



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI "L'ORIENTALE"
Dipartimento di Studi Americani, Culturali e Linguistici



studi americani, culturali e linguistici

Susanna Poole

Writing Images Imaging Words

*A Course in Cultural Analysis for Students
of English as a Second Language*



Copyright © MMV
ARACNE EDITRICE S.r.l.

www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

00173 Roma
via Raffaele Garofalo, 133 A/B
(06) 93781065

ISBN 88-7999-924-3

*I diritti di traduzione, di memorizzazione elettronica,
di riproduzione e di adattamento anche parziale,
con qualsiasi mezzo, sono riservati per tutti i Paesi.*

*Reproduction or translation of any part of this work
without the permission of the copyright owners is unlawful*

I edizione: marzo 2005

to Lidia

Contents

Introduction	9
Chapter I Film: <i>Alien</i> by Ridley Scott	13
Part one. Describing	14
Pre-viewing Tasks	14
Watching the Film	16
Part two. Analysing	16
Focus on Language	16
Film Analysis	18
A Closer Scrutiny	19
Appendix	21
1. The Plot	21
2. Excerpts from the Script	22
3. Film Credits	29
4. Basic Glossary	29
5. Suggested Bibliography on the <i>Alien</i> Saga	33
Chapter II Novel: <i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	35
Part one. Describing	37
Pre-reading Tasks	37
Reading the Novel	38
Part two. Analysing	41
Focus on Language	41
Author, Narrator and Point of View	43
Narrative Techniques	45
Characters	46
Time, Story, Plot and Structure	49
Theme and Symbol	52
Appendix	53
1. Notes on Toni Morrison	53
2. The Plot	54

3. Basic Glossary	55
4. Suggested Bibliography on <i>Beloved</i>	59
Chapter III Interpreting	63
Part One. Researching and Writing	63
Writing a proposal	64
Finding your Way into the Novel	64
Researching	65
Writing Cultural Criticism	69
Part Two. Creating a Video Essay	73
What is a Video Essay?	73
Designing	74
Editing	78
Works Cited	85

Introduction

The aim of this book is to offer a guide to textual analysis for university students of cultures in the English language. Exercises based on current examples of film and literature in English are introduced through methodological explanations and suggestions. By engaging with authentic cultural texts, students are able to reflect on a variety of cultural and linguistic models that stimulate and enhance their critical skills, together with their knowledge of vocabulary and language structures.

Like any other language, English cannot be approached apart from its many past and present contents and contexts which are constantly re-elaborated in the interactions between individuals, groups and communities. Contemporary language teaching theories give primary importance to the guided use of authentic materials that are selected from a wide range of different sources and are combined with practical exercises to be graded according to the students' competence¹.

The volume has three chapters: the first guides students through a study of the film *Alien* by Ridley Scott; the second focuses on the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison; the third is about the interpretation of both narrative and film texts. The exercises proposed are aimed at graduate students, or undergraduate students of English in their third year (upper-intermediate or advanced).

Thus the first two chapters in this book present analyses of specific contemporary cultural texts. Both these chapters, commencing from general comprehension and **description** exercises, move to the **analysis** of different textual aspects and devices. In the third chapter techniques of **interpretation** are introduced, and students are encouraged to deal with both film and narrative texts in a more creative fashion.

In the first stage, **description**, students undertake pre-viewing and

¹ JEREMY HARMER, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Longman, London and New York 1991, pp. 185–187.

pre-reading exercises, in which they anticipate and share any information and expectations they might have about the text (whether film or novel). This work stimulates the revision and learning of English vocabulary and idiom useful for describing and analysing cultural texts. The first viewing or reading is then followed by an exchange of ideas and impressions.

The second stage, **analysis**, is based on a linguistic and semiotic approach. Students are invited to look closer at the text and concentrate on its individual constituents and codes, in order to see if and how they work together to form meaningful and effective units. During this stage they are able to improve their knowledge of the specific vocabulary used to analyse film and narrative fiction, drawing on semiotic criticism. A basic glossary is attached to each chapter.

