Film as Film: Using Movies to Help Students Visualize Literary Theory
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Film as *Film:*
Using Movies to Help Students
Visualize Literary Theory

Focusing on lighting, camera angles, and framing in a film version of *Moby-Dick,* high school teacher Valerie Muller discusses Dark Romanticism, archetypal theory, and deconstruction. Since multimedia texts are so prevalent in students' lives, learning to read film as a distinct art form may help students better understand complicated literary theories.

A t two in the morning, Nina sits on her bed and hugs a pillow tightly. The Stephen King movie marathon is on, the house is dark, and everyone else is asleep. Just as the television screen darkens, a ringing tone resounds from Nina's desk, where her high-speed Internet connection is always on. "LOL," she types moments later into the instant-message window that appeared on her computer screen. "Jay, your IM scared me so much I accidentally answered my cell. Now I'm ROTFL!" (That's "laughing out loud," "instant message," and "rolling on the floor laughing" for those of us not versed in cyberspeak.) Jay gives Nina his new cell phone number—he had been up late checking out the interactive CD-ROM that teaches him how to use his new phone—and Nina promises to send him a text message from her cell phone after first-period math class to let him know what to expect during his third-period exam.

Today, people are getting more information from multimedia sources than ever before. The average American spent ten hours a day in 2003 exposed to at least one form of multimedia—from MP3 music files to film and television to the Internet (Shaw, par. 1). Students often know more about this multimedia world than their teachers do. They immerse themselves in it. Though they have learned to navigate a high-tech world, they do not know how to "read" it.

Some educators insist that the English classroom is a stronghold in a war against impending technology. Its fortress, founded on the works of men such as Samuel Johnson, protects the great classics and rewards traditional reading and writing skills. Yet, as David Shaw argues, regardless of what we teach in the English classroom or how fervent our passion for printed texts, students are inherently more interested in multimedia—film, television, cell phones, music, the Internet—than traditional print texts. Regardless of English teachers' efforts, students will likely be exposed—and drawn—to movies more often than books.

Accepting this fact, Shaw asserts that multimedia, especially film, have the potential to be great educational tools that teachers are obligated to use in teaching students valuable new analytical skills. Jim Burke challenges teachers to use new forms of texts to teach "textual intelligence" (81), examining not only what texts say but also how they work. NCTE, recognizing that students are exposed to texts outside the classroom that are "increasingly non-printcentric" (par. 1), resolved to "encourage integrating multimedia composition in English language arts curriculum and teacher education" (par. 3). Regardless of how enthusiastically an English teacher presents printed texts, students will be drawn to multimedia texts. The degree to which students will be able to read critically these new and changing texts depends on the teacher's ability to foster textual analysis skills using different media.

Film in the English Classroom

In accepting new types of texts, English teachers are likely to turn to film. Often, films are presented to

students in ways that treat film as literature. Teachers encourage students to look for elements such as plot, symbolism, and setting—elements they would analyze in reading a printed text. At other times, students are asked to find differences between the printed text and the movie version. While useful, these methods of film as literature ignore film as a unique moving medium able to present texts in ways literature cannot. By critically thinking about film as *film*, students will learn to scrutinize a new generation of text—read daily outside the classroom—with its own language and conventions.

Teaching film as literature does have its advantages. Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder assert that few students, if any, have had formal training in film analysis, whereas students usually come to the English classroom with different levels of reading skills. Using film as a text in the English classroom helps to level the playing field as most students are equally inexperienced in film analysis (4). Michael Vetrie notes that students with low motivation are more willing to think, talk, and write about film than about books (40), regardless of which skills in Bloom's taxonomy are being employed.

While using film as literature does put struggling readers at less of a disadvantage and incorporates elements of English language and literature, it falls short in a number of ways. First, because films used as literature are taught in nearly the same way a teacher would teach literature, students struggling with literature might also struggle with film. Using film as literature still favors students with a strong grasp of narrative analysis skills, for it focuses mostly on the elements that film shares with literature, not on the unique ways a film expresses its narrative.

Second, the film-as-literature approach ignores the fact that a director has created a film text to shape the viewer's reactions. Many teachers focus on reader reaction, gauging students' reactions to a text as related to their life experiences. While this approach is useful, Bruce Pirie argues that teachers must not only consider how viewer/reader response shapes the text but also how the text is created to shape our reactions (29).

