Sample Film Review & Outline: Mark Kermode’s review of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*

Overview: Working backwards from a professional film review, I came up with an outline + thesis such as the one I want you to submit as a lead-in to your critical analysis of a film essay.

If you haven’t watched the film you plan to write about yet—time to get on that! I’d recommend you do that before you try to decide what to put in your review, but I won’t hold you to it if your essay turns out to be nothing like the outline. For ideas of the film elements you can discuss, review the handout called “An Exercise in Analyzing and Reviewing Movies,” posted under Small Assignments on the course website.

The outline below is based on a review by a professional film reviewer, but its structure is much simpler than most professional reviews, making it a good model for students. Note: He’s British, so his punctuation and spelling reflect British norms. Don’t imitate him in that respect. You can imitate his derisive tone if you want, but he is also capable of sincere praise. Here’s the link to his review of Captain Phillips, for instance, which is very different, emphasizing the cultural context of the film and its merits. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/oct/20/captain-phillips-review-mark-kermode> \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Sample Outline + Thesis

**Thesis**: Although there are a few positive elements of this film--including good CGI, a decent performance by Bill Nighy, and some funny bits of slapstick humor--overall it is very weak because of an incoherent and overly long story, bad directing, and terrible performances from the three main actors. (Note: This exact sentence doesn’t appear anywhere in Kermode’s review, but it’s good to have a fairly simple, one-sentence thesis starting out, even if it doesn’t get into your final draft in that form.)

1. **Positive assessment** (very limited praise for the film’s relatively strong features)
2. special effects
3. Bill Nighy’s acting
4. a few fun moments of slapstick humor
5. **Negative assessment #1: Incoherent Plot,** even for a blockbuster action flick
6. **Negative assessment #2 & 3 Bad acting,** result of **Bad directing**
7. Depp
8. Bloom
9. Knightley
10. **Conclusion:** sums up negatives and adds the final (worst) thing: too long

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**The full review** By [Mark Kermode](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/markkermode) [The Observer](http://observer.guardian.co.uk), Sunday 9 July 2006

Given my contempt for the first Pirates of the Caribbean movie, a triumph of turgid theme-park hackery over the art of cinema, it was assumed that I would have nothing positive to say about this sequel. On the contrary: the digitally enhanced squid-face of villain Davy Jones (he of the locker) is very well rendered, demonstrating the wonders of CGI and motion-capture technology. Reliable British actor Bill Nighy performs the human duties behind the high-tech make-up, lending an air of rancid fun to this slimy sea beast, who yo-ho-hos around the ocean accompanied by a crew of rum-sodden crustaceans.

There are a few moments of zany slapstick too, such as a fruit-throwing chase scene in which a skewered Captain Jack Sparrow becomes a human kebab, harking back to the days when the film's director, Gore Verbinski, made such innocuous fare as the slapstick farce MouseHunt. And I did laugh at one verbal gag about 'making the pleasure of your carbuncle'. So that's a thumbs up for the squid, the kebab and the carbuncle. Which is three more things than I liked about the last one.

Other than that, it's boring business as usual for this second installment in what is now a trilogy in the manner of all things post-Lord of the Rings. The plot (and I use the word loosely) is episodic to the point of incoherence, constantly reminding us that this is a film franchise based upon a fairground ride. Every five minutes a new quest is announced, sending us rattling off on another tack, each more fatuously inconsequential than the last. Go get Jack Sparrow's magic compass! Go seek out this magic key! Go track down the Flying Dutchman! Go dig up Davy Jones's locker! Go and harvest 99 souls in three days! An early line about 'setting sail without knowing his own heading' seems to apply to the screenwriters as much as the pirates, and it's a full 40 minutes before any sense of direction is established at all.

The romping tone may aspire to the nostalgic swashbuckle of Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* series (replete with John Williams-lite 'ta-ran-ta-raaa' score by Hans Zimmer), but it is the rambling blather of Lucas's *Star Wars* prequels which is most pungently evoked. So muddled is the narrative that the characters have to keep stopping and explaining the story to each other ('You mean, if I find the chest, I will find Will Turner ...'). By the time the closing credits roll the story hasn't actually gone anywhere, and there's still a whole other movie to come.

In the absence of narrative we are left with a string of 'spectacular' set pieces to hold our attention. Verbinski may be a witless hack, but he understands the laws of supply and demand and doesn't skimp on the money-shots. Thus we get giant-tentacled Kraken attacks, ghost ships rising from the dead, and multiple storm-riven battle scenes. When it comes to directing performances, however, Verbinski is completely at sea, leaving his rudderless cast to indulge themselves to their heart's content.

The fact that Johnny Depp received an Oscar nomination for his boggle-eyed, drawl-mouthed Keith Richards' impression doesn't change my opinion that the role of Jack Sparrow has produced some of the actor's very worst work to date. Depp is a brilliantly physical performer whose finely honed movements have breathed eerie life into characters as diverse as Ed Wood and Edward Scissorhands, and whose expressive voice lent an air of melancholy magic to the animated gem Corpse Bride.

Yet Verbinski is no Tim Burton, and under his slack direction Depp defaults to an untrammelled showiness not seen since the sub-Buster Keaton antics of Benny and Joon. In *Dead Man's Chest*, every moment is a symphony of eye-rolling, hair-tossing, lip-pouting, finger-fiddling narcissism. It's like being trapped in a room with a drunk karaoke singer who's having much more fun than his audience.

As for poor old Orlando Bloom, where does one start to document the tidal wave of wetness which he brings to these proceedings? No matter how much sea water Verbinski throws at the set, nothing gets as damp as Mr Bland, whose expressions run the gamut from perky to peeved with occasional interludes of petulance. An early scene finds an imprisoned Keira Knightley saucily telling her fiancé: 'If it weren't for these bars, I'd have you already.' The idea of anyone 'having' this doe-eyed waif is hilarious, and a frightened looking Orlando promptly runs away to sea, leaving a trail of froth in his wake.

Knightley, meanwhile, puts her best teeth forward and does her haughty Head Girl act, stopping only to lock lips with Depp in a red herring subplot which will presumably spark some dreary love triangle misunderstanding in Part Three. How on earth will Orlando react? I'm betting on 'prissy'.

Lumpen direction, lousy writing and pouting performances aside, the worst thing about Dead Man's Chest is its interminable length. The entire Pirates of the Caribbean franchise may be a horrible indicator of the decline of narrative cinema (and probably Western civilisation), but the rank consumerist decrepitude of it all would be tolerable if the film wasn't quite so boring. At a bum-numbing two-and-a-half hours, this is what weak-bladdered studio boss Jack Warner used to refer to as 'a three-piss picture' - in every sense. Thank heavens for the squid.