

AN APPROACH TO RHETORIC OF FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

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To see a power point and video clips related to this paper, go to:

http://www.csub.edu/~tfernandez_ulloa/filmrhetoric.ppt

ABSTRACT

In this article we show how we teach University students the rhetoric of film. We have to take into consideration figures of speech, image, sound and movement. We will study inventio (main ideas and genre), dispositio (organization of the elements into a narrative structure) and elocutio (to express with language –film language– the materials of invention organized by using a disposition or structure) will be studied here. Most of the examples will be extracted from Spanish and Latin American films, or films dealing with aspects related to Hispanic culture or history).

1. THE COURSE

The possibilities for a course dealing with film language are many. We include in this article the central elements of the rhetoric of cinema we taught in the course *Cine, lenguaje fílmico y sociedad en España y Latinoamérica (Spanish and Latin American Cinema and Society, and Film Language)*, and undergraduate course of the Spanish major at the California State University, Bakersfield. It covered two main aspects: the story of Spanish and Latin American film, and film language (Semiotics or Semiology). We only include here the second part. The screened films showed specific aspects of society, some of them rather controversial; they were also examples of different film genres and techniques. We mention here some of the films we used and we add some others.

Learning Objectives of the Course:

- 1) Students will gain an understanding of the aesthetics of film production (how to “read” a film).
- 2) Students will acquire specific knowledge and understanding of the socio-cultural factors that engendered Spanish and Latin-American cinema.
- 3) Students will acquire a critical perspective of contemporary issues addressed and incorporated in Latin-American and Spanish cinema. These socio-cultural issues pertain but are not limited to: race, ethnicity, gender, history, politics, violence, globalization and sexual orientation.
- 4) Communication skills: Verbalization of ideas, use of presentation tools (software: Win DVD, Windows Movie Maker, MPG converters, Power Point...), collaboration with mates.

Course Description:

The course was organized around video presentations, class discussions and assigned reading. Students had to prepare an oral presentation about one topic related to the movies (Mexican cinema, sexual orientation in films, the indigenous people in Latin American films...), and they have a exam on theoretical content, and a final analysis of one film.

In this paper we describe the contents learning objective 1, although some activities have to do with one or more of the other ones too.

2. “READING” A FILM (LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1)

In this article we show the specific contents of the section called “Film Language”, where students learned to analyze a movie. We followed the scheme that traditional rhetoric analysis gives us; this can be especially useful because it makes the students familiar with concepts that have used or will use in Literature classes:

-*Inventio*. Main ideas and genre.

-*Dispositio*. Organization of the elements into a narrative structure.

-*Elocutio*. To express with language (in this case, film language) the materials of invention organized by using a disposition or structure.

2.1. *Inventio*. Contents, expressed using a certain genre, which makes us to expect something specific before watching the film.

TOPIC

As we do in text analysis classes, the topic will be expressed using a sentence that captures the essence of the ideas in the film.

GENRE

There are a limited number of narrative elements in any story (characters, plot, historical setting, dress, dialogue...). A combination of certain specific types of elements will create a formula or pattern: western, gangster, horror, war, comedy, drama, melodrama, science-fiction¹... And each genre has its own conventions. Students were given a list of the elements that characterize a genre, and they had to identify different films. They realized to what extent we can predict the end of the film knowing its genre, and they reflected on why we still want to watch the movie (usually because we are looking for a particular emotional experience).

Documentary was also studied, and how to be critic with this supposedly “truthful” situations. Some of the documentaries’ characteristics are: voice over, hand-held camera, natural lighting, urban or industrial locations. A lot of these films or documentaries are made using digital video, to create the illusion or reality.

Documentary could be defined, according to pioneer of such filmmaking, John Grierson, as “the creative interpretation of actuality²”. Different kinds of documentaries can be identified: expository (an unseen speaker performs a voiced-over commentary that literally explains the images that we are seeing), observational (they appear to have been filmed in ‘real time’ and the filmmakers correspondingly attempt not to interfere in what is underway), interactive (with sequences that involve those being filmed responding to questions asked of them), reflective (usually associated with more experimental documentaries, ones in which the filmmakers are

¹ <http://www.filmsite.org/genres.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinematic_genre

² <http://www.filmeducation.org/secondary/documentary2004/whatis.html>

interested as much in the process of making a film, of how reality can be constructed, as the actual content)³. Grierson believed that greater realism would result if you used location shots, ordinary people and encouraged improvisation in films. This documentary drama is what Ken Loach does, and we used an example with a story settled in the United States: *Bread and Roses*, about the right to unionize. Another example is *La tragedia de Macario*, by Pablo Véliz, about a Mexican who wants to pass the border illegally. As the title says, this is a tragedy, with a chorus singing during the film, announcing what is going to happen.

