, Terminator 2*, and *The Abyss*). Unfortunately, his aptitude with models, animatronics, and computer-generated monsters doesn't extend to any other part of the production. Bruno should have started with a real script instead of a group of pointless scenes strung together. *Virus* is based on a supposedly dynamic comic book series created by Chuck Pfarrer (who also co-wrote the screenplay), but the result makes Charles Schulz's "Peanuts" seem complex and challenging by comparison.

2.2.5 OVERALL

What the author altogether thinks about the film; summary of his/her opinion. It tends to happen at the beginning or the end of a review, and needs to be distinguished from TAGLINE (see below).

(8)   You've Got Mail may not travel the Sammy-Sosa-like distance of the earlier film, but it's over the wall. A homer is a homer.

2.3 Describe + Comment

Within the same paragraph, the author mixes descriptive elements with opinion. Any paragraph that contains at least one independent clause that is purely description and one that is purely comment where there is a specific word or phrase that indicates a clear attitude

Nor should descriptive asides in an otherwise comment-filled paragraph be enough to warrant a DESCRIBE+COMMENT. In the example belo

(12)   AMERICANS NEVER SEEM phonier than when we're being reverent about our past. All it takes is the mere mention of magic phrases like "Founding Fathers" or "Our Great Heritage" to turn us into "cultured" people who profess to enjoy what they think is "enriching" rather than what they actually like. I'm not saying that no one can honestly enjoy American history (simply as a story, how can you not?), just that our appreciation is so often showy and false, furrow-browed and solemn, when our natural comportment is casual, slangy, disrespectful.

2.6 Interpretation

The author relates some aspect of the movie to another framework of ideas. This is a subjective statement, but it does not emphasize positive or negative evaluation (in which case the label would be COMMENT).

3.2.5   DIRECTOR

3.3.8   RATING

The overall rating assigned by the author to the film (e.g., *3 stars out of 5*) If some other information is included, use RATING, not MISC-REVIEW-INFO.

References

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