APPROACHES TO VISUAL TEXTS

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Portions of this presentation are drawn from Moon, B. (2004) *Viewing Terms: A Glossary for Film and TV Study*. Chalkface Press.

The following notes are based on a presentation delivered to CEWA and AISWA teachers at James Nestor Hall on August 28, 2017. Many of the images included in the presentation cannot be reproduced for storage and distrubution, for copyright reasons.

This summary includes a written precis of the presentation, the key conceptual diagrams and strategy suggestions, and a list of suggested readings.

PRESENTATION SUMMARY: 'VISUAL TEXTS IN ENGLISH'

We live in a visual culture; and visual texts play an increasing role in our communications and daily lives, from corporate logos to advertisements, internet memes to feature film, television to video games. If English is a curriculum space in which we prepare students to *comprehend, communicate* and *create* in ways that are contemporary and relevant, then visual texts must be a part of the syllabus.

Currently, the dominant approach to visual texts in our schools emphasises the formalist study of images through visual 'codes' – elements such as framing and composition, colour, viewpoint, camera angle, focus, distance, and so on. Students are trained to identify such elements and to consider how they position the viewer and shape a response. While some attention to visual grammar makes sense, too much emphasis on these so-called 'codes' can result in checklist-style responses from students. There is a tendency for many students to *catalogue* the elements in a visual text, often without a deep comprehension of what effect a particular element creates or what the image as a whole means.

The current focus on elements, codes and conventions is the culmination of a number of 20th century trends in textual analysis and curriculum development. It reflects the influence of structural and semiotic theories of language and text arising from the work of theorists such as Saussure, Peirce, Propp, Levi-Strauss, Greimas and Barthes. It also reflects the growing influence of Media studies upon the English curriculum. Media teachers furnished their English-teacher colleagues with many foundational strategies for working with visual text. Also significant is the influence of the Birmingham Centre for Communications and Cultural Studies (BCCCS) – an institute established by pioneers of Media and Cultural studies, including Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. The rise of media and cultural studies cemented the place of semiotic analysis in our approach to visual texts.

While structuralist and semiotic methods have been productive in many ways, their classroom application has sometimes obscured or sidelined other important dimensions of analysis, such as rhetorical and ethnographic studies. These latter approaches place much more emphasis on visual texts as *rhetorical acts* that take place within rich cultural and historical contexts.

It is now becoming clearer that code-based approaches to visual text do not always explain as much as we might think. As human beings, we know from lived experience that it is intimidating when someone physically towers over us; and that close proximity to another person's face is associated with moments of either threat or intimacy. Pointing out that these effects can be reproduced by camera angles and close-up shots doesn't add anything new to our understanding of what is depicted in an image—except to focus our attention on how the apparatus of the camera is used to emulate aspects of our social interactions. Such insights are arguably more relevant to the task

of media *production* than to comprehension and analysis. Film *makers* must learn how to emulate on screen the complex rules that govern our social interactions. They must learn about the technical capabilities of cameras, lenses, and film, and how to exploit that potential when composing images. But understanding the images they create requires a different set of skills.

What must be added to our code-based approach is an awareness of how visual representations are grounded in real cultural practices and in the set of relations between text, purpose, audience and context. These relations form the rhetorical matrix within which specific techniques and strategies become meaningful and effective. For many images, it is not the elements of composition that determine the meaning and effects but rather the text's role in an ongoing public debate, commercial enterprise, or historical moment. A rich understanding often requires specific knowledge of current events, the participants and their relations, and a broad general knowledge. That is especially true for political cartoons, street arts, internet memes, advertisements, posters and the like. Students who lack a basic knowledge of the issues and social relations that surround an image by Banksy or a political cartoon from Bill Leak or Jon Kudelka will not be able to redress that knowledge deficit by identifying elements of the visual code, in isolation from the cultural context. Indeed, the task of learning a long list of terms and concepts related to image production is likely to leave such students with even less cognitive space to devote to comprehension.