In the final stage, **interpretation**, students get to produce their own critical and/or creative work. Once they have sketched out their hypotheses about the text, the students confront the relative critical literature. They learn to recognise and weigh the language and conventions of cultural criticism, an essential skill for writing an essay. According to the students' and instructor's interests and curricula, critical analysis can here be supplemented by creative writing, oral presentations, or multimedia productions (such as videos, installations, websites or CD-ROM hypertexts). In the third chapter, space is given to essay-writing strategies, as well as to techniques for creating a video essay, a recent genre in cultural criticism. The focus in this final stage is on strengthening competence, creativity and independence in cultural interpretation.

While in the first two stages, the students gradually hone in on the text, moving from a general understanding to an analysis of details, when they reach interpretation they need to establish a point of view and a self-conscious critical evaluation. Here they will have to situate the text in an intertextual perspective, either in order to single out and discuss a specific aspect in a written essay, or to produce a creative work whose relationship with the text may also resonate with a strong personal stance.

The first two chapters of the present book are independent of each other, hence it is possible to work on just one of them in the course of a teaching module; whereas the third chapter represents a logical fol-

low-up to both of them. The book offers up to twenty-five hours of class activities on either film or narrative analysis, and allows for about the same amount of time for out-of-class tasks. Of course, specific exercises may be selected according to the objectives of individual courses and the time available. Furthermore, teachers may want to apply exercises such as the ones in this book to other films or novels.

As far as language learning is concerned, it should be noted that while the students' lexical and grammatical knowledge of English will be enhanced in all the activities, there is a marked emphasis on listening and reading skills in the first two stages (description, analysis) and on writing and speaking skills in the final one (interpretation).

University students of literatures and cultures in English often study the language only in its general communicative aspects and functions. At the same time, advanced courses in literatures and cultures require students to come to terms with a host of complex fictional and theoretical texts, many of them in English. This situation clearly calls out for more guided practice in the classroom, where students could be helped in understanding and discussing different types of texts. There also seems to be a great need to practise critical and academic writing, and to learn how to apply contemporary critical methodologies and concepts. As a practical manual in English cultural analysis, the present book seeks to offer a useful mediation between language courses and courses in English-language literatures and cultures. In fact, the book can be used in language, literature and culture courses, provided the students are on the upper-intermediate or advanced level.

Chapter I

Film: *Alien* by Ridley Scott

Movies speak to our bodies as much as they speak to our minds. This is especially true as regards sci-fi and horror movies, such as *Alien* (1979) by director Ridley Scott. Although operating only by visual and auditive technologies — leaving out smell, touch and taste — movies can effectively recreate a virtual environment and set off all sorts of intense psychological and physical reactions in spectators, such as fear, disgust, anxiety, cold shivers down your spine, pleasurable blessings, appetite, thirst. So, the first and foremost suggestion to all potential film critics is to relax and enjoy the movie. That is the best starting point for all work to be done.

For the sake of clarity, this chapter is divided into parts, according to simple and rather schematic organising principles. It focuses on two stages in the critical analysis of a film text: **describing** and **analysing**. The last stage, **interpreting**, is dealt with in the third chapter of this book. Of course, while a thorough work of comprehension is essential before we get out our critical tools, we should not forget that the processes of describing, analysing and interpreting are closely connected, and the way we experience and describe things is conditioned by sets of conscious and unconscious presuppositions. Moreover, the analytic route followed in this chapter should not be considered as the only model for critical investigation, but only as an effective example of one way to go for students who, once familiar with different critical approaches, will be able to build their own textual strategies.

In the first part students practise describing Ridley Scott's film as a host of physical stimuli, in terms of colours, shapes and sound, and in terms of each student's psychological reactions as a spectator. In fact, even the most lucid film scholar must be a fully human spectator in the first place: nerves, skin and blood.

Part two of this chapter is about analysing components of the film and how they work together in creating meaning. Studying films en-

tails using specific categories and corresponding vocabulary terms that are shared by most film scholars nowadays. This is the reason why one will have to come to terms with a basic film glossary. A film glossary is a list of technical words related to film and commonly used in the film industry. Without these words, one would not know how to name the images appearing on screen and how to recognise different types of images and sounds. A minimum glossary is included in the appendix to this chapter. Getting to know the technical terminology is the first step towards a critical approach to the study of the moving image. In this part students look closer at the film in order to find out how it is constructed by means of rhythm, narrative turning points, music, colours, editing, special effects, dialogue, etc. Analysing a film through a semiotic approach means trying to recognise and bring out functions and relations that are woven into the text and stimulate its interaction with specific spectators. Tasks are performed in groups and the result will be an oral presentation to class on a specific sequence of the film.

