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# The lexico-phraseological profile of professional film reviews published by the British media: A corpus-linguistic study

**Abstract:** Using corpus linguistic techniques, this exploratory study is intended to provide a descriptive insight into frequent lexical bundles, keywords and key terms as well as selected lexical markers of style used in a corpus of professional film reviews. The research material includes 210 domain-specific texts from the years 2020-2021, extracted from the websites of six British newspapers, magazines and institutions offering guides for moviegoers. The results show that the analyzed reviews make frequent use of general cinematic terms and more specific lexis denoting the different types and (sub)genres of cinematic productions represented by the reviewed films. Other salient lexical features include a high concentration of referential but low concentration of stance bundles, though attitudinal items, particularly evaluation adjectives, significantly enrich the lexical inventory of the reviews. The presented data may have important pedagogic applications in the area of teaching authentic English to future film reviewers and film journalists.

**Keywords:** corpus linguistics, film reviews, keywords, key terms, lexical bundles.

## 1. Introduction

Film reviews can be defined as short texts which provide basic information about a film, while simultaneously assessing its various merits and weak points. Those written by professional reviewers seem to be particularly interesting to the public, as their authors are usually among the first to see new films. In the US, for instance, eight out of ten viewers declare they consult film reviews when making a film choice (Ford 2014). As Gemser et al. (2007: 44) claim, “film reviews can actively influence consumers in their

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selection process” but they also “forecast whether a movie will become a success or not”. The impact of film reviews is thus twofold: they assess the value of a film for audiences, which influences their decision process, and pre-shape opinions about that film, which influences the film’s box-office performance.

Topa-Bryniarska (2020: 237) claims that there has been relatively little research so far on the genre of film reviews, though as Bieler et al. (2007: 76) suggest, the genre “has become relatively popular in computational linguistics”, which mostly aims to classify “an entire review as either positive or negative”. Admittedly, reviews have been studied to establish that the critical ones affect late and cumulative box office receipts, but seem to have no effect on early box office receipts (Eliashberg & Shugan 1997). Reviews have also been reported to be different from pieces of film criticism (e.g. O'Regan & Walmsley-Evans 2015), to have become standardized and taxonomic to the detriment of their essayistic value (Grue 2006), to possess persuasive traits typical of advertising discourse (Topa-Bryniarska 2020) and to be composed of a fixed number of components (Bordwell 1989). It seems that less attention has been devoted to the lexical and phraseological aspects of reviews, though some passing remarks on the language and style of film reviews can be found in Clayton and Klevan (2011), who are critical of larding the texts with superlatives, hyperbole and well-worn adjectives; on multi-word verbs, in Zelenka (2017), who concludes that the written reviews make frequent use of prepositional verbs and the spoken ones rely mainly on phrasal verbs; and on premodification, in Paul (2019), who lists adjectival classifiers and descriptors as the most common types of premodification in film reviews. Added to that is Zheltukhina et al.’s (2020) study of the verbal specifics of American film reviews from the magazines *Esquire* and *GQ*.

This paper aims to identify and examine salient lexical and phraseological units in a specialized corpus of professional British film reviews, attempting to classify these units semantically and functionally as well as to analyze their naturally occurring patterns of use. The focus is on recurrent lexical bundles, keywords and key terms, and additionally, on the high frequency keyword *film* and three lexical markers of style (i.e. *but*, *why*, *don't*). It is hoped that the findings of this research will not only offer a better insight into the lexico-phraseological profile of professional film reviews published in the British media, but also provide authentic descriptive data in the area of domain-specific language and style, familiarity with which may be sought for by those studying to become film reviewers, critics or journalists.

## 2. The film review genre

The film review is a journalistic genre which provides a brief description of a film – usually a new one – and states the reviewer’s opinion on it. It is thus subjective in its nature, as the author uses their own “knowledge, taste, artistic familiarity, intellectual level and sensitivity” not simply to evaluate the film, but rather to comment of the film’s

merits and weaknesses (Jelonkiewicz 2010: 312, translation mine). Apart from its informative, analytical and evaluative value, the film review also serves as an effective tool of persuasion which can either attract or repel viewers from particular films. The latter is possibly the reason why film reviewers are sometimes considered “as adjuncts of the film marketing process” whose recommendations can contribute to the box office success of movies (McArthur 1985: 81). This seems to be particularly the case with professional reviews, which have been selected as the focus of this study and which are written by trained journalist or professional film critics, not by ordinary members of the audience.

Despite the common goal of providing an accurate summary of a film that helps to understand its meaning and technical virtuosity, according to many scholars, film reviewing should not be confused with film criticism (e.g. O'Regan & Walmsley-Evans 2015; Maras 2020). Generally, reviews are more informative in their nature, as well as more consumer-oriented and sensitive to the audiences' immediate tastes and preferences, whereas pieces of criticism are more elitist in their nature, also in terms of the films chosen for analysis, as well as more concerned with the aesthetic, cinematic and cultural criteria (Holbrook 1999: 148). The former, as forms of journalistic criticism, are usually shorter and reactive, as well as written with the use of more general vocabulary and printed in newspapers; the latter, as forms of scholarly criticism, are typically longer and reflective, as well as written with the use of academic lexis and printed in journals and magazines (see Brown 1978: 32 and Grue 2006: 44). Yet, as Bordwell emphasizes (1989: 21), it has to be remembered that “film criticism was born from reviewing, and the earliest prototypes of the ‘film critic’ were journalists charged with discussing, on a daily or weekly basis, the current output of the film industry”.