More helpful than focussing on 'codes' is a broader rhetorical method—one that furnishes students with information about the creators of a text and their purposes, the site of publication, the target audience to whom the text is addressed, and the other texts to which it is a response. Rather than assume students have such knowledge, and rather than inviting them to research or speculate blindly, I suggest that teachers should supply much of this information, as a way of building the 'cultural capital' of students. Our questions should then direct students not only to the shaping strategies evident in the image itself, but to an understanding of the relationships between the sender and receiver of the message and the cultural context(s) within which the communicative act takes place. Visual elements are an important part of that framework of analysis, but their contribution will only be fully understood once they are seen within the overall context.

The rhetorical relations are clearer for some images than others. Political cartoons are a good training ground. Cartoonists make visual responses to the news of the day; and they make efficient use of a few basic tools: caricature, dramatisation, symbolism, allegory, and so on. A study of political cartoons, grounded in a wider engagement with news coverage of current events, can build general knowledge and comprehension at the same time. Starting with events close to home, and then progressing to world affairs and historical sources, teachers can develop students' understanding of rhetorical techniques and the roles of context and audience.

Advertisements also provide good training in visual analysis. In the case of advertisements, we don't need to speculate on the

producer's purposes: we know the aim is to create desire for the product, translate desire into action, and so increase sales. Here the basic technique is *transference*: advertisers confer desirable meanings and associations upon a product by transferring those meanings from an existing source. In any advertisement we can identify the *imported object* that brings a set of cultural desires and meanings into the image, and the *mechanism of transference*. Visual echoes based on colour and shape, juxtapositions, and implied equations are common strategies. Cultural signs and symbols, and verbal connotations, can also play a role. We can help students to see and explain these mechanisms by providing details about the site of publication, and the target demographic.

Film and television texts take us into another realm. In these tests, the visual elements sit alongside a narrative that unfolds in time through a series of implied causes and effects. While visual composition and aesthetics are profoundly important, it is the narrative itself that conveys a great deal of the cultural meaning. For this reason, I argue that film study in English should begin and end with a focus on the narrative. Ideas, attitudes and values are communicated through contests between characters (or groups) in the film, who function as the bearers of values. Teasing out the narrative elements, and inviting students to predict the relationship between characters and values—including which values will be affirmed in the end—is an effective way of helping students separate the fundamental story from the visuals in which it is embedded. Once the narrative design has been grasped, students can consider the how the visual style, composition, and aesthetics shape our response to the narrative. This will not always require a close study of 'codes'. In the case of some film and television texts it might be more productive to look for connections beyond the text—to identify genre conventions, or features of a director's oeuvre, or allusions to other films. Film styles and genres are often best explored not through individual texts but through text collections: the works of a specific director, studio, or producer; the key texts within a specific genre; or representative texts from a specific historical period or culture.

Television can likewise be explored through genre and intertext. Television shows work primarily through genre, and this can be examined at a variety of levels: in the ongoing narrative, characters and setting, but also in the *ideational montage* of the opening credits. A television show like *The X Files* or *Fringe* signals its genre origins in its opening sequence. It can be productive to explore *connections* between such texts in addition to studying series and episodes in isolation. Here again the work of a particular writer, producer or studio can be explored through a collection of texts, and by mapping the links between them, even without going into detailed study of particular episodes.

The inclusion of video games, picture books, and other emerging media can also be a valuable strand in our studies of visual texts. In the case of computer games, one of the key themes to explore is the convergence of media—that is, the crossing over of influences between literature, feature film, games, graphic novels, and other media. Just as early pioneers of cinema looked to stage drama for inspiration and ideas, so we see the pioneers of graphical computer games turning to literature

and feature film as models for their own storytelling strategies. Even early arcade games such as 'Spacewar' and 'Space Invaders' were based on literary sources (including E.E Smith's *Skylark* novels and Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.) The whole genre of fantasy Role Playing Games is essentially based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which furnished not only the stock character types (elves, dwarves, orcs, humans) but also the basic fantasy storylines of questing, magic and the struggle between good and evil.