Finally, while film as literature can benefit struggling populations, it falls short of challenging all levels of students. Students already skilled in literary analysis would gain little benefit from a film-as-literature approach beyond that already provided by studying printed texts.

If teachers incorporate film as *film* in the classroom, they can bring their students to higher levels of thinking and can differentiate their film-based lessons to challenge all levels of students. Understandably, English teachers most often treat film as literature because they are experts in literary theory and the analysis of printed texts. John Golden and Marion C. Sheridan et al. note that English teachers often lack the training to treat film as anything other than literature. Nonetheless, as Golden insists, by coupling their expert knowledge of literary theory with an elementary understanding of film techniques, English teachers can more effectively utilize the unique medium of film and teach students to be more critical—and less passive—viewers.

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Studying specific cinematic techniques can help students decide what biases a director has and what point(s) he or she is trying to convey to the viewer. Unlike literature, film can use lighting, music, and camera angles as tools with which to tell a story. By studying these elements, students can learn to see film as a cultural artifact, noting its use of cultural conventions for conveying information. Students may observe that "bad guys" often appear in black wardrobes and dark lighting or that an upbeat musical theme announces the coming of a "hero." Students can speculate on the biases of the director by observing how characters or groups are presented in terms of lighting, music, and camera angles.

In addition, students can develop critical-thinking skills by looking into the narrative structure of these new texts. For example, students are quick to note suspenseful cues that a commercial is about to come on (Pirie 17–18). This peak in suspense both shapes the specific text (made-for-television movies are filmed with dramatic stopping points at evenly spaced intervals to convince the viewer "not to touch that dial" during the commercial break) and serves a larger, societal purpose (in their commercial function—to showcase the sponsors of the

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FIGURE 1. Common Visual Cinematic Techniques with Possible Meanings and Literary Connections

	Cinematic Element	Definition/Description	Often Used for/Connotation	Comparable Literary Elements, If Any
Framing	Long Shot	Main object(s) are seen in the distance and appear small on the movie screen.	Establish setting, show characters in relation to objects	third-person omniscient point of view
	Medium Shot	Shows a character from the waist up	Natural, "common in our real lives" (Golden 5). A neutral shot.	objective or third-person omniscient narration
	Close-up Shot	A shot in which the object or subject takes up most of the movie screen	Show emotion, identify viewer with character; subjective point of view (Golden 73)	subjective, first- or third-person limited point of view
Angle	Low Angle	The camera is located at a lower position than the subject.	Intimacy; establishes power; shows feeling of specific characters (Golden 61–62)	descriptive/subjective narration
	Eye-Level Angle	The camera is positioned at the eye level of the actor.	"Neutral shot," emulates the way we usually perceive the world (Golden 9)	objective narration
	High Angle	The camera is positioned above the subject.	Intimacy, power dynamic (Golden 61–62)	descriptive/subjective narration
Movement	Pan	The camera "pivots along a horizontal axis" (Golden 12) without moving from its original location.	Camera movement cues us that we are watching through a certain point of view (Bordwell and Thompson 245) and emulates the movement we make in daily lives, bringing us closer into the narrative of the film.	subjective point of view, builds suspense or increases emotion
	Tilt	The camera moves along a vertical axis, as if it were following someone moving up and down a ladder.		
	Zoom	The camera lens changes so that an object appears to grow either larger or smaller (take up more or less space) on screen.		

text). In this case, students can begin to see how the creators of the text weave the plot to influence viewer reaction—and to sell products! Since most students will continue viewing film and television after graduating from high school, these critical-thinking skills will be useful throughout their lives.

The important thing to note when analyzing film as *film* is that the students must not get lost in the story, as films tend to encourage. The narrative must never become transparent. Rather, students must take note of the ways directors use the cine-matic tools available to them, such as lighting, camera angle, and framing.

A number of resources can offer English teachers a basic understanding of key cinematic techniques and the ways in which they are com-monly used. One such source, *Film Art: An Intro-duction* by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, treats film as a unique art form and notes the differ-ent ways directors use cinematic techniques to cre-ate meaning. A second resource, *Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom* by John Golden, distills the essence of film techniques, presenting them in ways that are practical and helpful for an English teacher. Figure 1 summarizes major cinematic techniques and their common uses

