



Reframing The Narrative: A Multimodal Rhetorical Analysis Of Vertical Adaptation In Atonement (2007)

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Abstract- This paper investigates how the vertical reframing can alter the rhetorical and visual meaning in addition to the message of two selected video excerpts from the famous film *Atonement* (2007). The study analyzes the two excerpts by adopting the model of visual rhetoric by Sonja K. Foss to denote how the change of the regular cinematic aspect ratio of the film into the new Tiktok vertical screen aspect ratio can in turn, reshapes the rhetorical ambience of the film. This paper argues that the aspect ratio can ultimately function as a rhetorical strategy adhering to some principles of visual rhetoric which can be used as a tool to influence the viewer's interpretation of a given excerpt from the film.

Keywords: Vertical framing, Aspect ratio, *Atonement* (2007), Visual Rhetoric, Tiktok

I. INTRODUCTION

The way that television and film are portrayed, understood, and distributed has changed dramatically as a result of the current shift in media consumption. With the emergence of mobile platforms such as Tiktok and several others, vertical viewing formats have become more prevalent, replacing the conventional horizontal watching method. This change foreshadows new kinds of visual interaction in which everything horizontal gets cropped, extended, and reframed to fit vertical platforms. This in turn poses some significant and legitimate queries regarding the ways in which these changes impact the processes of meaning-making.

Cinema has always relied on carefully crafted visual compositions that are intended to direct the viewer's perspective. Visual storytelling is essential in movies like *Atonement* (2007), where the story follows perspective and subjective truth based on the conversation in addition to the skill of visual storytelling. Any alteration to the film's aspect ratios has the potential to create a new level of meaning as well as affect its rhetorical significance.

The most well-known original horizontal movie scenes are reformatted into vertical compositions in what can be called vertical adaptation, which appears to be a development of digital practices in Tiktok. This process is not just technical; it also contains some significant rhetorical cues, such as the ability to adapt and identify new visual emphasis that draws the viewer's attention.

The rhetorical dominance of such practices has received little scholarly attention despite the increasing volume of research on film studies. This

study uses a visual rhetorical technique based on Sonja K. Foss' paradigm to close this gap. By examining a few reframed movies from the 2007 movie *Atonement* alongside their original portions, it becomes clear how altering the aspect ratio can alter the visual artifact's characteristics and purpose.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

The most significant features of the study will be covered in detail in this section, which also provides a thorough analysis of the research literature and certain related issues.

Corbett and Connors (1999) state that "Rhetoric is the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform, persuade, or motivate an audience, whether that audience is made up of one person or a group of persons" (p. 3). Thus, the skill of effective communication can be summed up using rhetoric.

In this age-old subject, visual rhetoric is a comparatively recent development. The first official request to incorporate visual representations into the study of rhetoric—which had previously solely been thought of as verbal speech—was not made until 1970. The Speech Communication Association hosted the National Conference on Rhetoric that year, and its attendees produced a recommendation supporting the growth of rhetorical study "to include subjects which have not traditionally fallen within the critic's purview: the non-discursive as well as the discursive, the nonverbal as well as the verbal" (Sloan, 1971, p. 221). According to the participants, a rhetorical perspective "may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior" and "may be



applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact" (Sloan, 1971, p. 220).

The spatially oriented, nonlinear, multidimensional, and dynamic human experiences that frequently can only be expressed through visual imagery or other nondiscursive symbols are the first of several factors that Smith, Moriarty, Barbatsis, and Kenney (2005) claim encourage the presence of visual rhetoric in the field of study. To comprehend and convey such experiences, it is crucial to pay attention to these kinds of symbols. The need for more thorough and expansive rhetorical theory is another driving force behind the rhetorical study of visual imagery (p. 143). Another definition of visual rhetoric is a communication approach that use images to bolster a claim or communicate a point. Consequently, an examination of visual rhetoric takes into account how images function both alone and in conjunction with other components to produce an argument intended to evoke strong feelings in a particular audience (Bulmer & Oliver 2006, p. 55).

