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"Eloquent" Film and TV How to Quicken a Heart Rate

By Mark P. Scalese, S.J.

The Jesuit tradition of teaching students "perfect eloquence" developed during an era when printed texts — and the thought-patterns they fostered — dominated Western culture. As Walter Ong, S.J., once pointed out, such communication is linear and based on propositions that can be verified by facts and subjected to logic. But in his classic book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Neil Postman made clear that we no longer live in such a text-based world. What he wrote about television during the 1980s is equally true about the Internet today: they are non-linear and non-hierarchical media whose contents appeal more to aesthetics and emotion than to logic or facts.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he felt compelled to enumerate the abuses King George III had imposed on his American colonies (things that could be verified by factual events), whereas Tea Party activists protested "Obamacare" in 2009 with signs comparing the President to Hitler. What the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act had in common with the Final Solution wasn't very clear, but equating President Obama with the German dictator was a rhetorical appeal to the emotional gut, and in our day and age, such tactics can be very persuasive.

While fluency with words and grammar is essential for "perfect eloquence" in speeches or printed texts, what kind of mastery is necessary to communicate effectively in the audio/visual media that dominate our culture and which for all intents and purposes, *ARE* our culture? At Fairfield University, that's what we teach in our film, television, and media arts program. While our major is relatively young with about 100 students, our curriculum requires a dozen courses that give equal emphasis to hands-on media production as well as historical and theoretical analysis of film or television "texts." The very first course introduces students to aesthetic concepts like space, rhythm, or color. For example, they learn that images composed primarily of reds or yellows are considered "warm," with all the literal and symbolic meanings associated with that term, and that opposite connotations can be suggested using shades of blue.

Our "Lights, Camera, Audio" course not only immerses students in how to use technical equipment, but in how to creatively wield those tools to convey meaning. For example, they learn that aiming a camera at people from below their eye-level can suggest that they are heroic or powerful, but that aiming lights at them from the same position can make them seem corrupt or sinister. Likewise, we teach them that a constantly gliding camera can convey a sense of

dynamism and energy, whereas symmetrical compositions shot from a tripod can connote stability and order.

In our film and TV editing course they learn about the "Kuleshov Effect," in which individual shots of film have no fixed meanings on their own, but rely instead on their juxtaposition before or after other shots. We show students how alternating sequences of shots (called "parallel editing" or "cross-cutting") suggest that two or more lines of action are occurring at the same time in different locations, and how steadily decreasing the amount of time that shots are on the screen will quicken the pace of a scene — and the heart rate of audience members.

Our history and analysis courses sensitize students to depictions of race, gender or class, and how those depictions can influence their self-images and aspirations in the world. For example, after watching the "Poor Unfortunate Souls"

scene from *The Little Mermaid* in our "Films of the 1980s" course, students are surprised to discover that a beloved cartoon heroine actually chooses to lose her voice and change her body (for legs, no less)

in order to get the man of her dreams.

Ultimately, the courses in our program at Fairfield strive to educate our students in "perfect eloquence" as storytellers. In our film studies, screenwriting, or senior capstone courses, we constantly ask them, "Does this story perpetuate racial or gender stereotypes, or undermine them?" "How does it explore the human condition or what it means to live an authentically human life?" "Does it shed light on issues that help to promote social justice?" When students graduate from our program, we not only want them to discover their creative voices and to find jobs in the film or television industries. We want them to think about how they can use their technical skills and media savvy to help make the world a more just and humane place.

Of course, our program at Fairfield is only one of several Jesuit colleges or universities across the country that teach film and television production and/or media studies. Together, we are all doing our part to adapt the tradition of *eloquentia perfecta* to our post-textual, audio/visual age. ■

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