Examples:

Señorita Extraviada, by Lourdes Portillo. Expository/interactive documentary. *Missing Young Woman* tells the story of the hundreds of kidnapped, raped and murdered young women of Juárez, Mexico.

Suite Habana, by Fernando Pérez (observational documentary). Dawn breaks in La Habana, and as the day advances we follow the simple lives of ten ordinary Cubans, with only sounds and images accompanied by music; they do not talk.

En construcción, by José Luis Guerin (observational documentary). A portrait of a community in flux (Barcelona's historic Chinese quarter). It tracks the construction of a block of flats in the traditional working class neighborhood. Focusing on the stories of both inhabitants and construction workers, the film shows how mutation of the urban landscape brings mutation of the human landscape.

Balseros, by Carles Bosch and Josep M. Domènech (interactive). A team of reporters interviewed seven Cubans and their families while they were preparing to put out to sea to reach the United States. Some time afterwards, in the refugee camp within the United States base of Guantánamo, the reporters found them again, after they had been rescued from the sea. Their families were still in Cuba without hearing from them. Seven years later, they met them again in the United States to find out what had become of them.

La Pelota Vasca. La piel contra la piedra, by Julio Médem. Interactive documentary; people are interviewed, even when we do not know the questions; sometimes we can see the interviewer, but only as a silent presence. The film's intention is to create a bridge between the different political positions that coexist, sometimes violently, in the Basque Country. In order to do so, Médem edits the interviews giving a sense of dialogue between parties that refused to sit down and talk (the film may be hard to understand to audiences without previous knowledge of the Basque problem).

The Merrow Report: Lost in translation. Latinos, school and society. (www.pbs.org). Expository/Interactive documentary. The extraordinarily high drop-out rate among Latinos is the result of many factors, one of which is language. This documentary explores the successes and failures of different types of language programs- English only, bilingual, and dual. Host John Merrow talks to Latino youth and educators to uncover additional reasons many Latino youth are falling through the cracks.

The five obstructions, by Jorgen Leth and Lars Von Trier. Reflective documentary. An investigative journey into the phenomenon of documentary, based on manifestos written by each director.

In the last years, a type of documentary called “mockumentary” has appeared in the screen with relative success. It is presented as if it were a documentary, though it is not factual. It

³ <http://www.filmeducation.org/secondary/documentary2004/style.html>

is a commonly used medium for parody and satire⁴.

We could consider *A day without a Mexican*, by Sergio Arau, in this category, into the dramatic subclass.

It could be interesting to dedicate some time to short films and video clips. (See <http://www.sie.es/pgoya/> for awards and nominations for best short films).

CENSORSHIP

In different cultures censors work differently. A good topic for research and discussion in class is the definition of erotism and pornography, and the differences regarding cultures (Hispanic-North American, Spanish/Latin America). Some of the movies with different aspect to discuss about and that can be also used in this section are *Días contados*, by Imanol Uribe; *La virgen de la lujuria*, by Arturo Ripstein; *Lucía y el sexo*, by Julio Médem; *Sexo con amor*, by Boris Quercia; *Hable con ella*, by Pedro Almodóvar...

Another topic for debate: the effects of screen violence. The effects fall into two main categories: imitation and desensitising.

(Learning objective 3).

IDEOLOGY

Values, viewpoints and meaning/messages that a film might be able to communicate. We worked finding the ideology expressed in two ways: explicit and implicit. (Learning objective 3).

We can consider here the audience and issues as expectations, impact of films in the audience, classification... (See Film Education).

2.2. *Dispositio*. Organization of elements into a structure.

We should study several aspects:

-TIME. Are the events presented chronologically, or with *flashbacks* and *flashforwards*? Plot could open *in media res* ("in the middle of the action") or *in extrema res* ("at the end of the action").