In the third chapter of this book students will focus on interpreting the film or novel. It is important to come to terms with different approaches to film. Some might find the semiotic approach most interesting, or be drawn towards a feminist deconstructionist reading or any number of other approaches, but, whatever approach one is going to adopt (and it is possible to use more than one at the same time), s/he will surely have to add a personal touch at this stage. The final outcome will be a written or video essay on *Alien*.

Part one. Describing

Pre-viewing Tasks

Before watching the film it is recommended that the class do pre-viewing activities and get some information on the film. This will arouse interest and allow participants to share any previous knowledge about what they are going to watch. Discussing expectations will both help the understanding of the film and activate items of vocabulary that will turn out to be useful in the post-viewing phase. In addition to the appended bibliography, a great number of film reviews and infor-

mation can be found on the Internet. What is needed at this stage is some stimulating hints to enhance curiosity and anticipation, just before the first screening.

For instance, Dragan Antulov, in his review of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, published on "The Internet Movie Database" website, refers to the revival of the science-fiction horror genre in the late 1970s as a sign of the economic and political uncertainties in Western societies at the time. While filmmakers like George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Gene Roddenberry had established a tradition of sci-fi movies, depicting future worlds that were almost always better than our own, people like Ridley Scott and John Carpenter resurrected the almost forgotten sub-genre of science fiction horror, until then strictly in the B-movie domain, to express their anxiety and scepticism towards things to come¹.

In groups. If you have already seen the movie, describe the feelings and emotions you went through while watching it. Try to remember the colours, shapes, and sounds from the film that were most impressive and significant. If you have never seen the movie, try to define what an alien creature is to you, and how you anticipate the alien might be represented in the film. Each student takes notes of the key points touched in the discussion. To conclude, the individual groups report to the class, compare ideas, and class responses are summarised by reporting key words on the board².

A pre-viewing activity may also be done as individual study, at home. If you happen to have seen this film before, you may jot down any words describing the colours, shapes and sounds in the film, and emotional reactions to them. Write as much as you can, trying not to censor the free flow of words, without worrying about spelling, grammar, etc. Once you have stopped writing, connect key words/ ideas drawing circles around them, and connecting arrows between different words³.

¹ DRAGAN ANTULOV, "Alien (1979). A Film Review" (June 1998), *The Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com>> (June 21 2003).

² Note for the instructor: before the exercise, and depending on the students' level, it might be necessary to review vocabulary related to colours, shapes, sounds, emotions and feelings. Students communicate freely with each other at this stage, and mistakes need not be corrected.

³ These two methods are known as "free-writing" and "clustering".

Watching the Film

Watching instructions

As one watches the film for the first time, it is best to try to relax and allow oneself to be taken by all aspects of the film: the music as much as the actors' performances, visual effects as much as scenery. One should be sensitive to the full range of one's physical, emotional and mental reactions. One should not focus on the story at this stage, but consider the film as an experience to be lived through, not as a message to be understood. Language comprehension is not the first objective. It should be remembered that a film is much more than what the script can tell.

The film is screened in the classroom, with the help of a video-recorder.

Post-viewing exercises

1. In groups, compare what you have seen in the film with your memories and predictions about it (see Pre-viewing Tasks). This is the time to check whether the words on the board might be useful for describing the film. What other words should be added? (A bilingual dictionary may be used if needed). You may add more comments to your notes.

2. Now, try to sketch the basic narrative of the film and describe the different characters, in as much detail as you can. Check your answers by looking at the film credits and plot (see Appendix 1 and 2). This exercise could be done either as a group discussion, or individually in writing.

Part two. Analysing

Focus on Language

In this section we will look at the use of different registers, varieties and uses of the English language in *Alien*. One of the reasons why the film was so successful is the way screenwriter Dan O'Bannon manages to create very human and believable characters as a counter-