According to Olson (2010), visual rhetoric is "the practice of using visual images to communicate persuasive messages." He contends that visual rhetoric is an effective communication strategy that can influence attitudes, convictions, and actions. Olson highlights the need of studying visual texts and comprehending the role that visual components play in persuasion. According to Olson, studying visual texts entails looking at how composition, color, and symbolism are employed to convey ideas. People can become more adept producers and consumers of visual communication by comprehending the techniques used in visual rhetoric (p. 573).

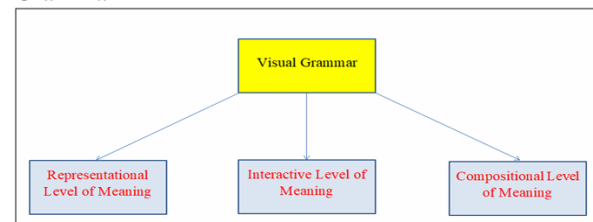
Last but not least, Foss (2004) distinguishes between two types of visual rhetoric: (i) a communicative artifact, which is defined as "a product individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating [...] such as the purposive production or arrangement of colors, forms, and other elements to communicate with an audience," and (ii) a perspective, which is defined as "it constitutes a theoretical perspective" and includes the symbolic process by which images perform communication, such as the "colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an artifact, [which] provide a basis for the audience to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas" (pp. 304). In order to examine shots as artifacts with context and purpose, this study uses Foss's methodology. The model of analysis employed in this study, Foss's

framework, is briefly described in the part that follows.

Rhetoricians from a wide range of academic backgrounds are starting to pay considerably more attention to visual rhetoric because of the remarkable increase in visual usage and its undeniable prevalence in international media. McKerrow (2010) states on page 199 that it is "no longer philosophy's stepchild, but rather a unique entity with its own internal power to create knowledge." These days, rhetoric is not limited to speeches and legal proceedings; "there is a range of modes—the image, the moving image, sound, gesture, movement." These can be utilized in conjunction with the verbal arts, and they typically are (Andrews, 2014, p. xi). Numerous academics have used rhetorical theory to study how films convey powerful messages. The relationship between rhetorical theory and film dates back to John Harrington's 1973 articles on the rhetorical consequences of motion pictures. "The affective experiences elicited by the film are homologous to those of the characters, thus encouraging spectators to share in rather than merely identify with [the characters'] states of being" (Ott & Keeling, 2011 p. 369).

Another approach can be used to assess the composition rhetorically. The pieces in the following figure are part of a novel framework of analysis called "Visual Grammar," which was introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021):

Figure 3.3: Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) Visual Grammar



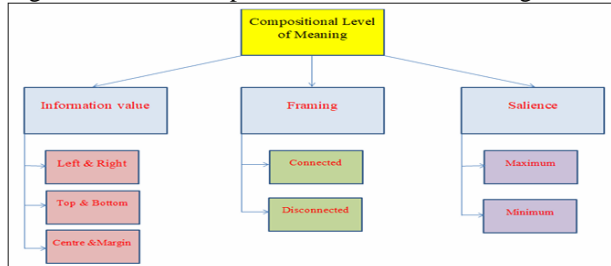
Note: Adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen 2021

Composition, according to many academics, is a visual tool that symbolizes the goal of positioning, organizing, and framing objects inside a picture or screen. Nonetheless, Kress and van Leeuwen's "The Compositional Level of Meaning" is adopted in the current study (2021). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), composition is the process by which the interactive and representational levels of meaning are connected to one another and incorporated into a meaningful whole (p. 179). For them, composition uses three interconnected systems to narrate the



representational and interactive meaning of the image or to one another (p. 181). A detailed illustration of the three systems can be seen in (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.4: The Compositional Level of Meaning



Note: Adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen 2021

Each point in the above image is explained in depth below: A. Information value: According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), participants are positioned in a way that offers them unique informational values connected with the various zones of the image, as are combinations of signs or visual features that connect them to the viewer and each other. To put it another way, how actors and props are positioned on the screen greatly influences the information value (p. 181). B. Framing: According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), the presence of framing devices—which could be represented by real frames or by elements that draw divisions—means that the elements, or collections of elements, are connected or detached from one another.

