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## Formalism Exemplified in The Wolf of Wall Street

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“Let me tell you something. There is no nobility in poverty. I have been a rich man, and I have been a poor man- and I choose rich every fucking time!” spews Jordan Belfort, ranting feverishly to a rapt audience



of stockbrokers at his firm Stratton Oakmont Inc. Belfort, played with blistering intensity by Leonardo DiCaprio, commands every minute of screen-time in Martin Scorsese’s sprawling three hour bacchanal *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Based on a memoir published by real-life stockbroker-turned convict-turned motivational speaker Jordan Belfort, Scorsese’s film tells the story of Belfort’s rise and eventual fall as a crooked Wall Street giant. *The Wolf of Wall Street* breathes new life into the traditional “gangster” drama. Using humor to frame Belfort’s absurd antics, the film drips with excess and greed.

Written by Terence Winter, whose past writing credits include *The Sopranos* and *Boardwalk Empire*, is no stranger to the gangster drama. His *The Wolf of Wallstreet* script takes the audience on an exhilarating, exhausting ride that begins in the late 1980s and hurtles over a decade of drug-laced debauchery in Belfort’s life. *The Wolf of Wall Street* uses a variety of cinematic techniques to transform the 500-page memoir into a whirlwind of rapid cuts, pulsing rock music, and lavish visuals. When viewed through the “lens” of formative theory

*The Wolf of Wall Street* complies with the set of limitations posed by formative film theorist Rudolph Arnheim, making the film's departure from reality discernable enough that it may be considered art.

In his essay "Film and Reality" Arnheim states, "A film art developed only gradually when the moviemakers began consciously or unconsciously to cultivate the peculiar possibilities of cinematographic technique and to apply them toward the creation of artistic productions" (Arnheim 286). He argues that box office success alone does not quantify a film as art. Arnheim declares that film can be considered art only when it differs from an accurate depiction of reality through adherence to a set of limitations. These limitations address aspects of the "material of film" that Arnheim believes must be utilized by filmmakers to "achieve artistic effects" (Arnheim 286). According to Arnheim, filmmakers use "material" unique to their medium to transform/interpret reality. The material is listed as projection of solids upon a plane surface, artistic utilization of reduced depth, light and absence of color, framing, absence of the non-visual sense experiences, including sound and absence of space-time continuum through editing.

*The Wolf of Wall Street* employs several of Arnheim's limitations, most notably the projection of solids upon a plane surface, reduction of depth, and absence of the space-time continuum. Regarding the projection of solids upon a plane surface, Arnheim argues "the effect of surprise is achieved by making use of

the fact that the spectator will be looking at the situation from a certain definite position” (Arnheim 287). When an audience member anticipates seeing something from a specific viewpoint, (this offers the opportunity for) a filmmaker can create art by presenting it from an unconventional viewpoint, thus surprising the viewer and creating something fresh and unique. Scorsese uses this technique often in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, specifically when filming the multitude of sex acts Belfort engages in throughout the film with various unnamed prostitutes, a sadistic dominatrix named Venice, and his beautiful wife Naomi.

Audiences typically expect filmmakers in the mainstream movie industry to shy away from close up, graphic depictions of sex in their films because it instantly guarantees a mature rating – automatically limiting audience demographics due to the age restriction associated with an “R” rating. Scorsese did not hesitate to take risks in filming these particular scenes, often opting for shots ranging from medium to close-up. Barely two minutes into the film, Belfort is shown in close-up receiving oral sex from Naomi while driving erratically in his Ferrari. The technique of placing the camera in unexpected locations (i.e. directly inside the Ferrari instead of merely suggesting what was taking place from outside the car) surprises the audience and serves as an example of cinematographic technique used to create art.

