The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film

David Blakesley (Editor)
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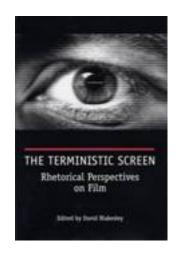**Printer-friendly PDF version**

The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film is an edited volume of fifteen essays edited by David Blakesley. The book is designed for readers with an awareness of rhetorical studies who are interested in entering broader conversations about the relationship between contemporary rhetoric, cinema, social and cultural criticism.[1] A clear goal of this book is to "map the emergent field of rhetorical studies of film" (17), as it draws upon contributor's specialties in cinema, communication, English, literature, rhetoric, and philosophy to give their perspective on film and film theory as rhetoric, on films about rhetoric, and the relationship between film and film culture.

As the title of the volume suggests, the editor considers rhetoric as a "terministic screen" for film studies. Drawing on the work of Kenneth Burke, Blakesley argues that film rhetoric and film theory provides a lens for understanding the ways that cinematic representations select, deflect, and reflect reality. He argues that while film rhetoric "directs our attention… with the aim of fostering identification," film theory functions by "filtering what does and does not constitute and legitimize interpretation and, thus, meaning" (3). Films in this volume are considered for their acts of representation and communication to audiences. Several authors consider cinematic representations as a rhetorical situation involving the director, film, and the viewer. Film is also treated as an ideological orientation, or as a rhetorical form which "serves as the means of initiating cultural critique and stabilizing cultural

pieties" (5). Other essays take a phenomenological orientation toward film as a grammatical system of signs. Thus, four thematic areas—film as language, film as ideology, film interpretation, and film identification—emerge as central to Blakesley's collection of essays practicing rhetorical analysis on film and film theory.

The volume is divided into three parts. Part One provides six essays that examine films and filmic techniques through the terministic screen of rhetoric. For example, in "Mapping the Other: *The English Patient,* Colonial Rhetoric, Cinematic Representation," Alan Nagel discusses how codes of mapping are "rhetorical devices providing colonial narratives with scientific ethos" (22). He then offers a detailed case study of *The English Patient* to show in many contexts how "codes of cinematic representation… are rhetorical devices providing the illusion of omniscience or, to state it differently, the ethos of objectivity to narratives that subordinate the deigesis to the desires of the spectator" (22). Martin J. Medhurst contributes "Temptation as Taboo: A Psychorhetorical Reading of *The Last Temptation of Christ*," to show how the relationship between myth, metaphor, and signs of film generates psychoanalytic principles that can be used to evaluate cinematic work "on its own terms" (57).

Throughout the volume, and particularly in the first part, the book is careful to highlight the theoretical orientations of the authors, and the ways in which a rhetorical approach to film studies can augment film theory and criticism. For example, Ann Chisholm's "Rhetoric and the Early Work of Christian Metz: Augmenting Ideological Inquiry in Rhetorical Film and Criticism" considers the way Metz creates a terminology of film, and extends his work to suggests ways that film theorists and critics may enrich their analysis by "explaining the rhetorical significance of Grande Sytagmatique in relation to the following: the Plausible, the filmic image, the connotative stratum of cultural signification, and the process of filmic writing" (48).

Ekaterina V. Haskins' "Time, Space, and Political Identity: Envisioning Community in *Triumph of the Will*" extends the work of Michael Calvin McGee, Maurice Charland, and other rhetoricians who study rhetoric of identification by arguing that a focus on the visual dimensions of identification is necessary to examine how "the spectator's experience is framed and guided by the medium of film" (93). By moving beyond ideographic criticism to adopt a chronotopic interpretive lens, Haskins illustrates the aesthetic and political aspects of identification constituted by filmic images. The spectator's viewing experience is also considered in Byron Hawk's essay which examines *The Fifth Element.* Hawk proposes examining the potentialities of "hyperrhetoric" to better understand the vernacular theorizing that occurs in contemporary media culture. Finally, Part One concludes with James Roberts' (On Rhetorical Bodies: *Hoop Dreams* and

Constitutional Discourse) examination of the materiality of bodies as cinematic subjects in *Hoop Dreams*, which details the ways in which cinematic presentation provides an "often contradictory screen of rhetorical construction" (123).

Part Two attends to the ways that films shape audience understanding of cultural phenomena and direct action. The contributions of Thomas W. Benson ("Looking for the Public in the Popular: The Hollywood Blacklist and the Rhetoric of Collective Memory"), Philip L. Simpson ("*Copycat*, Serial Murder, and the De-(Terministic) Screen Narrative," Davis W. Houck and Caroline H.S. Picart ("Opening the Text: Reading Gender, Christianity, and American Intervention in *Deliverance*"), and Friedmann Weidauer ("From 'World Conspiracy' to 'Cultural Imperialism': The History of Anti-Plutocratic Rhetoric in German Film") each illustrate the ways in which a rhetorical analysis of film contributes to understandings of cultural stability and change. While there is not sufficient space to discuss how each essay serves to generate such understandings, Thomas Benson's contribution serves as an illustration. Benson takes a historical-critical approach to understanding films that broach topics of anti-Communist hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Well grounded in historical analysis, his criticism illustrates how notions of the public, the popular, and the private are historically contingent and may be enacted distinctively by such films over time.

Blakesley edited this volume with the intent to approach film and film culture from a variety of rhetorical perspectives and Part Three of the collection continues this orientation by focusing on films that are "self-reflexively rhetorical" (211). Bruce Krajewski's "Rhetorical Conditioning: *The Manchurian Candidate"* considers the ways in which the film orients viewers to particular rhetorical interpretations. Other contributors take up a director's invitation to see the verbal and visual resources contemplated in film's rhetorical reflexivity. Such is the case in David Blakesley's "Sophistry, Magic, and the Vilifying Rhetoric of *The Usual Suspects,*" Harriet Malinowitz's "Textual Trouble in River City: Literacy Rhetoric, and Consumerism in *The Music Man,*" and Granetta L. Richardson's "Screen Play: *Ethos* and Dialectics in *A Time to Kill.*" The volume concludes with Kelly Ritter's ("Postmodern Dialogics in *Pulp Fiction:* Jules, Ezekiel, and the Double-Voiced Discourse") description of how a filmmaker (Quentin Tarantino) may use a particular character (Jules) as a double-voicing agent within a film (*Pulp Fiction).*

The book covers a broad spectrum of films across several decades to highlight a variety of terministic resources made available by film, film theory and criticism. Beyond the particular essays written by each contributor to this collection, readers will see how the collection of essays, taken together, contribute to a broader understanding of rhetorical theory, visual argument, electronic publication, film theory and criticism. The variety of film texts analyzed through the terministic

screen of rhetoric will interest students of rhetoric and mass communication, critical and cultural studies, cinema studies, politics and sociology, as well as electronic media practitioners.

Endnotes

[1] Blakesley offers the essays in the volume as contributions to a broader dialogue concerning film theory and criticism. By interpreting these essays in "cooperative competition," Blakesley provides Kenneth Burke's admonishment that properly understood each perspective "can lead to views transcending the limitations of each" ("Rhetoric—Old and New" 63).

Works Cited

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