Films differ from reality in several aspects, and time is one of the most important ones. We can find elongation of time, to focus on the struggle of the characters (the main character running towards the police station at the end of *Días contados*. Movie time has slowed down to create suspense), but temporal ellipsis is more common: we do not see the whole story in real time, we assume times passes (change of seasons in *Flores de otro mundo*, by Iciar Bollaín).

-The STRUCTURE itself. We can have a single story, or parallel and interrelated stories (*Flores de otro mundo*, by Iciar Bollaín, *Amores Perros*, by Alejandro González Iñárritu, and *El callejón de los Milagros*, by Jorge Fons).

Something we could discuss here is *transtextuality* (and all the five types of transtextual relationships that G. Genette identifies: *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, and *architextuality*). *Ópera prima* and *La niña de tus ojos*, by Fernando Trueba can be used. Recently we have another example in *Dot the I*, by Matthew Parkhill (British-Spanish film with two famous Latino actors, Gael García Bernal and Natalia Verbeke).

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mockumentary>

-VIEWPOINT

The position of the audience will depend on whose eyes the filmmaker has chosen to tell the story through. The audience will be an onlooker, or the camera can bring the audience into the narrative space to see things from a particular perspective.

A good example is *La hija del caníbal*, where nothing turns out to be as it seems, because even Lucía (in her off screen narration) admits she is not always truthful; outcomes of events are changed according to the changes in Lucía's story. We are deceived because of seeing everything with the main character's eyes.

2.3. *Elocutio or film language*

Camera work, editing, lighting, sound and color are part of one director's style of telling a story. The same story can be told in very different ways. The codes are not only visual: music and camera shots can focus on a character or give us an impression of fear, surprise... The study of these systems of signs is called *Semiology* or *Semiotics*.

We should consider:

2.1.1. Camera

a) Type of shot. We have to indicate the amount of subject matter contained within a frame, how far the camera is from the subject, and the perspective of the viewer. Each shot has a different purpose and effect. We can distinguish a great variety of shots, these are the main ones:

-*Establishing shot*. Opening shot used to set the scene. It is usually a very long shot or extreme long shot.

-*Extreme long shot* (or extreme wide shot). A panoramic view of an exterior location, photographed from a great distance, usually the films begins with this shot so the viewer gets oriented to where s/he is.



Image 1. *A day without a Mexican*. Extreme long shot.

-*Very long shot* (or *very wide shot*). A wide location where people is included. It is more descriptive and close to the subject than the extreme long shot, but still much further away than a long shot. The emphasis is on placing the characters.



Image 2. *Los lunes al sol*, by León Fernández de Aranoa. Very long shot.

-*Long shot*. The subject takes the full frame.



Image 3. *Flores de otro mundo*. Long shot.

(There is also a *full shot*: full body of a person, without taking into consideration the environment).

-*Medium shot*. Shows less of a scene than the long shot; the camera seems closer to the subject; generally includes the body from the waist up.



Image 4. *Los lunes al sol*. Medium shot.

-*Medium close shot*. Halfway between a medium shot (and more direct) and a close up shot. The character appears from the armpit or shoulders up

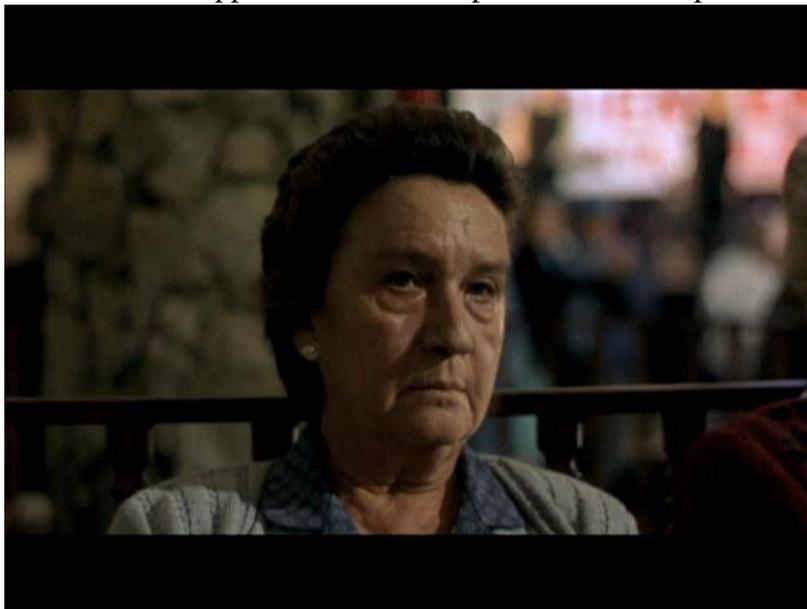


Image 5. *Flores de otro mundo*. Medium close shot.