As visual texts, computer games lend themselves to study from a range of angles. Like feature films, games are forms of narrative; but they are narratives in which the gamer plays a role, actively intervening (in scripted ways) within the game world. We can study the narrative design, values, conflicts and resolutions of computer games, as we do for films. It isn't necessary (indeed, it isn't practical) to play the games; we can make use of cut scenes, trailers, gameplay clips, key scenes and other resources to explore a game text. This approach works well for rich and complex games like *Bioshock* or *Planescape*, which combine surprising philosophical depth along with their action-oriented gameplay.

Game designers work hard to give their games a unique visual style that will make it stand out from other games, while at the same time signalling their membership of a particular genre or body of work. The distinctive visual styles of games can make them useful for teaching the differences between realism, fantasy, noir, gothic, and other styles. Games also provide effective materials for exploring the construction of point of view and for exploring how voices and perspectives can be incorporated in a text.

In all of these cases, effective study calls for a contextualised treatment of the text—relating it to its historical moment, its producers and audiences, and the set of shared (or contested) ideas and values that are the background to the communicative act of which the text is a component. For certain purposes, an exploration of filmic or visual codes will be relevant—such as when explaining the impact of specific scene in a film, or accounting for the *visual impact* (as opposed to the rhetorical function) of a particular image. But even in those cases, it is arguable that the terminology and concepts of codes and conventions should serve to illuminate our understanding of the aims and effects, rather than serving as an end in itself.

Above all, we must guard against the tendency for terms, mnemonics and codes to become the content we teach rather than an aid to learning something more important and fundamental. If we find ourselves saying "I must teach SWAT codes this term" rather than, say, "I want to explore the dystopian genre in film with my class" then we have fallen into the trap of substituting the map for the territory. Something equally troubling happens when teachers retreat from a rich engagement with poetry and start teaching lists of "devices" (alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, onomatopoeia...). We must be sure that in our efforts to help students cope with complexity, by making lists of terms and concepts, we don't lose sight of the pleasures, ideas, and contests of meaning that draw us to texts in the first place.

- Brian Moon, August 2017.

Suggested Readings and Resources

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Hill & Wang.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-text*. Hill & Wang.

Benjamin, W. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

Berger, J. (1977). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.

De Lauretis, T. & Heath, S. (1980). *The Cinematic Apparatus*. Macmillan.

Gee, J.P. (2003). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. MacMillan.

Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1988). *Social Semiotics*. Polity.

Hughes, R. (1980). *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*. BBC.

Jameson, Frederic. (1984). 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. *New Left Review*, 146: 53-92.

Metz, C. (1974). *Film language: a semiotics of the cinema.* Oxford.

Monaco, J. (2000). *How to read a film: the world of movies, media and multimedia*. Oxford.

Moon, B. (2004). *Viewing Terms: A Glossary for Film and TV Study*. Chalkface.

Sturken,M & Cartwright, L. (2009). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford.

Williamson, J. (1978). *Decoding Advertisements*. Marion Boyars.

Wolf, J. (1981). *The Social Production of Art*. Macmillan.

CURRENT PRACTICE: VISUAL 'CODES'

FRAMING

COMPOSITION

RULE OF THIRDS

CAMERA ANGLE

CAMERA MOVEMENT

FOCUS

LIGHTING

SYMBOLIC CODE

WRITTEN CODE

VIEWER POSITIONING

AUDIO CODE

EDITING

LIMITATIONS OF FORMALISM ('CODES')

Cultural knowledge is bracketed/ignored
Codes become the content
Elements replace *discourse*
Comprehension reduced to *decoding*
Leads to cataloguing/checklisting
Context is reduced to history

E.D. Hirsch, (2006) *The Knowledge Deficit*.

General knowledge—not formal skill—is the prime determinant of textual comprehension.

TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL STUDY

IMAGE ANALYSIS

What must viewers know about the historical and rhetorical context of this image?

What are the relationships between sender, text, message, receiver?

