

Critiques of Atlanta-Based Events and Topics Related to Entry-Level Multimodal Composition Classes at Georgia Tech (2007-2010)

The critiques below are essays that students opted to develop, re-configure and evaluate as part of the writing section of their Final Digital Portfolios. Though I have received permission to include the essays on this site, I am deleting each student's name from his/her paper to ensure anonymity. The works are meant to show the development of each author's voice in reference to acquiring the skill of reviewing various cultural events and artifacts.

Review of Live Performance Event

***Peach Drop, Stop, and Roll* Alliance Theatre Sunday February 22, 2008**

Last Thursday, I went to the dress rehearsal of the show *Peach Drop, Stop, and Roll*. I had learned from class that the performance would be about the city of Atlanta, but other than that, I entered the show not knowing what to expect. As I watched the performance, I learned that the show focused on the human aspect of the city of Atlanta more so than the physical city. The show focused on the lives of Atlantans, the problems they faced, and the connection that they felt with the city they called their own.

The performance was heavily reliant on humor to convey these aspects of life in Atlanta. A majority of the show was scripted; however, there were some parts of the show that were improvisational skits that relied on the audience to shape the direction of the particular scene. The performance was organized in a series of comedic sketches that generally alternated between a long scene and a brief scene that usually ended with a one-liner. I thought that this format was an effective way to hold the audience's attention. Using the audience's own input was also a great way to keep the show interactive, engaging, and above all, entertaining.

I would certainly recommend *Peach Drop, Stop, and Roll* to anyone in Atlanta who is looking for a good comedy production. The show brings out many of the mundane aspects of life in Atlanta, such as the horrific traffic or Clark Howard's rambunctious consumer reports, and brings out the humor of these situations. Another aspect of the show that I enjoyed was that it did not alienate audience members who might not have hailed from Atlanta. The performance encapsulated life in any big city—with a focus on Atlanta in particular.

My favorite aspect of the performance was the tight-knit atmosphere in the theater. I liked the fact that there were only six performers who changed roles to adapt to different scenes.

They often came off-stage into the audience to continue their performances as well. This made me feel like there was a connection between the audience and the performers. There were not that many props, which allowed the audience to concentrate more on the acting than any special effects. The “human props,” such as the Olympic Park fountains, were extremely entertaining. Overall, *Peach Drop, Stop, and Roll* was entertaining and creative, and I greatly appreciated the opportunity to watch this exceptional show.

Critique of Comedy Website

Onion News
November 2009

A cursory glance over the homepage will lead you to the terribly false assumption that *the Onion* is an ordinary news aggregate, complete with tabbed categories, a dramatic looking headline news story, and a small logo in the upper left corner. Only when you read the bold text under the large photo, “Rich Guy Feeling Left Out of Recession” do you realize that the site might not be what you expected. *The Onion* is a comedic parody of the news genre we interact with on a daily basis, and attracts an audience that is familiar with the news world: that is to say, nearly everyone.

The site employs its visual content in a manner almost exactly identical to other common news websites, such as Fox, CBS, and CNN news. In fact, even the ads are placed in locations very similar to the news websites. The color scheme is a simple green and white, not unlike CNN’s red and white colors. There is no indication anywhere on the site visually that would lend itself to the fact that the site was intended to be humorous. A person who did not know English wouldn’t be able to discern the difference between the Onion and any other news site. Its mild-mannered stateliness belies its wacky personality.

The Onion has actually expanded to incorporate more sources of news to mimic. For instance, they have ‘radio clips’ announcing the marriage of a Christian male who wanted to ejaculate. They’ve also included a breaking news story on video: “Scientists Successfully Teach Gorilla It will Die Someday”. Their quaint local section shows a nice, WASP-ian family portrait with the title “White Family Moves into Town”. The first line reads: “Shock, outrage, and fear were just some of the emotions that failed to sweep through this affluent Chicago suburb

Monday, when word got out among residents that a white family had moved to town over the weekend.” The slight twisting of ideas causes all of these headlines just nearly plausible on any other site.

The Onion’s humor originates from how close it is to actual news stations and websites. If you changed perhaps a single word in a headline on Fox News, it could appear as a headline in the Onion. The mimicry is so close, it makes you realize how formulaic all news is. This type of comedy is very appealing to me because they are jokes about something that I would otherwise think is mundane. Each individual news story is a parody on some actual story or a parody of the schematic of the news telling. In fact, if you dig into deeper layers, you will find that there is something called Onion Personals, where the onion has created a side project parodying online dating. Everything on the site is a parody, an endless world of laughter, fully immersive and fully fulfilling.

Critique of Free Atlanta Event

Movie Night at GA Tech Dorm **Spring 2010**

Throughout the course of this class I have attended numerous events, some for the class and some unrelated to it. Each event seemed to build upon the one before it as I learned ways to analyze what I was viewing and experiencing. Despite how different and unique all the of previous experiences were, they all had a common theme. Before this particular assignment I considered only the events that had some cost involved to actually be “cultural events.” This final project has opened my eyes as to what can be seen and done around Atlanta, all for free. This can be anything from going to a park, going to a free night at a museum or even participating in a weekly movie-watching event. My free event happened to be the latter.