-*American shot* (also called *medium long shot*, *knee shot* and $\frac{3}{4}$ *shot*). Some authors make a difference between the *American shot*, which refers to a medium-long (“knee”) shot (this would be an individual) of a group of characters, who are arranged so that all are visible to the camera. Includes the body from the knees up



Image 6. *Días de fútbol*, by David Serrano. American shot.

-*Group shot*. It shows the action and situation of a group of people.



Image 7. *Los lunes al sol*. Group shot.

-*Two shot* (a medium shot with two actors. Variation: three shot). The background is important but the characters are predominant.



Image 8. *Flores de otro mundo*. Two shot.

-*Over the shoulder shot*. Looking from behind a person at the subject.



Image 9. *Flores de otro mundo*. Over the shoulder shot.

-*Close up shot*. Shows a small part of the subject or scene; it is useful to show detail, like a person's emotional face; it is expressive, dramatic.



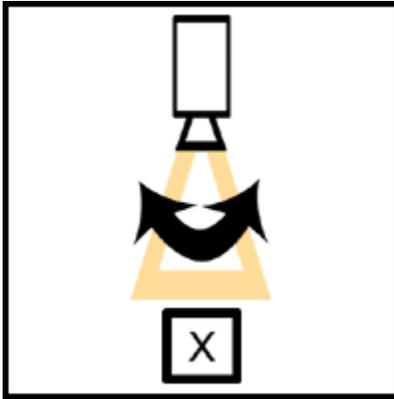
Image 10. *La comunidad*, by Álex de la Iglesia. Close up shot. It has a dramatic meaning in this case; she is going to open the door to people who wants to kill her.

-*Extreme close up shot*. A detail; if it is related to human body we will see a hand, a nose, the eyes... It analyzes psychologically the situations.

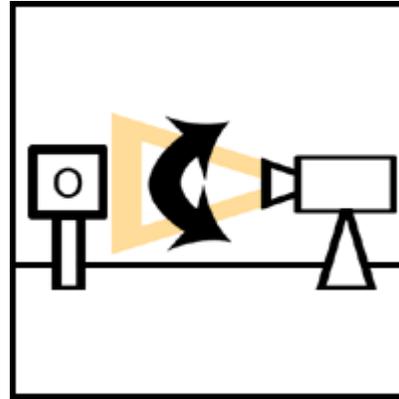


Image 11. *La comunidad*. Extreme close up shot.

b) Camera movements (kinds and speeds). Among them: *panning* (scanning the scene horizontally), *tracking* (also called *dolly shots* and *trucking*; the camera is placed on a moving vehicle and moves alongside the actions, generally following a moving figure), *tilting* (scanning a scene vertically), *zoom* (the camera needs not be moved; the lens can zip a camera in and out of a scene very quickly), *crane shots* (dolly shots in the air; moving a camera up, down, left, right, swooping in on action or moving diagonally out of it), *aerial shots* (usually taken from a helicopter; often used at the beginning of a film to establish setting). Sometimes the operator's body is used as a camera support, either holding it by hand or using a harness; this is known as *handheld camera* (at the beginning of *Bread and roses*, to give the impression of being a documentary; it brings realism to the story).



Panning⁵



Tilting⁶

These movements can create a specific effect: in *Los lunes al sol*, a character (Javier Bardem) walks into a friend's room (Amador) and the camera slowly pans around. We feel as if we are the character looking around.

In *La comunidad*, the camera moving from top to bottom, *crane shot*. And then, it is kept at a high angle. This is to show that something is going on in the apartment over the one Carmen Maura is spending the night, in the meantime, she is laying down on the sofa trying to figure out the word puzzle/treasure map).

In *En la ciudad sin límites*, by Antonio Hernández, there is a zoom while the old man is trying to escape from the hospital.