O'Regan and Walmsley-Evans (2015) attribute the rhetorical origin of film reviews to 19th century theatre criticism, which they explain by common circumstances of both art forms, such as “mass circulation daily and weekly publications, national circuits and defined seasons, and an interest in discussion of the object in advance of, and subsequent to, its performance/exhibition”. The literature on the topic is less definite about the candidate for the first film review. Iampolski (1998: 58) writes about *New York Times*' “first article on a motion picture”, which was the 1909 review of D. W. Griffith's film adaptation of Robert Browning's play *Pippa Passes*, but does not make it clear whether it was actually the first review ever. Roberts (2010: 20), writing about American cinema, points to the *New York Times* anonymous piece from 1896 reporting on the first public exhibition of a film at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. In turn, O'Regan and Walmsley-Evans (2015) claim that in the context of Australian cinema, the very first film review was written even earlier – it reviewed a private screening of Edison Kinetoscope films and was published in 1894 in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. What, however, raises no doubt is that film reviews were first published in newspapers, which made them

function as “a type of journalism”, with “a sort of news value” and publication regularity (Bordwell & Thompson 2011: 54-55).

Regarding the formal characteristics of the genre, Bieler et al. (2007: 75) argue that a typical review contains formal and functional elements. The former are characteristic for the genre and include a conventionalized constellation of linearly ordered details, such as the title, the name of the reviewer, list of cast and copyright notice. The latter are closely linked with the communicative goal of the writer whose intention is to present the contents of the film to the reader and offer a personal evaluation, both of which are provided in the main paragraphs of a review. Bordwell (1989: 38) summarizes the typical structure of a review in the following way: “Open with a summary judgment; synopsise the plot; then supply a string of condensed arguments about the acting, story logic, sets, spectacle, or other case-centered points; lace it all with background information; and cap the review by reiterating the judgment”. He elaborates further on this issue, adding that the plot summary should highlight pivotal moments without revealing the ending; background information about the film should indicate its genre, source, director, stars and anecdotes about production or reception; whereas the advanced arguments should be concise and compelling, and followed by a clear recommendation.

Depending on the place of publication, film reviews may range in length and detail, as for instance, Bull (2010: 335-336) advises that a typical review should be around 500 word long, whereas Brown (1978: 34) reports that the majority of reviews are between 500 to 1000 words. The latter seems to be true for the reviews analyzed here, which are on average 731.53 word long, with the longest consisting of as many as 1374 words and the shortest, of only 281 words. Some additional details that can be discussed in a review include the cinema’s resources (e.g. lightning or camera placement and movement) (McArthur 1985), photographs or trailers of the film (Gemser et al. 2007), or even “prematurely dismissed pictures or those that could not find immediate audiences” (Roberts 2010: 12). What helps the reviewer to cover all essential features of a film are its multiple viewings, accountability to the audience as well as familiarity with the art form reviewed and good writing ability<sup>2</sup>.

For a review to be effective, it definitely takes the use of the right language and style. In their analysis of film reviews published in the *Esquire* and *GQ*, Zheltukhina et al. (2020: 13) conclude that reviewers rely heavily on nouns (46%) and adjectives (28%) as well as on “epithets, comparisons, metaphors, lexical repeats, homogeneous members of the sentence, various grammatical structures, and other expressive means”. Corrigan (2015: 129-134) explains that successful writing about film is largely dependent on

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2 The hints on how to write a film review can be found on websites dedicated to this matter, specifically: *How to Write Film Review* (n.d.), *9 Tips for Writing a Film Review* (2017) and *7 Tips for Writing a Film Review* (Nichol 2007-2021).

concreteness, that is, on the accuracy with which a writer linguistically visualizes a film's scenes or sequences. He adds that other rhetorical tools include the skilful use of denotations and connotations, precision of meaning, avoidance of empty words like thing or aspect, employment of a moderate amount of professional terminology, adoption of a tone devoid of sarcasm, irony or blatant humour, finding a balance between a casual and formal voice, restraint in using clichés and repetitions other than those involving key words, reliance on varied vocabulary and sentence structures, remaining economical and focused on the main purpose of the review, which is to inform about and evaluate a film. Topa-Bryniarska (2020: 240-243) also emphasizes that film reviews constitute a form of mock dialogue between the writer and the reader and should, therefore, contain strong evaluative lexis, questions and direct reader appeals.

### 3. Material and methodology

The present study is part of an ongoing project aimed at disentangling the intricacies of recurrent lexis and phraseology in professional review texts that has so far investigated restaurant reviews published in British and American newspapers (Szczygłowska 2021). Capitalizing on the approach adopted in this earlier work, here the focus is on film reviews published by the British media. In addition to keywords, key terms, and lexical bundles, all of which have been analyzed in the previous work, in this study attention is also devoted to three lexical markers of style (i.e. *but*, *why*, *don't*) and the high frequency keyword *film*.

The research material encompasses a specialized corpus of 210 professional film reviews extracted from six British internet websites: the platform *BBC Culture* (BBC), the *British Film Institute website* (BFI), *The Spectator magazine* (TS), and three newspapers: *The Guardian* (TG), *The Telegraph* (TT) and *The Independent* (TI). These sources were selected to ensure that the reviews were authored by film critics and film journalists working as regular columnists, as confirmed by their online profiles, not by ordinary members of the audience. For this reason, however, multiple reviews by the same authors had to be included in the corpus, as the above mentioned media institutions employ a fixed number of professional reviewers. Each source contributed 35 reviews: 15 from the year 2020 and 20 from 2021. The movie genre factor was not considered, similarly as reviews devoted to several films simultaneously. Multiple reviews of the same film (i.e. two reviews – each culled from a different source) constituted only 10 per cent (21) of all the corpus texts, and the remaining 90 per cent (189) were devoted to different films. The corpus size is 153,622 word tokens (18,523 word types), which yields a standardized type/token ratio of 49.64, indicating a reasonably diverse vocabulary (Baker 2006: 52). The small size of the corpus may help to closely “reflect contextual features”, thus giving “insights into patterns of language use in particular settings” (Koester 2010: 67). Additionally, the English web 2020 (enTenTen20), containing over 36 billion words crawled from the Internet, was used as a reference corpus.

