

Essay Assignment 4--Film Analysis

Recall Simone Weil's essay "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," in which Weil defines force as "that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing" (*Humanities Core Reader* 27). For Weil, "the true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad*, is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away" (27). The film *The Manchurian Candidate* takes up this subject, capturing the physical subjection of its characters to a force (or to forces) not their own. Using the formal components of film, both visual and aural, it poses many of the questions about human agency that we have considered in *The Iliad* and other texts so far this year.

Assignment

Analyze how *The Manchurian Candidate* uses film techniques (such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound) to make an argument about force. What account does the film offer of the possibilities and limits of human agency during the Cold War?

This paper should be between 5-6 pages and will be worth 30% of your grade. You will be required to integrate an academic, secondary source into your essay.

The Writing Process

In your brainstorming process, you will need to familiarize yourself with the conventions and vocabulary of film analysis. Re-read your *Writer's Handbook* chapter "Analyzing Film." There, Dr. Buhanan claims that film is both "attractive" and "inherently deceptive" because it makes us feel as if we have gained "complete access" to an event (*Writer's Handbook* 69). But, he also shows that while film may generate a feeling of immediacy, film analysis works to critique that sense of immediacy. Film analysis approaches each component of a film as a choice, a decision to implement one mode of representation over another. It asks why a certain choice has been made and how the choice affects the film's argument.

To help yourself understand basic film terminology, technique, and points of analysis involved in the production of film, explore the websites Dr. Buhanan recommends, as well as the Yale Film Studies Film Analysis Guide. Write a list of eight or ten of these techniques.

Now, watch *The Manchurian Candidate* all the way through. This viewing should offer you context: a sense of the plot, characters, political setting, etc. Afterwards, make preliminary notes about the ways in which the film uses the components of film on your list, such as mise-en-scene (lighting, decor, space, etc.), cinematography (close-ups, zoom shots, point-of-view shots, etc.), editing (shot/reverse shots, montage, etc.), and sound (synchronous and nonsynchronous sound, voiceover, etc.).

To best understand the impact of these filmic techniques, you may want to evaluate the difference between the written screenplay and the movie you have just watched. How does the difference in medium shape your interpretations? What do you learn, feel, see, notice from the movie that you don't get from the page?

You might then take a moment to extend your research by reading secondary, academic analyses of *The Manchurian Candidate*. If you need a refresher on conducting searches for these materials, take a look at some of the Library's tutorials on the research process. Look especially at the best ways in which to conduct a basic search using Boolean operators and truncation. If you do a book search on ANTPAC, you will find some volumes on *The Manchurian Candidate* that have been put on reserve in the Langson Library.

With these various contexts in mind, review the film and ask yourself how the components of film on your list relate to one another. How, for example, does the film's use of lighting and panning develop a sense of constrained agency? How does the use of close-ups and montage suggest or diminish our sense of individuality?

When you begin drafting your paper, you may find it best to evaluate multiple filmic techniques used in a single scene, or you may find it more effective to analyse a few filmic techniques used throughout the film. In either case, you will want to watch relevant portions of the film repeatedly. Choose scenes that seem important to you, and as you watch, hit the "pause" button in order to write notes. Your descriptions of the scenes will be the most essential part of this paper because they serve as evidence to support your claims. In the same way that a film director makes choices about what to include and exclude in a shot, you must carefully select the scenes and filmic components that further your argument about human agency during the Cold War.

Student Learning Goals

- Reinforce skills carried over from Essay Assignments 1-3: make specific, complex and arguable claims; produce cohesive paragraphs; present well-selected and well-contextualized evidence; develop strong warrants; develop organic transitions that show the progress of ideas over time; write rhetorically persuasive introductions and conclusions; evaluate and integrate secondary materials into writing through careful evaluation and contextualization.
- Develop strategic depictions of evidence in the process of film analysis that anticipate and reinforce claims.
- Invoke vocabularies relevant to film analysis.
- Practice active revision, in which the final submitted draft exhibits your generation of ideas, your working through of numerous revisions, editing and proof-reading, and reflection on the process of writing itself.