Are visual codes or historical circumstances the prime shapers of meaning?

Source: https://thebodyoftruth.wordpress.com/2012/09/18/muslim-thugs-from-sydney-riot-leaving-court/

TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL STUDY

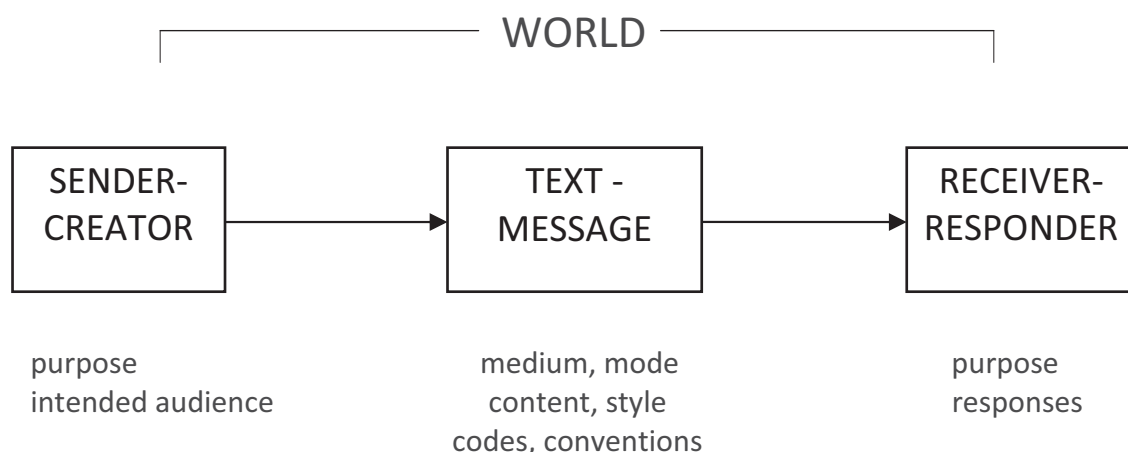| THE CONTEXT	THE IMAGE CONTENT
The image shows five men charged, but not convicted, over rioting in Sydney between pro-Islamist Muslim Australians and Anti-Immigration groups in 2012. It appeared in an international online publication, "The Body of Truth" -- a conservative anti-Islamic blog based in the Republic of Georgia (in the former Soviet Union). The blog's authors campaign against Islam, Communism, Marxism and Liberalism around the world. The photograph appeared under the heading MUSLIM THUGS CHARGED IN SYDNEY RIOT.	The image is dominated by five men walking down the stairs from the Sydney courthouse. Four are dressed in casual western clothes, two with hoodies over their heads. One wears a baseball cap. Two are in dark sunglasses. One man is dressed in a traditional white kaftan-style shirt and pants. All wear sneakers. All of the men are bearded. Other men can be seen in the background exiting the court. A man with a briefcase, possibly a lawyer or official, can be seen on the right. There are no women visible in the image. The courthouse is an architecturally formal stone building with arched windows.
SHAPING STRATEGIES	**AUDIENCE AND EFFECT**
The camera's viewpoint is below the men, which makes them seem imposing as they advance down the steps. The image is framed to place them in the centre so that they dominate the frame. The men in the foreground appear muscular, self-assured and powerful. The camera's viewpoint positions the viewer as if present at the scene, with the men advancing down the steps toward the viewer.	The "Body of Truth Blog" attracts predominantly young males in the 16-35 age group, from mid-lower socioeconomic quartiles. They would be described by market demographers as "Fairer Deal" consumers: they feel left out and cheated by a society that is rapidly changing around them. They value traditional male roles and manual jobs, and they resent non-Western immigrants and refugees who they see as threatening their jobs and way of life. In Australia, such men are likely to be in the D/E income quartiles, with mortgages and limited disposable incomes but not relying on welfare or allowances.

What ideas will this image suggest to its intended audience?
How has the text been shaped to convey these ideas?