The research methodology also involved the extraction of frequent lexical bundles (LBs) with the help of WordSmith Tools 6.0 (Scott 2012). The focus was on 4-word sequences<sup>3</sup> occurring at least 4 times in the research corpus. Following Hyland (2008: 8), bundles of this length are more common than 5-word items and represent clearer structures and functions than shorter strings. The initial list included 123 items and was filtered out to remove fragments of film titles (e.g. *A Call to Spy*) and bundles which did not reach the distribution threshold that was set at 4 texts. The remaining 75 bundles were classified into functional (sub)categories, some of which were taken from Biber et al. (2004), while others were created to reflect the specific functions performed by them in the analyzed texts.

Additionally, the analysis involved the extraction of keywords and key terms (i.e. multi-word expressions, typically noun phrases or nominalizations), that is, lexis occurring with unusual frequency in the target corpus, compared to the reference corpus. Such lexical items “provide information about the keyness or specificity of a given corpus in terms of what it is about” (Szudarski 2018: 25). They were identified using Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014), with the minimum frequency set at 5, the focus value set at 0.00001 and the keyword attribute defined as word. Considering the relatively small size of the corpus, the criterion of range (i.e. frequency understood as the number of texts an item appears in) was not applied, mainly because some of the items occurred in only one or two corpus texts. This decision was motivated by the belief that if such low-range items were excluded from the analysis, some of the semantic categories to which they were assigned would be reduced to a minimum. This could make that certain interesting aspects of the analyzed reviews would be lost, such as references to film characters or details of the storyline, both of which tend to be unique, often typical of a single film. Yet, to signal that some of the discussed keywords and key terms may possibly be of idiosyncratic nature, those that occurred in only one review were italicized. Top frequency items (by keyness) were scanned to remove proper names, which are often incidental to the analyzed texts (Scott 2012), and compile two refined lists of the most common 100 keywords and key terms. These items were then classified into semantically and functionally related categories of words and terms, typical for the research corpus and its domain, that were developed intuitively after examining the relevant concordances. The discussion of keywords and key terms is supplemented by a closer scrutiny of the grammatical and collocational behaviour of the high frequency keyword *film* and three lexical markers of style: *but*, *why* and *don't*.

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3 Following the approach adopted by Kim (2013), the apostrophes used for contracted and possessive forms are treated as a separate unit, which means that sequences such as *and there's a* as well as *is the film's* are treated as 4-word bundles.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Lexical bundles

Drawing on the functional typology proposed by Biber et al. (2004), 75 target LBs, totalling 431 tokens, were assigned to three categories: referential, discoursal and expressing stance. These categories were further modified by incorporating more specific subcategories to closely reflect the specificity of the studied film reviews. The LBs were categorized based on their primary functions fulfilled in most of the contexts in which they occurred.

Referential bundles constitute the largest category comprising 50 items (66.67%), totaling 290 tokens, which were used to convey content by referring to concepts, entities and ideas, as well as their attributes. Referential bundles served seven distinct functions shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Referential bundles in film reviews

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Identification/focus	81	14	is one of the, one of the most, this is a film, and there's a, the film is a, one of the film, one of the great, is a film that, is the film's, it's one of, then there's the, there's also a, there is also a, 's adaptation of the
Attributes of the film	57	7	of the film's, written and directed by, of the film is, is written and directed, the film doesn't, a film that is, the film isn't
Specifying attributes	56	9	the rest of the, much of the film, a bit of a, in the form of, to the point of, as a kind of, in a state of, is a bit of, of the same name
Referring to the plot	43	9	at the centre of, the centre of the, the film begins with, the story of a, a film about the, at the heart of, film is set in, is based on the, the film is set
Temporal	25	6	at a time when, and a half hour, for the first time, over the course of, two and a half, in the middle of
Location	24	4	in the film's, in a film that, in one of the, into the middle of
Multifunctional	4	1	at the end of

Film reviews are dominated by identification/focus bundles, which help to point out important aspects on which the author wants to elaborate, such as specific film scenes (1) or people involved in filmmaking (2). Some bundles also direct readers' attention to key points, including the reviewed film itself (3), its characters (4) or their character traits (5).

- (1) *In **one of the most** affecting scenes, Fern talks to a friend named Swankie, a woman in her seventies in failing health, [...]* (BBC\_15 Sept 2020)
- (2) *But Bong has never made a straightforward film in his life – that's why he's **one of the great** masters of the cinematic game [...]* (TI\_6 Feb 2020)
- (3) ***This is a film** of quiet, cumulative power, which has much to say about serial sexual predators in the Harvey Weinstein mould, [...]* (TS\_2 May 2020)
- (4) ***Then there's the** Park family, settled in a quiet suburban home that's halfway between an art installation and a fortress. (TI\_6 Feb 2020)*
- (5) *But **there's also a** strange sense of empowerment in Claire's ability to un-write and then re-write her life at will, [...]* (TG\_12 Apr 2020)

Bundles referring to attributes of the film identify its main filmmakers (6), title (7) or such partly overlapping details as various qualities (8), characteristics (9) and aspects (10).

- (6) *The film is **written and directed by** Chinonye Chukwu, a Nigerian-American and the first black woman to win the Grand Jury prize. (TS\_18 Jul 2020)*
- (7) *The same can be said **of the film's** title: while *Fire Will Come* suggests a prophecy or a threat, the Galician *O que arde* simply means "that which burns", [...]* (BFI\_20 Mar 2020)
- (8) ***The film isn't** realistic in the sense that we can say any of it happened, yet it's otherwise intensely realistic. (TS\_27 Mar 2021)*
- (9) ***The film doesn't** reinvent the spy genre, but uses it effectively, creating suspense and near-misses whenever the Nazis approach. (BBC\_4 Nov 2020)*
- (10) *A highlight **of the film is** the meet-cute at a friend's wedding between her and Matt [...]* (BFI\_23 Nov 2021)

Bundles specifying attributes describe various characteristics of the entities mentioned in film reviews, including their type (11), part (12), quantity (13), condition (14), manifestation (15) or some other details (16). Attributive bundles are the most popular referential expressions in the corpus, both in terms of the number of distinct forms ( $N = 16$ ) and their cumulative frequency of use (Freq = 113).

