

THE RHETORIC OF THE CINEMA: A WORKSHEET FOR FILM ANALYSIS

Directions: When analyzing films or literature, remember that *how* the content/contents are presented is as important as those *contents* themselves. Everything you see or read should be analyzed as a “conscious choice” of the writer or filmmaker. Think about how each choice about presentation *persuades* you of the contents.

Content is *what* a work is about, then, while rhetoric is *how* that content is expressed. In art theory, it is an old saying that “form follows content.” Therefore, understanding how literature or cinema communicates or creates meaning requires more than paying attention to *what* happens in the story (the CONTENT / PLOT). It also requires paying attention to *how* various artistic choices (the FORM / RHETORIC) affect the way the story is understood by the reader or viewer.

THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF FILM FORM/RHETORIC are: literary design, visual design, cinematography, editing, and sound design:

LITERARY DESIGN INCLUDES CONVENTIONAL “RHETORICAL ELEMENTS” such as: the choice of GENRE (comedy, tragedy; romantic comedy; western, horror, thriller, etc.) as well as conventional literary rhetorical devices such as IRONY, ALLEGORY, SATIRE, etc. (It does NOT include “CONTENT ELEMENTS,” such as the plot, the characters, the setting and other “diegetic” aspects!)

VISUAL DESIGN INCLUDES: the choice of sets, costumes, makeup, lighting, color, acting style, and actors’ arrangement before the camera

CINEMATOGRAPHIC DESIGN INCLUDES: the choice of framing, shot distance, lenses/angle of view, film speed, camera angle, camera movement (e.g., tracking, panning, tilt), and focus (“depth of field”). [N.B. *Each individual shot can usually be storyboarded*]

EDITING (or “montage”) INCLUDES choices about editing pace, types of shots (e.g., establishing, reaction, freeze frame), types of cuts (e.g., match cut, jump cut, etc.), length of shots (e.g., long, short, etc.), scene transitions (e.g., fade-out, wipe, dissolve, etc.). In short, editing is how the individual shots are put together in order to create meaning or tell a story.

SOUND DESIGN includes: choices made about music, score/soundtrack, audibility, sound effects, off-screen sound, and so on. (N.B. *Soundscape* alone does not produce the “mood” of a film.)

(WARNING: FYI for Francophiles, *MISE-EN-SCÈNE* can refer to all of the following: VISUAL DESIGN, SOUND DESIGN, and CINEMATOGRAPHY.)

FOR A GREAT EXAMPLE OF FORMAL/RHETORICAL ANALYSIS (ALONG WITH CONTENT/CULTURAL ANALYSIS), SEE THE FOLLOWING SHORT VIDEO:

<http://wnnorton.com/common/mplay/5.10/?p=/college/movies4/dvd/&f=harry-potter.mp4&i=harry-potter.jpg&st=harry-potter.xml>