BASIC RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK

WORLD

SENDER-CREATOR → TEXT - MESSAGE → RECEIVER-RESPONDER

purpose
intended audience

medium, mode
content, style
codes, conventions

purpose
responses

Moon, B. (2016). *Introducing Literature: A Practical Guide to Literary Analysis, Criticism, and Theory*. Chalkface Press.

ADVERTISING IMAGES

Advertisements are *rhetorical acts* in *cultural contexts*.

Goal =   Provoke desire, consumption
Key strategy =   Transference
Audience =   Specific demographic

Mechanisms: The 'objective correlative' equations, visual echoes,
                         substitutions

The product is linked not to an actual lifestyle but to an *ideological image* life.

It is "a representation of our *imaginary* relation to our conditions of existence."
- *L. Althusser*

DIVERGENT READINGS OF BANKSY'S IMAGES

LEFT (Labour-Green)

Appeals to our humanity
Endorses diversity
Supports human rights
Promotes openness and equality
Shows shame of anti-immigration policies

Banksy = genuine voice of the people,
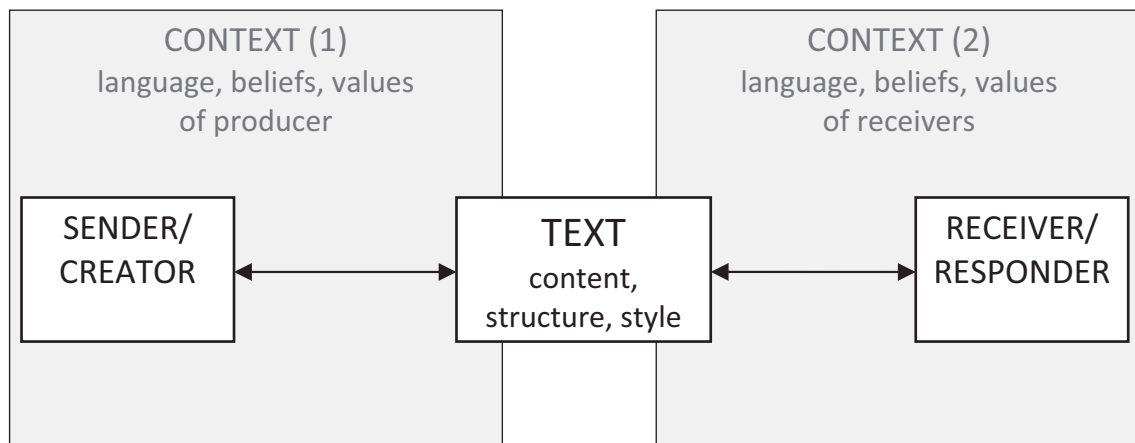   moral conscience

RIGHT (UKIP-Tory)

Simplistic populism
Reduces complex economic and social issues
to pure sentimentality
Confuses sovereignty with "sharing"
Sells out Britain to the EU

Banksy = guerrilla campaigner for fashionable
         Left causes

Competing interpretations remind us that creator and audience may act within
different cultural contexts...

REVISED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

	CONTEXT (1) language, beliefs, values of producer		CONTEXT (2) language, beliefs, values of receivers	
	SENDER/ CREATOR	TEXT content, structure, style	RECEIVER/ RESPONDER	

Moon, B. (2016). *Introducing Literature: A Practical Guide to Literary Analysis, Criticism, and Theory*. Chalkface Press.

QUESTIONS FOR STILL IMAGES

- What is the historical and cultural context of the image?

- What ideas does the image suggested to its *intended viewers*?

- How do relations between producer, text, context and audience work to create these meanings?

- How has the visual text itself been shaped as part of the communication? [consider relevant codes here]

- What other readings of the image are possible? How might other viewers respond?

APPROACHING FILM AND TV

Film narratives are *culturally embedded* texts.

They combine elements of ART + CULTURE + TECHNOLOGY + COMMERCE.

They require *ethnographic and rhetorical analysis,* as well as semiotic study.

Values are strongly conveyed through the narrative.