- (11) *Waves rapidly descends into a repetitive cycle of black trauma, playing horror **as a kind of** cruel irony. (TI\_16 Jan 2020)*



- (12) *And will **the rest of the** community support her?* (TS\_23 May 2020)
- (13) ***Much of the film** is shot in natural light, with plenty of sensual close-ups of sweat and grime.* (BBC\_2 Sept 2021)
- (14) *In fact, no – it simply left us **in a state of** permanent suspense about his fate.*  
(TT\_21 Sept 2021)
- (15) *Meanwhile, reality intrudes **in the form of** a nationwide fuel shortage: [...]*  
(TT\_30 Dec 2021)
- (16) *Alma, his father’s housekeeper, even **to the point of** a drunken attempted rape.*  
(TS\_18 Apr 2020)

Bundles referring to the plot indicate various details linked directly with the main events of a film, such as the specific time (17) and location (18) where the story happens or the film’s main theme (19), opening scene (20) and background inspiration (21). Interestingly, the bundles at the centre of, the centre of the and at the heart of, which give the impression of referring to location, are also concerned with aspects of the plot, as illustrated by (22) and (23).

- (17) ***The film is set** in 1870, as Kidd travels from town to town reading newspapers aloud to groups of people who drop coins in a bucket to hear him.* (BBC\_11 Dec 2020)
- (18) *The new Disney-Pixar **film is set in** and around an idealised Riviera village, a rustic paradise of trattorias, vineyards, and crumbling town squares with fountains in the middle.*  
(BBC\_16 Jun 2021)
- (19) *Waves is **a film about the** rapid and shocking destruction of an upper-middle-class black family, written and directed by a white man.* (TI\_16 Jan 2020)
- (20) ***The film begins with** a voiceover from Murray over a black screen.* (BBC\_25 Sept 2020)
- (21) *Military Wives **is based on the** true story of an ensemble of servicemen’s spouses who formed a choir and later enlisted the help of TV choirmaster Gareth Malone.* (TT\_25 Feb 2020)
- (22) *At **the centre of the** story is Selah’s relationship with her young new protégée [...]*  
(BFI\_1 Jun 2020)
- (23) *But **at the heart of** the film is the developing relationship between Mahiro and the father she believes is her father but isn’t, [...]* (TS\_4 Jul 2020)

Two less common subcategories of referential bundles include time/place reference. Those tied to the concept of time indicate the duration of a film (24) or refer to particular points in time mentioned in the review, as in (25). In turn, location bundles mark either particular places (26) or more abstract locations, such as the film itself (27), its scenes (28) or even script (29).

- (24) But **over the course of** two hours, the flaws are all too visible. (BBC\_26 Feb 2020)
- (25) It's possible that some more magnetic actors might have helped, but **for the first time**, Marvel's sharp eye for casting has gone awry. (BBC\_24 Oct 2021)
- (26) A lonely, spoilt girl is plonked **into the middle of** a decaying estate, left to explore its corridors and its secrets. (TI\_22 Oct 2020)
- (27) Steadman and Dave Johns are mostly wasted in **a film that's** less a pleasant meander than a gruelling hike. (TT\_24 Sept 2020)
- (28) Their differences are stated out loud **in the film's** final scene, as they drink and clink glasses. (BBC\_6 Oct 2020)
- (29) The question of what initially compels Robert to consider firing into his own ranks by taking on the case as a class-action suit is never quite crystallised **in the film's script**, [...] (BFI\_26 Feb 2020)

The subcategory of multi-functional bundles comprises only one item, which either indicates location (*like Gatsby mesmerised by the light **at the end of** Daisy's dock*) or time (*film was shot around the city's San Fernando Valley suburbs **at the end of** last year*).

Discourse-organizing bundles include 15 items (20%), totaling 79 tokens, which served two main functions shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Discourse-organizing bundles in film reviews

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Topic elaboration/ clarification	74	14	but it's a, turns out to be, as well as the, but it's also, out to be a, at the same time, it's just that, on the other hand, or to put it, put it another way, to do with the, to put it another, turned out to be, what to do with
Topic introduction	5	1	when it comes to

The majority of discourse organizers are concerned with topic clarification or elaboration. This may involve paraphrasing the author's opinion about a film (30), making it harsher (31), more argumentative (32) or more detailed (33). An interesting bundle is *at the same time*, which despite its direct reference to time, expands on a topic, as in (34).

- (30) [...] you'll have a fair idea of what to expect from Charlie Kaufman's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*. **To put it another** way, you won't really know what to expect at all, because Kaufman's films are always weirder, gloomier, and more unsettling than you might assume, [...] (BBC\_1 Sept 2020)
- (31) This being a Kaufman film, though, nothing is as it should be. It's not that anyone behaves outrageously or threateningly. **It's just that** everything is... wrong. (BBC\_1 Sept 2020)

- (32) *It's not as if you get to watch surreal, avant-garde rock operas very often. **On the other hand**, you might think that that's for the best.* (BBC\_7 Jul 2021)
- (33) *The murder scene itself is expectedly horrific, **but it's also** short.* (TI\_28 Jul 2020)
- (34) *It is a testament to Thomasin McKenzie's performance that she manages to maintain a lightness while **at the same time** suggesting a woman who could also be slipping into madness.* (BFI\_31 Oct 2021)

The subcategory of topic introducing bundles comprises only one item, which serves as a signal implying that the author is about to undertake a new idea, as in (35).