Reduction of depth is an interesting phenomenon in film, as “every object in film appears to be solid and at the same time flat” (Arnheim 287). The ability

for objects onscreen to appear almost simultaneously 2-D and 3-D is unique to the cinema. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the cinematography often capitalizes on this phenomenon. The



consistently engaging visuals allow viewers to immerse themselves in Belfort's dynamic world. In an early scene where Belfort breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the audience, he is shown waltzing down a beautiful, curved staircase casually discussing his daily consumption of several narcotics. The way the camera moves in front of Belfort as he descends the staircase makes the scene feel almost 3-D, as though he is walking out of the screen and into reality. In actuality, the scene is only 2-D, but the clever movement of the camera allows the viewer to feel as though they are in the scene. Although the smooth dolly movement of the camera invites the viewer in, it also creates a break from reality—no stationary human could follow Belfort's descent and exit from the house in the same way.

The absence of a space-time continuum is perhaps the most obvious of Arnheim's limitations featured in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The manipulation of time through editing and various slow motion effects is what makes Scorsese's film a clear departure from reality. The combination of found footage and b-roll placed throughout the film coupled with Belfort's voiceover provides a unique,

visually interesting way of illustrating his thoughts onscreen. Having the film open with a commercial for Belfort's brokerage firm, followed by a scene where time literally halts as though paused by a remote control, then a quick transition into two long freeze frame shots of Belfort, establishes early on that *The Wolf of Wall Street* is going to take advantage on the freedom offered by the medium to play with time.

Scorsese includes a variety of commercial/infomercial footage in the film to interrupt scenes in order to expand upon whatever Belfort is describing: his yacht Naomi, a commercial for Steve Madden shoes, or later in the film, an actual infomercial he shoots for his financial advice program called "Straight Line." To separate the commercial/infomercial footage from the rest of the film, Scorsese adjusts the aspect ratio of the various clips. The obvious visual shift onscreen is another not so subtle break from reality that is compounded by Scorsese's decision to make the footage look dated. There is a clear distinction between the quality of the footage used for the Naomi and the Steve Madden commercial that sets those scenes apart from the rest of the film.

The greatest manipulation of time in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is undoubtedly the scenes where time is dramatically slowed down (or sped up) to illustrate the influence of drugs. Belfort and his sleazy cohorts pride themselves on the incredible amount of drugs they consume on a daily basis, and Scorsese sacrifices little screen time in an attempt to contain the madness. Instead he lets

the film spiral into a cocaine-dusted kaleidoscope of images, each more outrageous than the last. At the beginning, Belfort is uncomfortable with the casual approach to drug use among his fellow stockbrokers until he agrees to smoke a crack pipe with his new best friend and business partner Donnie Azoff and discovers exactly how much fun he had been missing. From this point on, Scorsese uses time to illustrate Belfort's many drug influenced missteps.

The scenes featuring the most amusing time manipulation often involve Belfort's ingestion of an exotic recreational nervous system depressant, the Quaalude. Often referred to as "Ludes" or "Lemmons" in the film, the drug causes everything to slow down, both literally and figuratively. In one of the most talked about moments in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Azoff comes to Belfort with a bottle of outdated Lemmons. They ingest several on the pretense that the pills are old and most likely duds. Belfort is soon overcome by the powerful narcotics, but not until after he drives to his country club and is reduced to a drooling mess on the floor. Belfort's crawl out of the building to his car is painfully slow, showing how the sedative affected his reflexes. However, the scene does not play out in "real time." It's only a few minutes in length whereas in real life Belfort's journey to the Ferrari would have taken much longer. The choice to manipulate time to produce a specific effect is another example of Scorsese's artistry.

Arnheim's contributions to formative film theory undoubtedly grew from his background in Psychology and theories regarding visual art (Braudy, Cohen

167). His limitations of what film must consist of to be considered film art continues to shape the film industry today. *The Wolf of Wall Street* adheres to Arnheim's limitations in such a way that Scorsese's irreverent, wickedly debauched tale of greed and self-destruction should be considered art.



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