Consider the narrative design:

VALUES (A/B) ⟶ CONTEST ⟶ RESOLUTION

Study the point of view and ask: Who looks? Who is looked at?

Compare aesthetics and mise en scène to the axis of montage (narrative).

TECHNOLOGY AND FILM GRAMMAR

Year		Description
1877	–	Series photography (Muybridge)
1888	–	Moving picture camera (Dickson)
1893	–	Kinetoscope (Edison)
1895	–	Film projection, 'Actualities'
1899	–	Causal narrative (Melies)
1900	–	Parallel editing (Williamson)
1903	–	Continuity editing (Porter)
1903	–	Parallel editing, rear projection, camera panning, diagonal shots. (Porter)
1906	–	First colour process
1908	–	Multiple camera set-ups (Griffith)
1912	–	Multi-reel films, first cinemas
1915	–	Hollywood established
1918	–	Montage and mise en scène techniques (Kuleshov)
1919	–	German expressionism (Pommer)
1922	–	Point of view and camera movement (Murnau)
1927	–	Synchronised speech (Crosland)
1929	–	Invisible editing, shot/reverse, motivated pov (Pabst)
1931	–	Expressionists flee Germany to the US. Development of film noir style.

TECHNOLOGY AND FILM GRAMMAR

1895	–	Auguste & Louis Lumiere, first film projector
1899	–	*The Dreyfus Affair* (Melies)
1902	–	*A Trip to the Moon* (Melies)
1903	–	*The Great Train Robbery* (Porter)
1912	–	*Quo Vadis* (Guazzoni)
1915	–	*Birth of a Nation* (Griffith)
1919	–	*Das Cabinet des Dr Calligari* (Pommer)
1922	–	*Nosferatu* (Murnau)
1925	–	*Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein)
1926	–	*Metropolis* (Lang)
1927	–	*The Jazz Singer* (Crosland)
1932	–	*Scarface* (Hawkes)
1941	–	*Citizen Kane* (Welles)
1949	–	*The Third Man* (Reed)
1952	–	*High Noon* (Zinneman)
1958	–	*Touch of Evil* (Welles)
1960	–	*Psycho* (Hitchcock)
1968	–	*2001 A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick)

ELEMENTS OF FILM GRAMMAR

SHOT

The basic structural unit of film, defined as a single uninterrupted exposure.

POINT OF VIEW

The apparent view or perspective adopted by the camera: may be objective or subjective.

MONTAGE

The process of conveying an idea through the sequencing of shots.
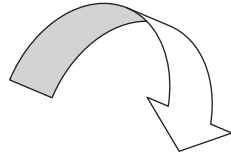
MISE EN SCÈNE

The visual composition and arrangement of elements within the frame.

From Moon, B. (2004) *Viewing Terms: A Glossary for Film and TV Study*. Chalkface Press.
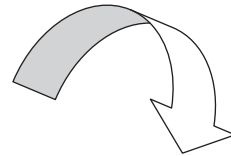
CURRENT PRACTICE

