

THEATRICAL AND CINEMATIC STYLES:

Theories of Style in Theatre and Film for Individual Artists, Movements, and Epochs
Graduate Seminar: Prof. Thomas Postlewait

The concept of style is central to all artistic study. It is also quite familiar to all of us in our daily lives. Everything apparently has a style: clothes, cars, phones, beverages, cuisine, and so on. And both individuals and groups have their styles of identification and behavior. So, at one level, we all know immediately what the idea of style means. We use it all of the time. Establishing stylistic traits and sending stylistic signals seem to be essential attributes of human behavior and community. But as soon as we attempt to define and apply the concept in the study of the arts—including drama, theatre, and film—we face major problems. Is it possible to develop a vocabulary, even a poetics, of artistic style, in ways similar to Aristotle's attempt to develop a poetics of a dramatic genre? What is an artistic style? What is it made of? How are styles achieved or recognized? How or why do styles change? What is the relationship between form and content in the arts? Is style something we add to or impose upon artistic content? Or is it part of the content? What is the stylistic relation between a play text and a performance text? Is style a part of the formal elements or system of an artwork? Or is it located elsewhere, such as the artistic sensibility or imagination? Or is style something an observer recognizes; if so, is it located in the perceptions of observers?

This course will investigate three basic topics: (1) the stylistic codes, verbal and visual, of theatre and film, as achieved and perceived in their formal systems of representation; (2) the history of "period" styles in Western theatre (e.g., classical, medieval or gothic, rococo, expressionism, symbolist, and postmodern); (3) the aesthetic theories of visual styles in the performing arts. We want to discover how theatre and film achieve their stylistic effects, how they communicate, what they communicate, and how they are perceived. We will chart the uses of the concept of style in historical and formal analysis, from Aristotle to the present. We want to see if features of Aristotle's methodology for analyzing tragedy provide a foundation for the study of artistic style. We will investigate the ways that people in the theatre (e.g., costume and scene designers) derive much of their stylistic vocabulary and understanding from the visual arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Is this transfer of terminology and ideas across the arts appropriate? Can we, for example, apply the word *baroque* equally well to painting, architecture, music, scene design, and acting style? If not, why not?

Throughout our investigation, we will attend to the challenges of using clear and concise descriptive and analytical language for discussing artistic style in the performing arts. Also, we will watch and analyze several films for their handling of elements of style, from costuming and set design to camera shots and editing. In the process, we want to see if the terminology and methods for describing and analyzing the stylistic codes of representation in theatre can also be applied to film. Do the two performing arts share similar stylistic features and vocabulary? Or do we need two distinct vocabularies and theoretical models for analyzing theatre and film?

By drawing upon theatre semiotics, as developed during the twentieth century, we will examine the verbal, visual, and auditory codes of theatrical and cinematic styles—as used by artists

and perceived by spectators. For the seminar, students will help guide our discussions of the class readings. Also, each student will select a specific period style for a class report (discussion, debate). In our study of the historical, aesthetic and political nature of stylistic choices in theatre and film, we will give special attention to the history of Shakespearean production since the Renaissance (e.g., costuming, design, lighting, acting, stage movement, and directing styles). How have directors, since their emergence in the 19th century, attempted to express their stylistic visions in performance? One of our case studies in our class readings will focus on the stylistic history of productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—on stage and in film (1590s to the present). In addition, each student will do a research project on a specific Shakespeare play and its production history—its changing styles across time. Throughout our investigations, a central theoretical problem and challenge will engage us: how to locate, define, apply, and interpret the historical, formalistic, and ideological features of style in both theatre and film.

Possible Texts: we will study many of the following texts (most are in paperback editions):

Aristotle. The Poetics.

Berel Lang, ed. The Concept of Style, Rev. ed. (1987).

Eric Bentley, ed. Theory of the Modern Stage (1968).

David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson. Film Art: An Introduction. 6th ed. (2001) or later.

David Bordwell. On the History of Film Style (1997).

Martin Esslin. The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen (1987).

Dennis Kennedy. Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performances, 2nd ed., (2001).

Gary J. Williams, Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night's Dream in the Theatre (1997).

Besides the class texts that I decide upon, I will provide a Class Reader on Style in Drama, Theatre, and Film. Also, I will supply a bibliography on the scholarship and criticism on “Shakespeare in Production: 1660 to the Present.”