Furthermore, the degree of visual framing varies; compositional parts might have either strong or weak framing. The more an element is framed, the more detached it is from its immediate environment and presented as a distinct entity (p. 205). C. Salience: According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), the elements (participants as well as representational and interactive syntagms) are made to draw the viewer's attention to varying degrees. This is achieved by things like placement in the background or foreground, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or color), variations in sharpness, and so forth.

Making these units salient to varying degrees is another aspect of the composition of an image, page, or screen. Salience can establish a hierarchy of importance among items, choosing some as more significant and deserving of attention (maximum salience) than others (minimum salience), regardless of where they are positioned or how closely related they are to one another (p. 211). Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) claim that numerous semiotic modes are integrated by a set of overarching principles

whose meanings and structures provide multimodal texts the logic of their integration. Rhythm, often known as temporal composition, and spatial composition are two such sets.

The former is employed in texts where all elements are co-present in space, such as paintings, streetscapes, and magazine pages. The latter is used in writings that evolve gradually, like speech, music, and movies. Both are used in some multimodal text formats, such film and video, but in these cases, rhythm is usually the dominant integrative idea (p. 182). Both single images like the one we just discussed and composite visuals—graphics that combine text, images, and other graphic components on a page or screen—are subject to these three compositional laws.

Atonement (2007), directed by Joe Wright and based on Ian McEwan's novel, presents a particularly compelling case for this paper for its stunning visuals and rhetorical depth. The next chapters will investigate the compatibility of the modal with the film and how any change or 'shift' in the film's visuals can lead to altering the rhetorical stance of the sampled video.

The growing dominance of mobile media platforms has also influenced the ways in which visual content is produced and consumed. Short-form video applications encourage vertical formats that prioritize immediacy, central framing, and viewer engagement within limited screen space. While existing research has examined user behavior and platform dynamics, there remains a lack of focused analysis on how vertical reframing affects the rhetorical properties of pre-existing cinematic works.

Owned by China's emerging tech behemoth ByteDance, TikTok is a short video social media platform that debuted in China in September 2016 under the name Douyin and went global in May 2017 under the name TikTok. It enables users to produce and distribute their own videos, which are typically between 15 and 60 seconds long, as well as livestreams. The variety of filters, music, animation, and camera effects available on TikTok is a distinctive element that can improve users' uploads. TikTok has been the fastest-growing social media app in the world, with a focus on young audiences. TikTok is the fifth most downloaded app of the 2010s, with 1.5 billion downloads in 39 languages across 150 countries as of December 2020 (Wu, 2021, p. 12).

This study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating visual rhetoric with contemporary media practices. By

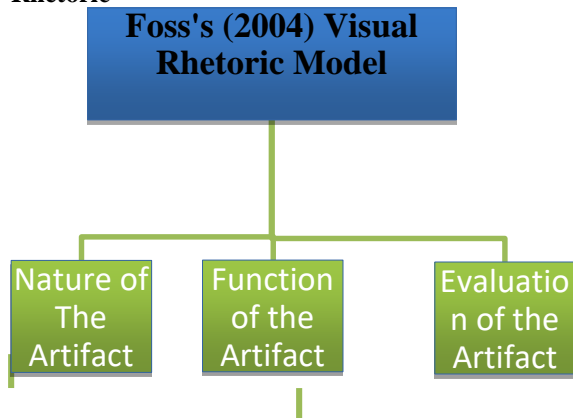


applying Foss’s framework to vertically adapted scenes from *Atonement*, the research explores how digital reframing reshapes visual hierarchy, narrative emphasis, and audience interpretation. In doing so, it situates traditional film analysis within the evolving context of digital media, highlighting the rhetorical significance of aspect ratio transformation.