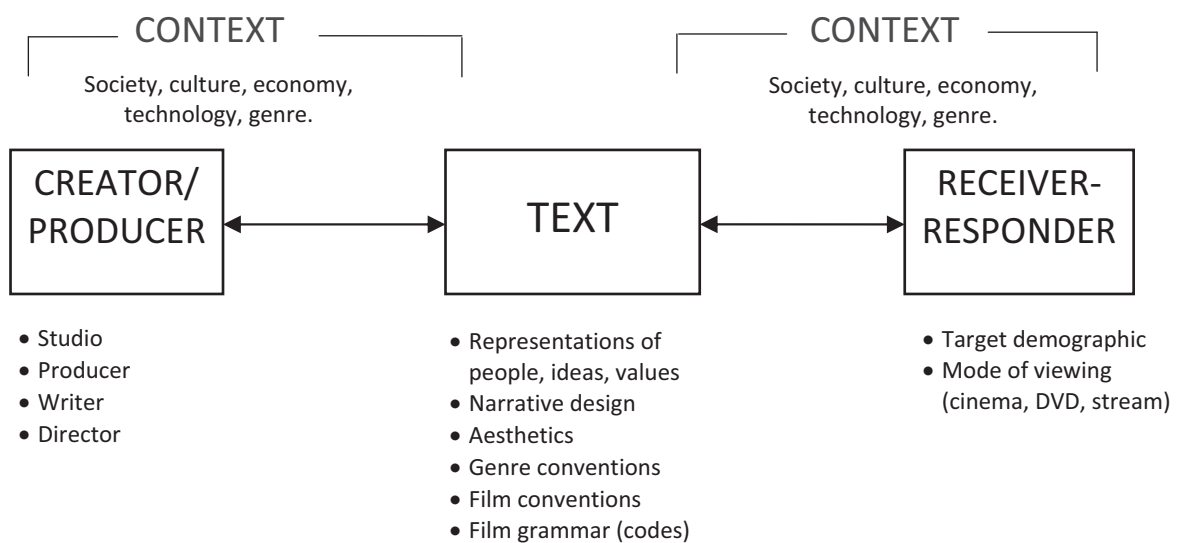Film screening:
Rabbit Proof Fence

SWAT Codes:
Camera angles, framing
symbolic codes, written
code, sound, music...

ESSAY: How were
film codes used to
convey ideas and
position the viewer?

A RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK FOR FILM/TV

CONTEXT

Society, culture, economy,
technology, genre.

CONTEXT

Society, culture, economy,
technology, genre.

CREATOR/
PRODUCER

↔

TEXT

↔

RECEIVER-
RESPONDER

- Studio
- Producer
- Writer
- Director

- Representations of
  people, ideas, values
- Narrative design
- Aesthetics
- Genre conventions
- Film conventions
- Film grammar (codes)

- Target demographic
- Mode of viewing
  (cinema, DVD, stream)
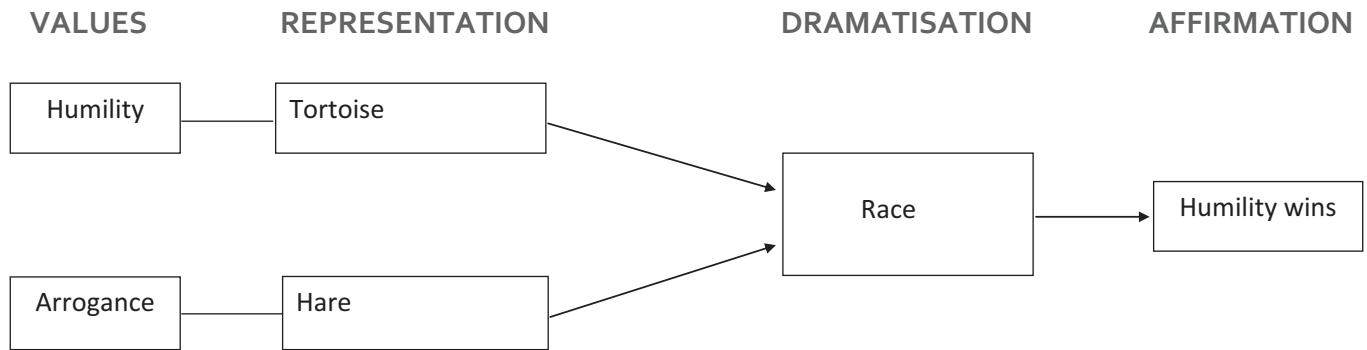
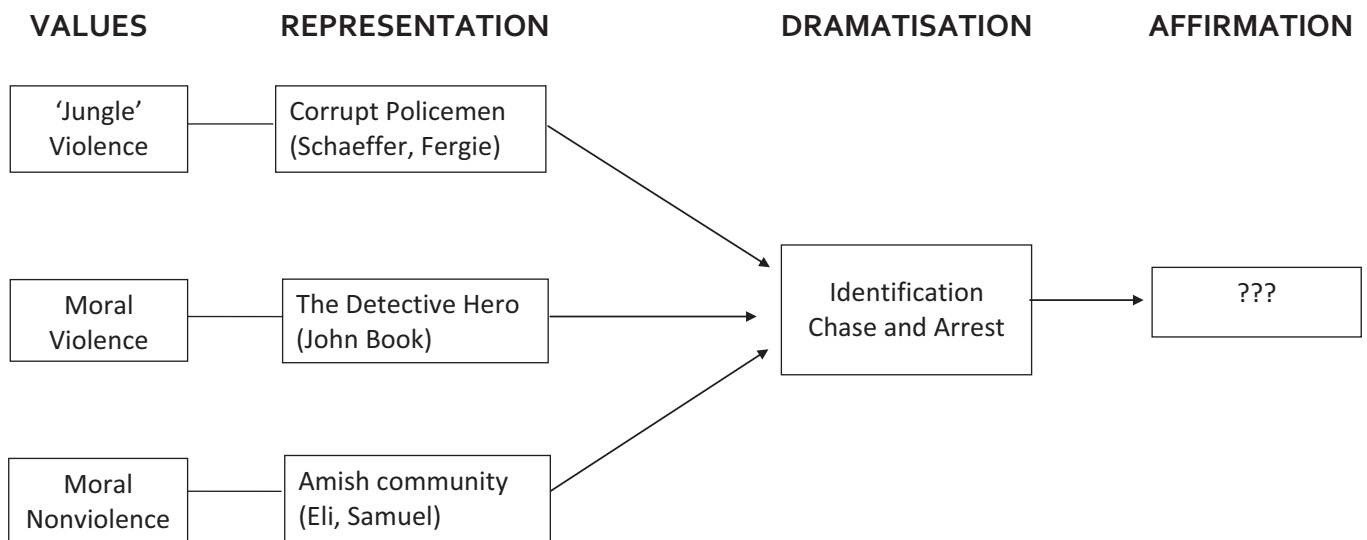# NARRATIVE AND VALUES