FIGURE 1. Continued

	Cinematic Element	Definition/Description	Often Used for/Connotation	Comparable Literary Elements, If Any
Lighting	Low-Key/ Side Lighting	A small source of lighting is used, characterized by the presence of prominent shadows.	Suspicion, mystery, danger. Suggests characters that are evil, hiding something, morally ambiguous, conflicted (Golden 16).	mood, atmosphere (Walsh-Piper 23), tone
	High-Key/ Front Lighting	An even light source and few shadows, as in an office building	Honesty, nothing to hide, lack of threat (Golden 16–17)	
Editing	Fade	"The image on-screen slowly fades away" (Golden 20) and the screen blackens until the next shot fades in.	Makes a connection between two objects or characters (Golden 21)	analogy, simile, metaphor, juxtaposition, irony
	Dissolve	One image fades out as another images fades in so that two images are on the screen briefly at the same time.		mood, can create irony (Golden 89)
	Crosscut	Also known as parallel editing; the director cuts between two different episodes.	Builds suspense	tempo, pace
	Eyeline Match	Begins with the shot of a character looking in one direction, presumably looking at something, cuts to whatever the person was looking at, cuts back to show the character's reaction	Can reveal thoughts (Golden 22)	internal monologue

as presented in these and other sources, as well as possible links to written literary techniques.

Using Film as Film to Teach Literary Theory

Coupling knowledge of literary theory with an understanding of cinematic techniques, teachers can use film as *film*—not as literature—to illustrate literary theories that may be too abstract for students to comprehend through printed texts alone. To achieve this understanding in students, teachers must begin by teaching a short unit on film techniques. Golden suggests beginning the year with such a unit. Once students have a basic understanding of film, including the elements detailed in Figure 1, a teacher can scaffold students' observations of cinematic techniques to higher levels of thinking.

An analysis of the 1998 made-for-television movie *Moby Dick* demonstrates how teachers can use film to teach elements of Dark Romanticism,

archetypal theory, and deconstruction. I chose *Moby Dick* because short excerpts from the text are often included in eleventh-grade American literature anthologies. Indeed, Herman Melville's full text is too lengthy and difficult to fit practically in most curricula, and teachers often opt to show a film version in lieu of reading the entire text.

Though the 1998 film adaptation of *Moby-Dick* simplifies the plot, the film still runs 180 minutes. While many of Ishmael's long passages of narration and information on cetology have been omitted, the film largely follows the book's plot, tracing Ishmael's journey as he meets Queequeg, departs from Nantucket on the *Pequod*, endures the madness of Captain Ahab, and survives to watch the crew perish under the strength of Moby Dick.

Because of the film's length—and also because analyzing film as film requires a high level of focused concentration—teachers can opt to show only select clips from the film in twenty- to thirty-minute

segments. They can select scenes appropriate to the particular literary theory being studied. This way, teachers can choose which scene(s) to show and have plenty of class time remaining to discuss the clip, rewinding to review key shots.

Dark Romanticism

Literature in high school textbooks is often grouped by theme or time period. *Moby-Dick* is frequently included in a chapter on Dark Romanticism. Editors highlight the dark aspects of the work and the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne on Melville's writing. Studying the text through this schema, teachers encourage students to note elements of the Dark Romantic setting such as the sea, Dark Romantic characters such as Captain Ahab, and the relationship between the two.

> Light sources are blocked in strange patterns by ship masts, sails, netting, and drainage covers. We first meet the mysterious Ahab and Queequeg in silhouette amid a thunderstorm.

Dark Romanticism is an easy concept to understand, but the task of studying Dark Romantic elements in Melville's *Moby-Dick* is difficult for students, especially since many curricula/teachers/textbooks opt to include only excerpts from the lengthy text, the language of which is difficult for even advanced readers to grasp fully. Viewing excerpts from the film can help students analyze film as film to visualize dark elements in the story.

Students could examine the implications of the opening shot of Ishmael in extreme long shot and silhouette, a tiny figure on a rolling landscape. The next shot segues to Ishmael looking at the ocean. As he narrates, we see his face half-illuminated in side lighting. Students could speculate on the reason his face is half-hidden. How does that relate to his first words ("Call me Ishmael")? What is his real identity, and why is he hiding?

Visual cinematic elements of Dark Romanticism are more apparent further into the movie: Characters' faces are often partly hidden in side lighting. Light sources are blocked in strange patterns by ship masts, sails, netting, and drainage covers. We first meet the mysterious Ahab and Queequeg in silhouette amid a thunderstorm. The prophet Elijah delivers his somber prophesies in shadows. As Golden suggests, side lighting could be a clue to the viewer that certain characters "are conflicted in some way" (16).