III. METHODOLOGY

The model of analysis used in this study is the framework that Foss (2004) suggested for framing the study of visual rhetoric. She says a rhetorical researcher should focus on three aspects when getting ready to study a visual object. The domains are evaluation, nature, and function. Evaluation is the process of assessing visual artifacts; function deals with the communication influence of visual artifacts on audiences; and nature deals with the components, characteristics, and features of visual artifacts. The framework for examining visual rhetoric is based on these three components taken together (p. 307). According to Foss's view of the appropriate methodology for the study, each element of the analytical model is shown in the following (figure 2) and the drawings below it.

Figure 2 : The model of analysis of Visual Rhetoric



Note : Adopted from Foss 2004 .

Based on Foss's (2004) methodology for analyzing visual rhetoric in visual artifacts, the following sections provide a thorough description of every element in the adopted model.

A. Nature of the Artifact

According to Foss (2004), analyzing the distinctive qualities of the visual artifact is an essential part of

studying visual rhetoric. Understanding the substantive and stylistic qualities of objects is crucial for their interpretation and assessment, and this is the main focus of visual rhetoric studies. Presented elements and recommended elements are the two primary components of visual rhetoric. Determining an artifact's elements involves defining its main physical attributes, such as color, medium, and space. Finding the thoughts, ideas, motifs, and allusions that a viewer is likely to deduce from the items supplied is part of identifying the suggested elements (p. 307).

B. Function of the artifact

According to Foss (2004), the purpose or functions that visual rhetoric serves for an audience are a secondary focus for academics using a rhetorical viewpoint on visual symbols. The activity that a visual item represents defines its function. Visual artifacts have a variety of purposes, such as commemorating specific people, arousing feelings of coziness and warmth, and encouraging viewers to consider the boundaries they have set for themselves. When it comes to visual artifacts, scholars who take a rhetorical approach do not consider the creator's intentions to be the most important factor in determining how a work should be interpreted. Evidence on the intentions of artifact producers may not be available to the scholar. Furthermore, options for different experiences with the artifact are limited when authors' interpretations are prioritized over viewers'. Scholars claim that an artifact survives regardless of the creator's intention once it is formed (p. 308).

C. Evaluation of the Artifact

Evaluation or assessment is the third focus area for researchers studying visual rhetoric, according to Foss (2004), who describes the examination of the third pillar. Some academics choose to evaluate an artifact according to how well it serves its intended purpose. Analyzing an artifact's material, colors, forms, and content is necessary to assess how well it memorializes a person. In order to assess the validity of visual symbols, some scholars look at the purposes for which they are used. The meanings and consequences of these purposes have a big impact on this assessment (p. 309). For example, they might investigate if an item is consistent with a particular moral code or has the potential to free people.

3.1 *Atonement* (2007)

The novel *Atonement* (McEwan, 2002) is about an attempt at atonement, permanent repercussions, and a



senseless transgression. The story, which is divided into three well-written sections, begins in a 1935 English country estate with domestic circumstances that culminate in a criminal scenario. The reader is guided through the atrocities of World War II in Part Two, which is set in France five years later and culminates in Dunkirk during the British evacuation. In Part Three, the action returns to London and takes place in a hospital anticipating a flood of injured soldiers. The epilogue, which takes place in the late 1990s, marks the magical turn. The reader's prior comprehension of the plot is altered by the primary protagonist's direct and indiscriminate communication. The audience is shocked by the naked, all-revealing reality (Hřibova, 2015, p. 14).