A narrative is a machine for naturalising (or challenging) cultural beliefs and values.

VALUES	REPRESENTATION	DRAMATISATION	AFFIRMATION
Humility	Tortoise	Race	Humility wins
Arrogance	Hare		

EXAMPLE: NARRATIVE & VALUES IN *WITNESS*

VALUES	REPRESENTATION	DRAMATISATION	AFFIRMATION
'Jungle' Violence	Corrupt Policemen (Schaeffer, Fergie)	Identification Chase and Arrest	???
Moral Violence	The Detective Hero (John Book)		
Moral Nonviolence	Amish community (Eli, Samuel)		

DIRECTOR PROFILE: Peter Weir

Australian, born 1944

Early films: *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974)
               Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975)
               The Last Wave (1977)

Major films: *Gallipoli* (1981)
               Witness (1985)
               Dead Poets Society (1989)
               Green Card (1990)
               The Truman Show (1998)
               Master and Commander (2003)

Themes: characters who live in 'closed worlds' and who must step outside of their world in
               order to grow, change or face reality

Style: lyrical directing style, impressive visuals, strong symbolism
               meticulous recreation of historical periods or cultural milieux

Image source: http://www.filmreference.com/images/sjff_02_img0894.jpg

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POINT OF VIEW AND THE GAZE

| | Laura Mulvey, 1941 – Film theorist 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' 1975 | | Teresa De Lauretis, 1938- Film theorist, critic *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, 1984 |

We *identify* with those in the film who look and see.

We *objectify* those who are looked at.

The narrative point of view belongs to the one who looks.

SUMMING UP

- Reduce our focus on purely formalist approaches ('codes'). Take a broader ethnographic/rhetorical approach.

- Place visual texts in a richer cultural context. Build students' general knowledge and cultural capital.

- Consider the broader *strategies* in texts (juxtaposition, visual echoes, equations, metaphor, allegory) rather than atomised visual elements.

- Encourage 'anthropological' discussion of texts rather than checklisting.