- (35) *Whatever small contrivances or inconsistencies might dwell in this story of a husband's secrets [...], they melt away as soon as the camera cuts to the face of its star. **When it comes to** convincing an audience that the terror is real, a horror film can try all the tricks in the book [...]* (TI\_20 Aug 2021)

Stance bundles constitute the least numerous category, with 10 items (13.33%) shown in Table 3, totalling 62 tokens, that have been grouped into four subcategories. They all express attitudes and judgements towards the information presented in film reviews.

Table 3. Stance bundles in film reviews

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
Attitudinal/modality – evaluative	28	4	it's hard to, 't help but feel, it feels as if, it's as if
Epistemic	14	3	I don't know, I'm not sure, may or may not
Attitudinal/ modality – obligation/directive	13	2	don't have to, you don't have
Attitudinal/modality – Ability	7	1	can't help but

It is not surprising that evaluative bundles are the most popular in the research corpus, since one of the main aims of any review is to “evaluate the product” (Blank 2007: 8). Such bundles usually convey attitudes towards the film (36), its story (37) or actors (38).

- (36) ***It's hard to** imagine a Terence Davies film that's not deeply personal in some way, [...]* (TT\_15 Oct 2021)
- (37) *Annette Bening and Bill Nighy star as a British couple whose 29-year marriage has run dry – yet **it's hard to** make ourselves care.* (TT\_27 Aug 2020)

(38) *The actor’s so present, so enthralling, that **it’s as if** she’s beckoned the audience to climb inside another self with her and have a look around.* (TI\_1 Oct 2020)

In the subcategory of epistemic stance bundles, two items are personal and serve to express the author’s uncertainty regarding some aspects of the film under review, as illustrated by example (39). There is also one bundle that is concerned with possibility (40).

(39) **I don’t know** why Stanfield wasn’t nominated for his role. (TS\_13 Mar 2021)

(40) *As for Enrico, he **may or may not** understand the truth about his wife – but we, the audience, understand the terrible irony.* (TG\_23 Jul 2020)

Bundles expressing obligation convey the lack of necessity on the part of viewers to do something to gain a specific impression about a film (41), which is also the case with the bundle expressing ability (42).

(41) **You don’t have** to analyse the camera angles or edits to feel that immediacy [...] (BBC\_6 Oct 2020)

(42) [...], *this is set in a rural, remote part of the country amid a farming community who are just about getting by but do wear great knitwear, you **can’t help but** notice.* (TS\_23 May 2020)

## 4.2. Keywords

Top 100 keywords (in order of keyness), totalling 1978 tokens, were assigned to nine semantic-functional categories shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Semantic-functional categories of keywords in film reviews

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
general cinematic keywords	972	8	screenplay, off-screen, film, voiceover, filmmaking, rereleased, camerawork, big-screen
film (sub)genres	220	7	biopic, thriller, melodrama, dramas <sup>4</sup> , psychodrama, romcom, drama

4 The list was not lemmatized, following Baker’s (2004: 355) claim that “a lemma-based analysis may not always be a useful strategy as particular word forms can contain specific collocations or senses that would be lost when combining word forms together.”

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
evaluation keywords	215	31	watchable, fascinatingly, enjoyably, dreamlike, disturbingly, undemonstrative, weirdly, hallucinatory, creepy, gripping, queasy, eerily, nightmarish, wistful, likeable, eerie, empathetic, outlandish, blandly, crass,
descriptors	144	18	claustrophobic, cinematic, curdled, traumatised, climactic, slow-burning, sombre, wide-eyed, heavy-handed, well-intentioned, sinewy, glib, self-conscious, real-life, doomed, black-and-white, middle-aged, ripped-from-the-headlines
people in film industry	105	9	writer-director, cinematographer, non-actor, screenwriter, film-maker, co-writer, mime, non-professional
film types	93	6	satire, blockbuster, fairytale, remake, <i>must-watch</i> , arthouse
film elements	92	9	lashback, set-piece, monologue, trope, close-up, shoot-out, meet-cute, shtick, backstory
references to a film character	79	4	heroine, protagonist, matriarch, <i>merpeople</i>
other	58	8	conceit, <i>grout</i> , knitwear, fictionalised, <i>contrivance</i> , charisma, clichés, blah-de-blah

The analysis revealed that film reviews are marked by the frequent mention of general cinematic terms, that have been developed for professional and disciplinary needs. The category comprises eight words, including the most frequent content word in the corpus: *film* (905 occurrences in 199 texts). Its direct left-hand modifiers, identified by analyzing the concordances of the noun, serve to evaluate the film (e.g. best, little), refer to its version (e.g. new, latest, previous, first, second), type (e.g. feature, original, debut) or (sub)genre (e.g. horror, political, action, war) as well as to denote its country of origin (e.g. French) or the location of the festival where it premiered (e.g. London, Sundance, Cannes, Venice). In the latter case, the keyword *film* is actually part of the name of a film festival, as illustrated by example (43).

(43) *Now the film of the play – directed by Regina King (...) – has premiered at the **Venice** Film Festival.* (BBC\_8 Sept 2020)

Additional information about the discussed keyword can be obtained by exploring other typical lexico-grammatical patterns in which it is used that are presented in Figure 1. The visualization has been generated using the Word Sketch function of Sketch Engine that summarizes the grammatical and collocational behavior of the selected word. As can be seen in Figure 1, the noun *film* typically takes *be*, *do*, *have* and *begin* as its predicates as well as often serves as the object of the verbs *make*, *be*, *set* and *shoot*. It also commonly functions as the head of such prepositional phrases as *of film*, *in film*, *film of* and *film about*, takes *his* and *her* as its pronominal possessors, and modifies the nouns: *version*, *land* and *review*.