On the sweltering summer day of 1935, it opens in England. The young daughter of an affluent family, Briony Tallis, has a vivid imagination and spies on her elder sister Cecilia (Knightley once more) and her developing affair with Robbie (James McAvoy), the son of the family housekeeper. Robbie is falsely accused of a terrible crime by Briony, which could have disastrous effects for the lovers' lives. As the movie advances to 1940, Robbie is a soldier in France, frantically attempting to return home to Cecilia. The scenario then shifts to London, where Romola Garai's character, Briony, who is now eighteen, works as a nurse to injured soldiers as a deliberate act of atonement. In a TV interview, Vanessa Redgrave portrays Briony, a well-known elderly author, reliving these incidents in a coda (David, 2007).

This study does not rely on full-length scenes as unit of analysis, instead it employs curated videos excerpts or "multimodal cuts" composed of selected moments from the film. These excerpts are constructed to capture rhetorically significance visual instances rather than continuous narrative sequences just to highlight the topic of inquiry being the effect of reframing the original film's composition. This approach allows for a more focused examination of visual and rhetorical elements as they appear across different parts of the film.

IV. ANALYSIS

4.1 Analytical Unit One : A Letter for Cecilia

This video excerpt describes several moments of the film while being narrated by Turner's message to Cecilia apologizing for his behavior and at the same time it was a sincere expression of his love towards her. A message carried to his beloved while being away as a soldier in the war. The several moments that

appears starts with Turner sitting on the stairs feeling sad and anxious about his distress, then it moves to picture some of the most highlighted moments , like the fountain and the meeting scenes.

The video can be find in the picture below :



4.1.1 Nature of the Artifact

The reframing of *Atonement* from its original horizontal cinematic format into vertical Tiktok frame in this excerpt brought a fundamental alteration to the nature of the visual artifact. In the original moments like Turner's message and while sitting on the stairs the scene was full of stunning visuals that carries the emotional depth of the film yet reframing has introduced the film viewer to a new depth of the film's visuals claiming it to be a new product that can be viewed with more depth, adding more spatial details, character's positioning which entail adding more layers to the original moments.

While the original moments represent a great narrative significance , the new reframing represents a semi-new product with far more rhetorical structure. In Foss's terms the artifact itself is transformed, not just resized and redefined as a different artifact.

4.1.2 Function of the Artifact

The reframing of the moments into a vertical also changes the function of the artifact, especially in terms of its persuasive and affective impact. While in the original filmic excerpt , the function of the artifact is to bring the viewers to immerse themselves with the broad historical and emotional map, where meaning is accumulated through the regular means of film production. The viewer of the video excerpt is invited to link himself with the original written work that the



film adopts the story from because it offers some additional details limited to the reframed excerpt. Tiktok video emphasis the immediacy and emotional intensity that aligns with the platform's rapid need for engagement. The Tiktok excerpt additionally functions as mirror of Turner's authority of his distress and emotional confessions portraying him as a narrator of his own story.

4.1.3 Evaluation of the Artifact

When evaluating the excerpt, the effectiveness of the reframing reveals how a change to the frames can invite a complex representation that enhances and maybe alter the whole rhetorical meaning of the film's moments depicted in the Tiktok video. On one hand , the vertical format enhances the viewers emotional accessibility by adding more spatial details and changing the characters positioning which leads to intensifying the viewer's emotional attachment to the film in general and to Turner's character particularly presenting a new balance that drives the viewer's attention more into the story. Although the fragmentation of the film into short moments can undermine the film's narrative coherence, yet the excerpt can be evaluated as the film statement with a rich display of the key moments , themes and characters.

4.2 Analytical Unit Two : A Cinematic Trauma

This excerpt differs from the first on the sense that music speaks louder in it. The music accompanied by the depiction of series of events in the film represents the film's map in a new manner that fit with Tiktok. The excerpt starts with a question of what if the Film Atonement was filmed vertically. Moving forward to display several key moments of the film reframed vertically presenting a new concept to watch the film, The music then fades to some of the key dialogues between Turner and Cecillia.

