

GROUP PROJECT UNIT ONE: Form, Structure, and Meaning

Directions: In groups of 4-6, choose one of the films viewed in class. Discuss the elements mentioned below. Make sure every member responds to each question. Choose one person to record your thoughts and observations. After you have answered the questions and analyzed the form and meaning of the work, your group must present your findings to the class in a creative manner.

*You must **diagram** the plot/structure of the film and explain how this structure creates the meaning. How would the film change if the structure was altered? You may use your own visuals or choose clips from the films.

****USE AS MANY TERMS AS POSSIBLE IN YOUR ANALYSIS. Answer as many of the sections below as you can. The more information and analysis—the better your grade.**

*****Decide how you will present all of this information. You will have one period to explain the film using clips, visuals, etc.**

- **Form=Content:** One basic tool for the students' examination of narrative form is the distinction between **plot** (the events as they are presented on the screen) and **story** (the events as we mentally reconstruct them in chronological order). Understanding the **plot-story distinction** will help the students think of narrative films as constructed by filmmakers. Moreover, the construction of the story (for example, figuring out how events depicted in flashbacks fit into the story's chronology) is one of the activities that makes us participate in the ongoing development of the film. Flashback? Flashforward? Other ways events are related?
- **Title/opening credits**—Titles are chosen carefully—consider alternatives and why this title was chosen; consider ambiguities in the title (“His Girl Friday,” a film with a strong, independent female protagonist). The opening credits establish a tone, and often are used to foreshadow events, themes, or metaphors—pay careful attention from the beginning. Where is the first plot point? Who is the main character(s) and what is the goal?
- **Subplots and Subtext**—The often numerous messages a film conveys beneath the surface; sometimes intended, often unintended, and sometimes conveying a different or contradictory message than the intended message. Look especially for ironies, contradictions, interesting juxtapositions, or if something initially doesn't seem to “make sense.” Subtext is usually developed through the use of figurative elements like metaphor and metonymy. Subplot relates to other stories in the film. Why are they there? How are they resolved? Do they relate to the main plot? Theme? How?

- **Causal, spatial, and temporal** relations among events are the building blocks of a film's narrative. They provide the student with the basic tools to discover how we can understand narratives. Causal and temporal factors, for example, are what enable us to understand the very concept of a flashback, as well as to figure out when its events occurred in relation to the rest of the action. Explain the relationships.
- **Change of knowledge:** Discuss the **range and depth** which varies enormously from film to film. This sheds light on the process by which narratives convey information to the spectator. How much do we know at the beginning? How much do we know at the end? How do we know? When do we know what we know?
- **Meanings? What are the meanings of the work? For Explicit meaning, use several quotes from the script.**
 1. Emotional
 2. Referential
 3. Explicit
 4. Implicit
 5. Symptomatic
- **Is it a Good Story?** (Your personal taste is irrelevant.)
 1. Unified Plot
 2. Credible/Plausible?
 3. Externally Observable Truths
 4. Internal Truths of Human Nature
 5. Artistic Semblance or Truth
 6. Interesting-Suspenseful/Action (How is suspense created?)
 7. Simple and Complex
 8. Handles Emotional Material with Restraint
 9. Other reasons it is or is not a good story
- **Intent/Message/Theme—**
 1. Morality
 2. Human Nature
 3. Social Problems
 4. Struggle for Human Dignity
 5. Complexity of Human Relationships
 6. Coming of Age/Innocence to Awareness
 7. A Moral or Philosophical Riddle-Symbolism
- **Metaphors? Motifs? Symbols? Images?Ironies?**
- **Narrative, Narration, Narrator—**Follow the camera and what do we see and learn? The narrative provides the basic structure by which a feature film is understood. (Most documentaries also have narratives.) The narrative consists of the story and the plot. The story consists of all of the

information conveyed by the film (either directly or by inference) assembled in chronological order to communicate the overall sense of what occurred in the film. The **diegesis** is the entire world of the story. A film's diegesis may have a different logic than the "real" world, but as long as there is proper motivation (see below) it will make sense to the viewer. Diegetic elements are found **explicitly or implicitly** in the world of the story; non- or extra-diegetic elements (the soundtrack, the title, a voice-over, an audience's expectations of a star's persona) are outside the story. The plot provides the cause and effect relations that cue the audience and create suspense, surprise, and fulfill expectations. While dialogue provides a good deal of information, pay attention to all the other audio and visual clues that convey information about the narrative.. In considering the narrative structure, note whether the film follows a standard chronological narrative or not and how time is used. What are the **key moments** and how are they established? What are the **climaxes and anticlimaxes**? How far ahead is the audience in understanding what is happening to the characters than the characters themselves are? What propels the story forward? What is the pace of the narrative? How do earlier parts of the narrative set up later parts? Where are the key emotive moments when the audience is frightened, enraged, enraptured, feeling vindicated, etc., and how has the narrative helped to establish these feelings? Note when there is a **change of knowledge** (when characters or the audience become aware of new information) which shifts the **hierarchy of knowledge** (the relative amount of knowledge characters and the audience have). Does the narrative have a coherent unity, or does it leave the audience feeling unfulfilled or confused? (Sometimes the latter is the mark of an unsuccessful film; sometimes its either an intentional effect to challenge the easy "Hollywood ending" or else the result of the mixed intentions of the various authors.)

- **Motivation**—"Justification given in the film for the presence of an element. What motivates a character to do what he/she does? What motivates the filmmaker to do certain things like slow motion, black and white, freeze frame, etc.?"
- **Characterization**—See outline for ways to understand character. Who are the central characters? How are minor characters used? Are characters thinly or fully drawn, and why? Who in the audience is meant to relate to which characters, and what sort of emotion (fear, pleasure, anxiety) are audience members meant to feel because of this identification? Is there a clear or ambivalent hero or villain? What values do the characters represent, and do they change during the film? Are the characters meant to play a particular "type" and do they play against type at any time? Names? Dress? Other characters?
- **Point of view**—Is the film in general told from a particular character's point of view, or is it "objective"? Is the film's perspective primarily intellectual or emotional, visionary or "realistic"? Within the film, is a particular shot viewed from a character's point of view ("subjective shot"),

and how does the camera technically reinforce the point of view? Who is the audience meant to be focusing on at a particular moment?

Unrestricted vs Restricted Narration? Objective vs Subjective Character Narration?

- **Important scenes**- Choose **3** important scenes that reveal the theme of the work. What occurs in this scene and how does it relate to the film as a whole. Is it a turning point? Shift of Focus? Epiphany?
- **Setting(s)**- How do the settings function in the story? Why do certain actions take place at these locations? Time of year? Time of day?
- **Dialogue/Quotes**- Choose a dialogue or an important quote or two and explain their significance to the work. Should this be taken literally? Ironically? Symbolically or metaphorically? Why is this conversation/quote so important to the rest of the film?
- **See screening checklist questions? See outline for help?**
- **Have you mentioned as many terms as possible?**
- **How many sources of research (websites, articles, dvd commentary, etc.) have you used in your analysis?**