(For all the video clips from these films, see the power point presentation).

c) Angles. The relationship between the camera and the object being photographed (i.e., the angle) gives emotional information; the more extreme the angle, the more symbolic the shot.

-*Eye-level* (the perspective most familiar to us; as though it is a human actually observing the scene);



Image 12. *La comunidad*. Eye level angle.

⁵ From Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Pan1.gif>

⁶ From Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Tilt1.gif>

-*Low* (the camera is below the image photographed; in this shot the camera looks up at the subject, making it seem important, powerful; it can also inspire fear or insecurity in the viewer. The background tends to be sky or ceiling; the lack of detail adds disorientation).



Image 13. *A day without a Mexican*. Low angle. We see Latin people's power because a great number of them are in charge of the crops, without them the United States would not have what to eat.

-There is also a *worm's eye angle* (a more extreme low angle).



Image 14. *La comunidad*. Worm's eye angle. The victory of Carmen Maura's character.

-*High* (the camera is high above the image photographed, it looks down on the subject, decreasing its importance or power).



Image 15. *La comunidad*. High angle. (The angle is a little bit over the character that is in a bad situation, the man, and showing the better situation of the woman; the camera, and therefore the angle, is over her shoulder, the way he thinks she is looking at him).

-*Bird's eye angle* (extreme high-angle shot; the camera is directly or almost directly above the image photographed; people can be made look insignificant, part of a wider scheme of things).



Image 16. *La comunidad*. Bird's eye angle. The defeat of "evil" Terele Pávez.

-*Oblique/canted angle* (the camera is tilted, i.e., not placed horizontal to floor level, to suggest imbalance, transition and instability).



Image 17. Oblique/canted angle. video clip, Julieta Venegas, “Aprendo de mis pasos” (Video clips are very interesting to use in these classes too, they are short stories with all the techniques we are explaining here). In this video clip, black and white/color are used. The lens is defocusing some times. And we have plenty of oblique angles, probably to show the process of learning, the transitions... that is, the theme of the song (“Aprendo de mis pasos”-*I learn from my steps*).

d) lens and focus (wide, normal; distorting; use of zoom; sharp, soft focus)

e) position (distancing the audience; involving the audience; viewpoint)

2.1.2. Lighting, color and atmosphere achieved.

We could have natural light (*A day without a Mexican* and *La tragedia de Macario*), or strongly contrasted (Pedro Almodóvar films have a strong contrast of colors); use of black and white (*You are the one*, by José Luis Garcí); sepia tones (*La virgen de la lujuria*), etc. We can study here the use of *special effects* ((See NOVA for explanations and exercises on special effects. Also L. Carrera).

In a studio, the lighting is usually from three sources:

-The key light (the brightest and most influential).

-The back light (counteracts the effect of the key light, thus making the figure look more 'rounded').

-The filler light (softens the harsh shadows created by the use of the back and key lights).

There may be more than one of these.



(Luz trasera-back light, luz relleno-filler light, luz clave-key light, cámara-camera, sujeto-subject).

2.1.3. Sound and atmosphere created

We can distinguish two types of sound: *diegetic* or *nondiegetic*.

Diegetic: is part of the film world we are watching. This can be dialogue, music or sound effects which come from a source within the film world. We can see the person or object that is making the sound (on screen) or not (off screen). Examples: the dance at the beginning of *Flores de otro mundo*, or the radio cassette that the Dominican women have in the kitchen, in the same movie.

Nondiegetic: sound which we do not recognize as part of the film world such as a voice-over or background music.

We could also take into account: voices, speech used in dialogue (accents, dialects; formal/informal language), background conversation only half heard, voice-over, thoughts, commentary, explanations; use of music and sound effects (natural, mechanical).

In film, voice-over is a technique by which “the filmmaker places the sound of a human voice (or voices) over images shown on the screen. These sounds may or may not be related to the images being shown. Sometimes voiceovers can create ironic counterpoint with the images being shown; also, sometimes they can be random voices not directly connected to the people seen on the screen.”

Usually, voice over is “by a character reflecting back on his or her past, or by a person external to the story who usually has a more complete knowledge of the events in the film than the other characters. The genre of film noir is especially associated with the voice-over technique.”⁷ (Some examples that probably our students know: *Memento*, by Christopher Nolan, and *Sin City*, by Frank Miller and Robert Rodríguez). Sometimes, it can also be used to create a funny effect (for example, in *Amelie*, by Jean-Pierre Jeunet).