There are numerous shots of the *Pequod* adrift in an endless sea that is at times so cold that icicles, shown in full-front lighting, form on the ropes and sails. Other shots portray the *Pequod* in the low-key lighting of a dim sunset, in a wide shot that emphasizes the ship's insignificant size on the open ocean. Such dreary shots stress the dark, dangerous landscape that supports the mood of Melville's work and the constant struggle of man against nature.

Emphasizing the internal conflict of Dark Romantic characters is the church scene in which Father Mapple delivers his sermon about Jonah and the whale. Here, Father Mapple is shot from a low angle; the viewer looks up at him as if sitting among the pews with the churchgoers. The scene also contains high-angle shots from Father Mapple's perspective atop his pulpit, looking down at the fearful Nantucketers as he speaks of death and love of God. The prominence of Mapple's placement and use of high and low angles show viewers the importance of Christianity to the state of mind of the Nantucket characters.
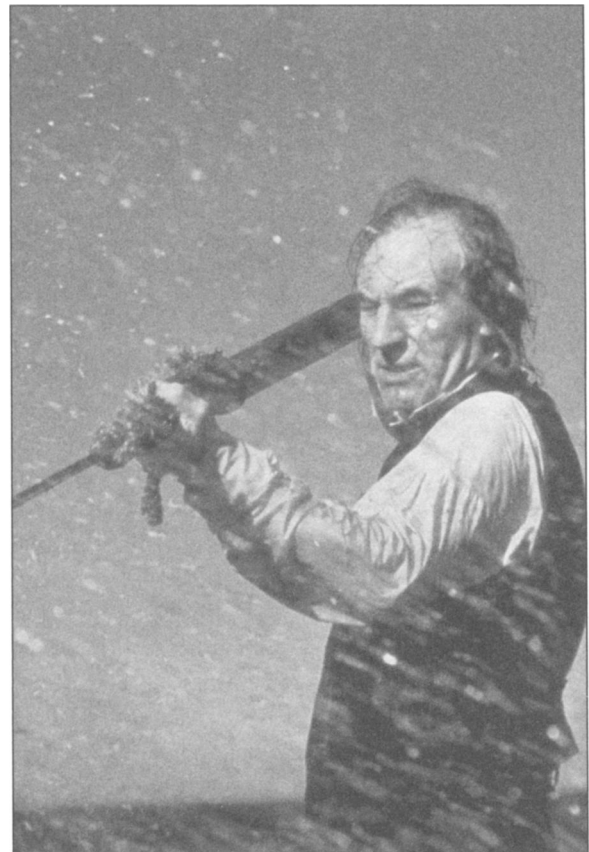
Ahab in a storm. From the 1998 Hallmark film, *Moby Dick.* © Corbis Sygma.

By analyzing film to understand such cinematic techniques, students will concretely visualize examples of Dark Romanticism; they can apply and translate this understanding to printed texts. In addition, such analysis can help students understand how cinematic techniques are designed to influence the way a viewer perceives each shot. Few would argue, for example, that in introducing us to Ahab during a thunderstorm in low-key lighting, the filmmaker intended to give us an impression of a peaceful and loving man!

Archetypal Theory

A theory often addressed in literary study is archetypal theory, based on Northrop Frye's conception of the monomyth and broken into stages by Joseph Campbell. Proponents of the monomyth suggest that most stories fit a basic pattern that runs through the veins of all humanity and encompasses three stages—departure, initiation, and return—each of which contains a series of substages (Moore 34–35). Though these elements can be seen in literature, film has many unique techniques that can illustrate elements of the monomyth in ways literature cannot.

For example, an important step between the departure and initiation stages is Crossing the Threshold. In the film, second-mate Stubb decides to turn "soft in the chest" Ishmael into a whaler by placing him on first watch early on the ship's journey. The camera angles are dramatic (extremely low and extremely high) as Ishmael climbs the ropes to the highest lookout of the ship. From the high angle, we see the crew staring up at Ishmael, with more men arriving to witness the trial. From the low angle, we look up as Ishmael climbs the ropes slowly and unsteadily. Yet after he arrives at the top of the mast, the music swells, the sun provides full front lighting, and the camera circles around Ishmael, from a high angle, showing his victory over this first trial. Ishmael has successfully crossed the threshold into the world of whaling.