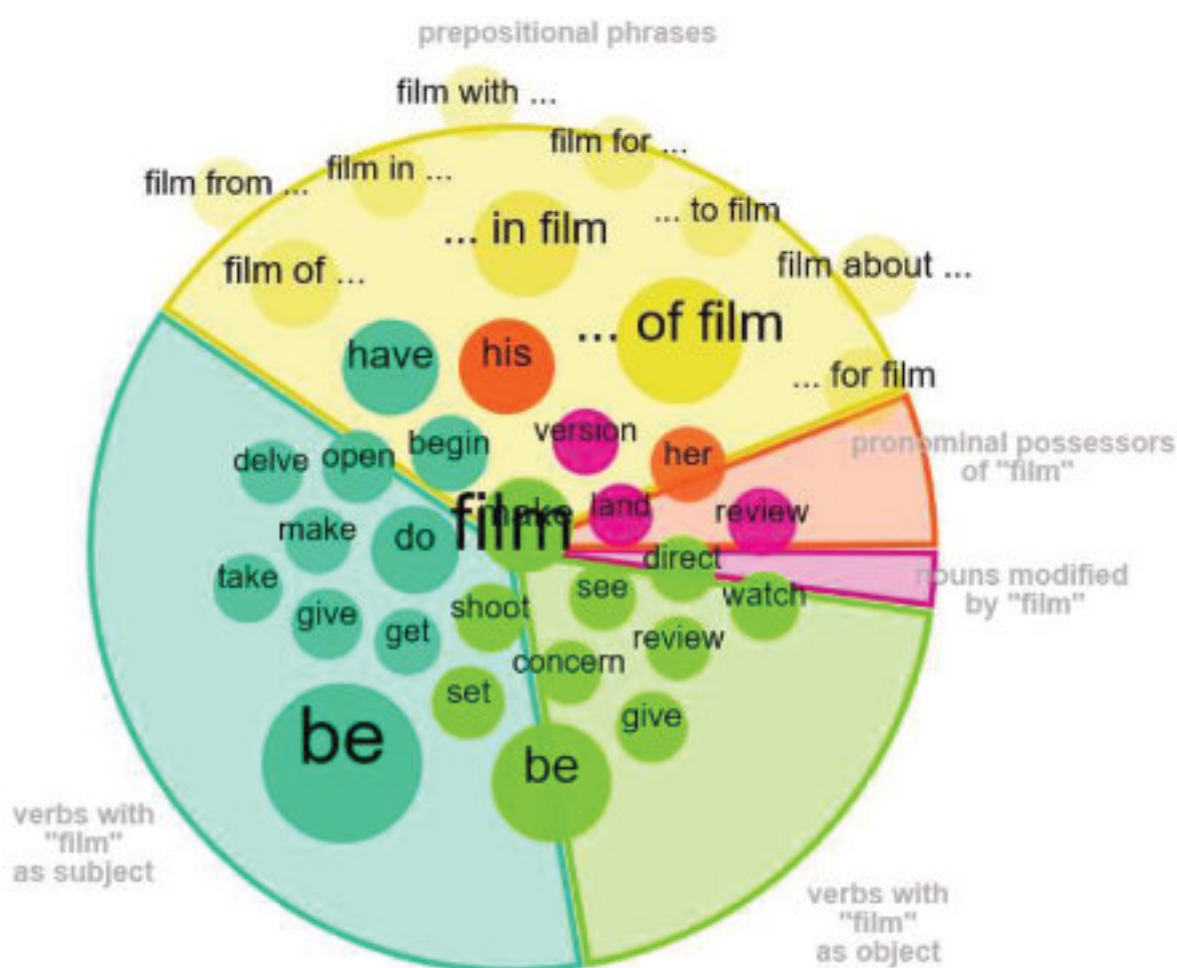


Figure 1. Common lexico-grammatical patterns of the keyword *film* in film reviews

Other clearly domain-specific categories of keywords include film type and (sub) genre that determine the class of cinematic productions to which a given film belongs. What the words denoting film (sub)genres have in common is their close link with the “conventions, iconography, settings, narratives, characters and actors” as well as aesthetic approach, main theme or even the film’s audience and emotional response to it (Grant 2007: 2). Two probably less familiar words in this category are biopic and

romcom, where the former is a clipping for a biographical film (44), whereas the latter is a blend for a romantic comedy (45). By comparison, the words classified as film type involve a more general reference, which may be related to the film's artistic form (e.g. satire, fairytale), version (e.g. remake) or merit (e.g. blockbuster, must-watch).

(44) *The Geiger counter is ticking moderately for this forthright **biopic** of Marie Curie, born Maria Skłodowska: [...]* (TG\_15 Jun 2020)

(45) *This thin **romcom** rejects meaningful speeches in favour of throwaway comments, but fails to compensate for its lack of profundity with laughter or charm.* (BFI\_21 Feb 2020)

Keywords labelled as film element, people in film industry and reference to a film character are also markedly domain-specific. Terms such as cinematographer, filmmaker or set-piece, which is a part of a film designed to have an imposing effect, raise no doubts as to their connection with cinematography. In the case of some of the other words this link becomes clear upon a close examination of their context and co-text, as illustrated by the examples below.

(46) *The sensibility of this piece, though, comes more from **co-writer**/director Will Sharpe, a Bafta-winning actor [...]* (TT\_30 Dec 2021)

(47) *The film is written and directed by Chinonye Chukwu, [...]. It opens with our **protagonist**, Bernadine (Woodard), preparing for an execution.* (TS\_17 July 2020)

(48) *When the other band members accuse him of pandering to the white owner of the studio, he launches into the film's central **monologue**.* (BBC\_20 Nov 2020)

Evaluation keywords and descriptors, mainly adjectives, constitute two most diverse, but also relatively frequent categories which comprise terms that despite being universal, give an excellent idea of the lexical variety of the analyzed film reviews. Both sets of keywords refer either to a given film (49), or to its different aspects (50), yet the former convey opinion that is usually positive (51) and only sometimes negative (52), while the latter simply denote some attribute.