This technique is also known as “off camera” commentary.

Examples of voice-over in Hispanic films: *Y tu mamá también*, by Alfonso Cuarón (here the voice-over tells coldly the hard reality in Mexico City, and also shows the characters’ past).

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voice-over>

And *Diarios de motocicleta*, by Walter Salles, where Gael García Bernal, “Che”, tells us the story.

In our classes, as long as they are learning Spanish too, we use the movies to explain different accents.

Some examples:

-*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, by Pedro Almodóvar. (Northern and Southern accents from Spain)

-*El hijo de la novia*, by Juan José Campanella (Argentinian accent)

-*Sin dejar huella*, by María Novaro (Northern Spanish accent and Mexican accent, from Chihuahua, with the peculiar “sh”).

-*Fresa y chocolate*, by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea/*Guantanamera*, by Tomas Gutierrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabio (Cuba)

-*Secuestro Express*, by Jonathan Jakubowicz (Venezuela)

-*Taxi para tres*, by Orlando Lübbert/*Sexo con amor*, by Boris Quercia (Chile)

-*La estrategia del caracol*, by Sergio Cabrera (a great comedy, but difficult to get. An alternative, much harder: *La virgen de los sicarios*, by Barbet Schroeder). (Colombia)

-*Días de Santiago*, by Josué Méndez. (Perú)

-*En el tiempo de las mariposas*, de Mariano Barroso/*Andrea*, by Rogert Bencosme (República Dominicana)

-*Cayo*, by Vicente Juarbe (Puerto Rico)

2.1.4. Use of editing

Editing begins when the film is finished. This is a matter of choosing which shots to include, which to put next to which, and what method to use to join the shots together. The filmmaker will decide the pace, treatment of time (chronological, shots rearranged, use of parallel cutting for simultaneous action, use of flashback), and use of transitions. Some of these are:

-*straight cut* (fast transition from a shot to another),

-*dissolve* (also known as *cross dissolve* or *crossfade*; two shots overlap each other with the first gradually disappearing while the next one appears and then remains alone on the screen. Thus, one shot blends into the next one),

-*fade out* (it works much like a theater curtain, and can be a fade to black),

-*wipe* (there are hundreds of different pushes or wipes, one example would have one image push another off the screen to the left, right, up or down).

Some examples can be found in: *Flores de otro mundo* (straight cut and fade to black), *En la ciudad sin límites* (dissolve to indicate pass of time at the end of the movie when the main characters are waiting at the station). And *La niña de tus ojos*, *La virgen de la lujuria* (wipes). In this last movie we can also see another interesting effect: *intertitles*.

3. WHY IS FILM LITERACY SO IMPORTANT?

We think that in the 21st Century it is very important to have the ability to communicate competently in all media forms, print and electronic, as well as to understand, analyze and

evaluate the powerful images, words and sounds that make up our contemporary mass media culture. These skills of media literacy are essential for both children and adults as individuals and as citizens of a democratic society.

A lot of times, children and young people are already visually literate - able to understand images - before they start school. First, we can use this knowledge to develop oral skills in the classroom by getting them to talk about a film or clip, even before discussing areas such as genre, narrative structure, the role of the narrator, characterization..., and finally arrive to *elocutio*.

Students are used to consume information but a media literate individual is able to analyze, in a first phase, and later, to produce, create and successfully communicate information in the new forms. Studying films is a fun way to start this. Later, we could study news, video clips, TV commercials... and learn how to create media products. Media (and film) literacy, like traditional literacy, includes the ability to both read (comprehend) and write (create, design, produce). It moves from merely recognizing and comprehending information to the critical thinking skills implicit in questioning, analyzing and evaluating that information.

Analysis of the rhetoric of film can be easier if they have learned rhetoric of literature first, but it is also a good way to start and then go to literature. Moreover, another path we may want to explore is studying a film based on a book (this is the case of some of the ones we use: *Plenilunio*, by Imanol Uribe; *La hija del caníbal*; *La virgen de los sicarios*; *El perro del hortelano*, by Pilar Miró...), this can help us to give our students the tools they need to analyze a text. It is important, however, to make sure that they are fully aware that the film is not the book but a version of it.

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