The video excerpt can be viewed below:



4.2.1 Nature of the Artifact

In the case of this excerpt as an artifact, it carries different characteristics because the reframing from horizontal to vertical has introduced a new visual artifact related to the film only in some details changing the whole constitution. The original filmic composition of Atonement relies in expanded horizontal expansiveness, the reframed product adds more vertical details, which represent new environments , places and additions to the characters depiction. The new vertical excerpt carries new rhetorical means that adds another layer to the artifact. In addition, the music in the background shows a new method to narrate the film or the original story inviting both the readers of the story and the viewers of the film to have additional sense of connection with the literary work.

4.2.2 Function of the Artifact

The function of this excerpt as a rhetorical visual artifact is entirely different from the moments depicted from the original film in the sense that they represent a different mean of engaging the viewers with the film. The Tiktok video invites the viewers to immerse themselves with the beauty of the film depending on the role of music, ambiguity, and gradual emotional development.

The vertical reframing additionally represents a hook that can bring the viewers to be charmed with the films additional stunning visuals which perform a new narrative tool and a mean of engagement. Eventually, Tiktok excerpt functions as a way to grab the viewer to immediate affective recognition rather than a story full comprehension.

4.2.3 Evaluation of the Artifact

The vertically framed excerpt with hints from the original films reconstructed as a Tiktok video can be evaluated from three angles.

Firstly, for a person who already watch the original film, it is considered as memoire and a compiled moments that are adjusted precisely to evoke a sense of complicated emotions, starting with nostalgia and homage to the early 2000s film vibes and powerful expression of emotions and sincere adaptation of well-known literary works.

Secondly, for those who read the original work by McEwan (2002) this excerpt is a reward for their experience of reading fine art work bringing them to remanence about the original rich build of the story's world, spaces, themes and characters' traits.

Lastly, the excerpt can also be evaluated as being an intriguing trailer for both the film and to lesser extent, the original novel for those who are not aware of them



. The Tiktok videos features of immediacy and attention grabbing, and content summarizing are on play at the most in this excerpt.

V. CONCLUSION

Through Foss's lens, and the step-by-step analysis, the reframing of the film's content from horizontal to vertical does more than change how the film looks as it subtly produces a new sort of cinematic related content channeled through a unique platform. The Tiktok excerpts addresses the viewers in an entirely new methods depending on several features that more related to the characteristics of the platform itself rather than merely the filmic elements.

The rhetoric effect of the film is the main subject of change in the process of reframing from horizontal to vertical. Although the film's in its original cinematic form with widescreen composition and long time span can contain some of its own rhetorical ambience, yet, the vertical video may add some different outcome that can alter how the film is viewed in many ways. The Tiktok video can persuade in new ways that align with the platform and the film combined.

There are several changes resulted from the multimodality of the adaptation of the literary work, first of which is abandoning some of the filmic rhetorical choices like the focus on the characters as pack or the setting of the film, in fact, the excerpt on Tiktok alters the setting and it may offer a different setting of its own. Additionally, a viewer of the excerpt can not feel the authority of the director, since as all the of the two function of the artifact analysis can suggest that the person or the Tiktok platform guides have lead to a drastic change in the nature , function , and evaluation of the artifact.

Another feature that changes when the film is reframed into vertical screen is the balance as the pictures might appear tighter, more intimate, and more immediate. What was hidden in the wide screen ratio is now pulled off to another world that is closer to the viewer's eye. These changes in general can alter the end of the rhetoric, for instance the film persuades the viewer to reflect while the video excerpt leads the viewer toward an immediate emotional response.

As a result, meaning is also subtly reframed. The original film's meaning is carried through narrative depth while in the video excerpt is reduced into focusing on a theme, a character, or just presenting a trailer to the film.

At the end, the reframing does not destroy the rhetorical richness of the film but it simply reproduced in a new manner that goes along with the needs of the platforms and the traits of its viewers and the result is a compressed emotional experience.

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