(49) *Oscar-winning Chloé Zhao directs the latest Marvel superhero movie, which is **watchable** but ultimately unmemorable.* (BBC\_24 Oct 2021)

(50) *Sangok is a **middle-aged**, smartly dressed sometime actress.* (BFI\_4 Aug 2021)

(51) *As Otis, Peters is his usual **gripping** presence on screen.* (BBC\_10 Jun 2020)

(52) *Indeed, what separates this film from its predecessor is exactly what you'd expect of Hollywood – it's more sensational and, in parts, more emotionally **crass**.* (TI\_1 Oct 2021)

The least frequent is the category comprising other keywords, the contextual use of which was too general to assign them to one of the more specific categories. This is best illustrated by example (53), where *blah-de-blah* is used to mean ‘and so on, and so forth’, implying simultaneously that those additional details are only chatter rather than something of substance.

(53) *It’s now up to Raya to find the last surviving dragon, Sisu (Awkwafina), and heal all divisions and **blah-de-blah** you know the rest.* (TS\_6 Mar 2021)

### 4.3. Key terms

Top 100 key terms (in order of keyness), totalling 447 tokens, were assigned to ten semantic-functional categories shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Semantic-functional categories of key terms in film reviews

Subcategory	Freq	No	Bundle
film types	113	19	new film, feature debut, debut feature, origin story, live-action remake, directing debut, first film, character study, father-daughter story, first feature, chamber piece, British film, third feature, new adaptation, film of the year, movie in the series, story of a woman, kind of film, directorial debut
film elements	70	16	set piece, opening scene, final act, action scene, third act, action sequence, musical sequence, single scene, opening moments, sex scene, opening shot, plot twist, final scene, plot strands, rest of the film, part of the film
general cinematic key terms	53	11	running time, production design, streaming platform, film review, cinematic universe, awards buzz, visual style, other films, film version, small screen, course of the film
film (sub)genres	49	12	period drama, superhero movie, rock opera, political thriller, war movie, crime thriller, family drama, indie dramas, action movie, political film, horror movie, action film



<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Freq</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Bundle</b>
details of the storyline	50	12	price of milk, inner life, righteous fury, moral panic, second world, black trauma, lakeside retreat, suburban home, police brutality, nuclear holocaust, age gap, holiday park
references to a film character	37	10	male colleague, Russian assassin, young heroine, blackjack player, historical figure, iconic character, leading man, middle-aged woman, young daughter, fashion designer
people in film industry	31	8	director working, exhilarating director, mime artist, production designer, black woman, exhilarating director working today, director working today, first black woman
other	26	8	period detail, grout drama, great knitwear, resonance today, talking heads, working today, skin colour, sort of way
types of acting role	9	2	central performance, lead performance
places related to filmmaking	9	2	recording studio, other studio

Seven of the above categories coincide with those distinguished for keywords, hence the key terms included in these sets mostly record more subtle aspects of the cinematic world. This is particularly noticeable in the category of film (sub)genre, where semantic distinctions are made between different types of drama (e.g. period, family, indie), thriller (e.g. political, crime) or movie (e.g. superhero, war, action). A similar tendency is observed in some other of the shared categories. For instance, regarding film type, details are added to the nouns film (e.g. new, British, of the year), feature (e.g. first, third) or story (e.g. origin, father-daughter, of a woman); regarding film element, mention is made of different kinds of film scenes (e.g. opening, sex, final), sequences (e.g. action, musical) or fragments (rest of the part of the); regarding reference to a film character, such general words as heroine, figure or character become more specific, owing to their frequent modifiers which are, respectively, young, historical and iconic. The latter mechanism is also visible in the category of people in film industry, where the word director is supplemented with such fine-grained details as working (today) and exhilarating. Other interesting cinematic details can be found in the category of general cinematic key terms, with items referring to the film's duration (e.g. running time,

course of the film), overall look (e.g. production design) or medium through which it is made available (e.g. small screen, streaming platform).

Regarding the three categories of key terms that do not overlap with those applied to keywords, it becomes clear that the cinematic universe depicted in the film reviews under scrutiny would not be made complete without awards buzz for the central or lead performance of actors starring in the directorial or feature debuts filmed in a recording or some other studio. In other words, film reviewing is not simply limited to specifying the film's type or (sub)genre, just as it does not end with devoting some attention to various technical aspects of a film or people responsible for its production. In a captivating film review, the reviewer “reveals the stars, the director, the sets, and the plotline, in addition to his or her own overall assessment of the film—details that can bring viewers to the theaters or cause them to stay away” (Boatwright et al. 2007: 402). Obviously details of the storyline may sometimes involve police brutality, nuclear holocaust or black trauma, but at other times they may be more concerned with something more mundane like the price of milk or a holiday park. In any case, however, film reviewing “should provide some useful entrée into the experience and textual meaning of a movie” (Hodsdon 2001: 145).

#### 4.4. Lexical markers of style in film reviews

Since both keywords and key terms are prominent in the research corpus in relation to a general language corpus (i.e. enTenTen20), they reveal not only what the authors of the analyzed film reviews actually focus on, but also how they formulate their ideas. According to Della Giusta et al. (2021: 77), these items can be thus “considered useful indicators of topics and style”. Yet, as Charteris-Black (2012: 154) argues, what actually provides true insight into rhetorical style are those words that relate to “the purpose of explaining and arguing”, such as *but*, *why* or *don't*. They were not identified as keywords by Sketch Engine but can be found on the wordlist generated by WordSmith, where *but* was ranked as high as 15th (1991 tokens), *why* – 163rd (92 tokens) and *don't* – 181st (82 tokens).