Every Thursday this semester, several of my friends and me gather to watch a movie from the Internet Movie Database's top 250 list. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) is an online database featuring information about movies, television shows and actors (among a host of other things). One of the ancillary features of the website is its listing of the top 250 movies as ranked by users of the site (known as the IMDb Top 250). This list only considers non-documentary theatrical releases that run for at least 45 minutes and have accumulated over 1500

votes. While I do not consider these to actually be the best 250 films in existence, the list is a good measure of whether a movie is worth seeing and is an effective way of expanding one's viewing horizons. In contrast to other popular film rankings, such as the American Film Institute's top 100 movies, the IMDb ranks are in a constant state of flux, which means that contemporary movies have just as much of a chance of being on the list as older films, something which is all but impossible on the more formal lists.

The film we decided to watch for the particular night I will be discussing was *8 ½*, directed by Italian director Federico Fellini. The movie was released in 1963 to near unanimous critical acclaim. Its name refers to it being the eighth and a half film that the director made – six feature length films, two short films and a collaboration with another director (the latter three counting as half a film each). In addition to all the critical acclaim, the movie won two Oscars, one for Best Foreign Language Film and another for Best Costume Design. It was for mostly these reasons that we decided to watch it.

According to Richard Schechner in his book *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, rituals are not only present in religious rites, “but secular public life and everyday life are also full of ritual.” Our weekly “ritual” of gathering and watching movies would fall under this category of secular rituals. The ritual helps us to enter an alternate reality, separate from our ordinary lives (Schechner 52). Sitting in a comfortable chair with the lights off, as the movie starts you begin to get absorbed into this “second reality,” as Schechner calls it. Entering into the world that the movie portrays transports the viewer in a manner similar to religious performances. Yet, despite how deeply absorbed or engrossed one is in the actions and experiences, the “transportation” ends and “people return to their ordinary selves” after the event is over (Schechner 72).

In addition to the ritual involved in the event, the movie itself embodies much of what Schechner describes. The film is what the author would term “reflexive,” or referring back to oneself. Centering around a director, Guido Anselmi, suffering from writer's block, the plot includes many autobiographical elements from the director of the film. As Guido's life begins to crumble around him as he works on a science fiction film, flashbacks and dream sequences are seamlessly interspersed into the movie. Sometimes this causes confusion in the viewer about

whether an event is actually happening, a deliberate act by the director to emphasize the effects of modernization and the struggle to understand and make sense of one's life.

The film is largely about the creative process and finding happiness in life no matter how difficult and fragmented it is. The opening scene, for instance, shows a man sitting in a car stuck in traffic as the car starts to fill with some sort of gas. He attempts to open the windows, to no effect, as people in other vehicles look on, doing nothing. Eventually, the man – the main character as it turns out – manages to get the window open and climbs on top of the car. As he stands on the roof of the car, it begins to move and he stretches his arms out to the side. At first, despite how surreal the scene is, you are unsure of whether it is actually happening or not. But, as the absurdity of the event dawns on you, you begin to realize that something isn't right, yet you are never explicitly told that it isn't real. This subversion of the “established order of things” is how Schechner describes postmodernism.

As the movie continues, the viewer begins to understand that the director feels trapped by all the expectations thrust upon him. His creative process interrupted, he is no longer having fun practicing his art. This once enjoyable occupation has become merely a business to him. The film's producer is constantly bothering him to make various decisions and not be so frivolous. This “bias against play” is evident throughout the movie (Schechner 112).

One of the more moving and memorable scenes involves a flashback to the director's childhood, where he and some of his friends pay a visit to the local prostitute and pay her to dance for them. As the woman dances, some local priests find the boys and chase them down. The mere act of play has become “frivolous, unimportant, and even sinful” in the eyes of the priests.

Another scene, closely related in theme to the bias against play, features Guido and his wife sitting at an outdoor cafe. His wife is scolding him for having a mistress as he fervently denies having one. As the argument continues on, his mistress walks up and sits several tables away. His wife recognizes her, but instead of getting more irate, she goes over and begins speaking to her as if they are old friends. Now obviously a fantasy of the director, the scene continues on, with him entering a house full of women – including his wife, his mistress, some of the actresses from his film and the prostitute from his childhood – all of whom are competing for

his attention. This “illusion” that Guido is experiencing acts almost as a safety blanket for him, allowing him to retreat from reality into a zone where he is free from the responsibilities and pressures of everyday life (Schechner 99).

In contrast to the mentally exhausting nature of the rest of the film, the ending of 8 ½ is invigorating. It guides the viewer through a harrowing journey, eventually showing us that life is merely a game in which we are on stage performing our roles. The only logical response to the turmoil that is thrust upon us is to join hands in love and celebrate the moment, as the characters do at the end of the film.

I feel that I have developed the ability to critique this film, and more specifically the event, through the course of this class. Before this class I never would have considered a movie night among friends a ritual, let alone a performance. This new knowledge has enabled me to be more aware of other performances happening around me, from sporting events to children pretending to be astronauts or cowboys. Because I am a Science, Technology and Culture major focusing on media studies, the ways of approaching and discussing performance and other cultural ideas learned from this class are invaluable to me. I have been attempting to be involved in the Georgia Tech community, and more generally the Atlanta one, since I came here. Coming from a relatively small town, the city life was exciting to me and enabled me to better explore my interests and passions. Even before this class I frequently attended local music and film events, but because of what I have learned I will be doing this with an even greater determination and a more insightful eye.

More important than the ability to analyze events, however, is the ability to analyze the everyday behavior that is exhibited by friends, family and even professors. A deeper understanding of human nature and why we “perform” the way we do in everyday situations is essential to being successful in this world.