Another stage in the monomyth is the Belly of the Whale, a part of the initiation stage in which the protagonist is immersed in his task. In the film, students can watch the tight framing used as Ishmael bonds with the other sailors in their quarters under the deck. Here, the director frames the screen in midshots and close-ups. To show more than two people in one shot, the director must place the actors close together. The cramped feeling conveyed by this cinematogra-phy emulates the nature of the Belly of the Whale stage of the monomyth, as Ishmael is completely immersed in the life of a whaler.

These are just two examples of the potential of camera angles, framing, and other cinematic devices to visualize stages in the archetypal journey. Such cinematic techniques are always open to interpretation, and teachers can discover new meanings with their students.

Deconstruction

For teachers with students more advanced in literary theory, *Moby Dick* can be used to illustrate the complicated theory of deconstruction. Studying film as *film* can help students grasp the concept of deconstruction, an understanding they can then apply to printed texts. One excerpt especially exemplifies the felicitous nature of the film to deconstructive analysis.

After the young Pip falls overboard while stowing away during a midnight hunt for Moby Dick, Starbuck allows Ishmael's boat to search for the boy until sunrise. As Ishmael's boat searches, the exhausted Starbuck returns to the ship and falls asleep, and the viewer watches his candle burn slowly down. Before it burns completely, Starbuck awakens and blows the candle out.

A common visual symbol in film is the extinguishment of a candle to signify the end of a life. In this particular shot, we see a close-up of Starbuck in full front lighting to show his emotions clearly—a mix of despair and regret. The viewer would expect Starbuck's expression and the extinguished candle to mean that Ishmael's boat had failed in its quest to find Pip. Yet in the next scene, we see that Pip has indeed been saved. Students might read this apparent paradox as simply a method of building suspense—a director fooling the viewer into thinking Pip had died. It could also be read to represent Starbuck's personal despair that Pip had been lost. Or, as we know from Starbuck's fervent protests to Captain Ahab, mostly shot in close-up, the candle could represent Starbuck's general despair at the apparent fate of the *Pequod*.

Reading further into the following scene, we see another possible meaning of the extinguished candle. Though Pip is alive, he is far from well, as his meeting with the shark has made him afraid of everything. The viewer learns of his mental state from a series of panned, spiraling close-ups of the crew, covered in whale's blood, greeting the rescued

boy. These shots are juxtaposed with extreme close-ups of Pip's terrified facial expressions. Pip now hides under stairways or in Captain Ahab's private quarters, and matched eyeline shots between Ahab and Pip form a bond of mental instability. Could the extinguished candle have symbolized the death of the old, sane Pip? Does it mean that, as many shipmates speculate, Pip should have been left to the kinder fate of death by shark?

Yet the symbol is not so neatly woven into the narrative as a symbol of Pip, for Starbuck begins his own personal transformation. He is pushed toward mutiny as Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick continues. Could the candle have symbolized a change in Starbuck's former, completely obedient self?

Other examples to illustrate deconstruction include the placement of the camera, which often obscures the narrative by adding additional layers that cannot be found in a printed narrative. For example, a medium shot of Ishmael and Queequeg through hanging fishing net obscures the two men by separating them from the viewer, who sits safely on the other side of the net. When the prophet Elijah first sets eyes on Ishmael, he watches Ishmael through shadows as Ishmael watches the men inside Coffin's Inn through a smoky window. With multiple characters looking through multiple filters—and the viewer watching through a television screen—viewers are left wondering which character is presented most objectively and which of the layered points of view they can most trust.

As students speculate on the possible meanings of such shots, they will likely find more and more possibilities. Such discussions will illustrate the theory of deconstruction: the more students search for answers, the more questions they will find.

The Future of Film in the English Classroom

While no one can guarantee that students will continue reading literature after high school, the chances are good that they will continue their exposure to multimedia texts such as film. Whether they spend their adult lives as passive viewers of such new and changing media or become active

readers of multimedia texts depends on their exposure to multimedia as valid texts for critical study. Though film as *film* cannot replace reading, writing, and the study of printed literature, it has the potential to bridge students' inherent interest in multimedia with the essential, active, critical-thinking skills that are at the heart of the English classroom. Through teaching simple cinematic terminology, teachers can join students in discovering the rich visual and aural language of cinema.

By harnessing students' inherent interest in multimedia as a tool to teach essential critical skills, teachers can show students that no matter what type of media is being viewed, each text has been specifically shaped to influence the viewer in one way or another, whether by an author, a director, an artist, or a musician. Realizing that is the most important step students can take toward the ability to read their new and ever-changing world.

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