*But* is a coordinating conjunction that combines two contrasting ideas and most often appears in the corpus in the pattern *but it's/it is* (61 tokens). Its role is to build an argument by highlighting the unexpectedness of what is introduced after *but* in view of what precedes it, as in (54); by softening one, often critical, comment with another, as in (55); or by combining positive and negative comments in one sentence, as in (56).

(54) *Settlers isn't perfect: some of the storytelling beats aren't hit as clearly as they could have been. **But it's** a quietly impressive piece of work.* (TG\_28 Jul 2021)

(55) *The film feels like a circuitous, effortful mess, **but it's** usually deliberate.* (TT\_30 Jan 2020)

(56) *This death-row film is certainly a tough watch **but it is** also a masterwork.* (TS 18 Jul 2020)

*Why* helps to create a dialogic style that enables the authorial voice to engage with the readers but also compels authors to respond to their own comments, owing to which they can introduce their own explanations and arguments in support of the expressed opinions (Charteris-Black 2012: 157-160). In more than one third of its occurrences (35 tokens), *why* is used to ask a rhetorical question through which the author tries to persuade some viewpoint while simultaneously attracting the readers' attention by making them think about how they would answer the question. This can be seen in example (57), where the author expresses a critical opinion about the dubbing in a film rather than expects any answer. A more explicit way of promoting the reviewer's own views is illustrated in example (58), where the author rhetorically poses a question to simply answer it in a sentence that follows.

(57) **Why** are the actors so overdubbed? (TS 25 May 2020)

(58) You may have noticed that the phrase "the film we need right now" is being thrown around by critics these days on a near-weekly basis. **Why?** Well, for one thing, we currently need a lot more films than usual: [...] (TT 20 Oct 2020)

Don't is a contraction of do and not which obviously accompanies many different words in the research corpus, but it is frequently found in the clusters you don't (14 tokens) and I don't (11 tokens). The former phrase is concerned with addressing the readers – often to suggest that the viewer will easily form the same opinion as the reviewer, as in (59). The latter phrase, in turn, "conveys conviction and represents the firm stance of the speaker", which makes it persuasive (Patrick and Hagtvedt 2012: 393). In the corpus, it most often appears in the sequence I don't know, whose role is to declare insufficient knowledge on the part of its user. I don't know is often pragmatically motivated by "a concern to save the face of self and other" that is achieved by averting potential contradictions from addressees (Tsui 1991: 607). The authors of reviews use it to admit their lack of knowledge of some specified matter and simultaneously make a conjecture about it, as in (60), which is achieved owing to the use of but in the same sentence. The sentence seems to convey the reviewer's reluctance to make a definite statement that could easily be put into question by the reader, thus they use I don't know as a kind of hedging device that is meant to soften their opinion so as to avoid potential criticism.

(59) **You don't** have to analyse the camera angles or edits to feel that immediacy. (BBC 6 Oct 2020)

(60) **I don't know** what the best lyric is but 'Harry, my ginger-haired son, you'll always be second to none' has to be up there. (TS 9 Oct 2021)

## 5. Conclusion

This exploratory study employed corpus linguistic techniques to examine the lexico-phraseological profile of professional British film reviews. The results revealed a marked presence of lexis representing general cinematic terms, which is a very frequent category of keywords and key terms, though not particularly diverse. The importance of domain-specific vocabulary for the analyzed text variety is enhanced by the recurrent reference to a number of aspects which make up the cinematic universe, particularly film types and (sub)genres as well as people and locations involved in film production, but also characters, scenes, roles and details of the storyline. This densely woven web of movie vocabulary is linked together by discourse-organizing bundles that facilitate the logical development of argumentation. Film reviewers establish a discursive dialogue with the readers, as part of which they promote their own comments – positive and negative – often indirectly through *whys* and *I don't know*s. It seems that by asking questions which the readers may answer themselves and by admitting gaps in knowledge which potentially may be filled in by the readers, film reviewers attempt to show they are not forcing their own opinions through. Yet, this apparent objectivization of the cinematic experience is implicitly counteracted by a wide lexical range of assessments and evaluations, mostly in the form of adjectives and surprisingly infrequently in the form of longer sequences like stance bundles. It generally seems that reviewers try to embrace the totality of the reviewed films, aiming to help diverse viewers decide whether to see the movie or not, even if they may be inclined to honour “the known proclivities of their audience by anticipating what its members would like and making recommendations accordingly” (Holbrook 1999: 148).

Inevitably, the present study has its limitations. First, somewhat different results might have been obtained with a different reference corpus and sample of film reviews. Second, the semantic-functional categories applied to the analyzed lexis were developed intuitively and thus in a somewhat subjective manner, based on a careful reading of context and co-text, rather than by adopting any potentially existing taxonomies. Third, due to the limited scope of this study, only three lexical markers of style were examined more closely. Despite these shortcomings, the reported findings may have pedagogical implications. They can inform the design of authentic teaching materials for film reviewers, critics and journalists who try to gain expertise in domain-specific vocabulary, phraseologies and persuasion patterns. The investigated lexical means can constitute the focal vocabulary of various activities intended to develop the lexico-phraseological inventory needed to present the nuances of the cinematic arts. Teachers can also instruct novice review writers to analyze texts similar to the ones explored here in order to identify four-word lexical bundles and the discourse functions performed by them. After familiarizing themselves with these salient lexical items, students can then be instructed to write their own reviews and reflect on their own texts to gain a deeper

understanding of the practice of film reviewing. Future research can extend the present study by exploring the co-text of selected lexical items with respect to preferred co-occurrences and grammatical structures. It could be also worth examining whether the lexico-phraseological profile of film reviews is dependent on the (sub)genre of the reviewed films.

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