

OPPONENT'S ASSESSMENT OF A WRITTEN THESIS

Thesis title:	Constructing Meaning: Metaphorical Frameworks in Cinema
Thesis author:	Alejandro Ríos
Programme of study:	CDM
Programme type:	Master's

Definition of objectives and their fulfilment: 10 points

Alejandro aims to discuss metaphor and its use in three films: *The Wind Rises* by Hayao Miyazaki, *Mirror* by Andrei Tarkovsky, and *The Turin Horse* by Béla Tarr while using the writings of so diverse scholars, from entirely different discourses (often not compatible at all), as Aristotle, Paul Ricoeur, Carl Jung, and Gaston Bachelard. I do not understand why the author decided to choose such a complicated way to say something quite banal, as, for instance, that house in *Mirror* has a symbolic meaning, or that empty field in *The Wind Rises* symbolizes the death of the female character.

6 points

Topicality of the thesis topic (and relevance of the selected methodology in the case of a Master's thesis): 10 points

I do not fully understand the author's methodology. In the abstract (p. iii) he explains that he will use "mixed methodology based on Aristotle's definition of metaphor" – I am not aware that any such methodology exists, nor understand what does it mean. Later Alejandro says "By encompassing metaphor as a figure of speech to cinema, we find a method of analysis in the following three essays" (p. 2) – it is not clear to me, what he means. How we can "find" method in the essays? The method needs to be first clearly established and then applied to the material in question (= films), and the findings eventually summarized in the thesis.

Therefore, the method used is unclear, and not properly explained.

From the core of the essays – three essays discussing the films – we can see that Alejandro reads the various texts and tries to apply some of the claims he found there to the films – as when he discusses Bachelard's text in connection of the characters in *The Turin Horse* occupying inside of the house majority of the time, or when he uses Jung to discuss dream imagery in *Mirror*.

5 points

Scholarly contribution, originality of the thesis, and its utilisation in practice: 5 points

The logic of the Alejandro's discussion is, at parts, unclear to me. For instance, on page 8 he tries to find a similarity between a sentence *Time is a Thief*, and a scene from *The Wind Rises*.

Time is a Thief – based on Paul Ricoeur (whom Alejandro is using as his main source) – can be put into the algebraic formula: $A(C) + B = \text{metaphor}$ where A is “consumed at an unreasonable fast pace,” B is a “time,” and C is “thief,” – because the time is consumed at an unreasonable fast pace, it is a thief. Basically, $B = C$, because B has the characteristic A. Later on that page, Alejandro is trying to find a similar situation in *The Wind Rises*, describing a scene:

Jiro realizes her partner Nahoko is dead. A(C) + B = metaphor in “The Wind Rises” A is Nahoko dying of tuberculosis. C is the empty flying field without sound, increasing the moment's meaning by interpretation. B is Jiro, the character involved in the scene. Together, they create a metaphorical scene [...] (p. 8).

In this logic, $B = C$ (see above, time is a thief, that is, B is a C), that is Jiro = empty field. However, it does not make any sense. If Alejandro would want to use this algebraic formula $A(C) + B = \text{metaphor}$, then B needs to be a dying Nahoko, C empty field (then truly $B = C$, meaning by empty field metaphorically implying Nahoko's death), and Jiro himself is, of course, not involved in this formula at all! Letter A then might be something like “sudden emptiness in Jiro's life”: Sudden emptiness in Jiro's life, shown by empty field $A(C) + \text{dying girl B} = \text{metaphor}$.

However, it is not exactly apparent, why something so banal, that has been known since the beginning of the cinema – that something can mean something else –, is presented here as something entirely new, worthy admiration and surprise, and is put here in the extremely complicated language, that, clearly, not even author himself, understands fully.

Some of the further Alejandro's claims are very problematic, e.g. “Therefore, a filmmaker cannot premeditate a metaphorical effect” (p. 10). Of course, s/he can! Even when metaphor may perhaps sometimes appear unwanted in the film, it is indeed a very rare case, and in 99% it is, of course, premeditated by the filmmaker. Mizayaki wants to say something by an empty field, namely, the girl is dead – he very much did premeditate it. What is Alejandro saying? That metaphors are random? Not planned? Why then discuss them when nobody planned them and they just appear, unwanted...

Even when I can agree that the final interpretation is on the viewer, and it may differ (see p. 11), the filmmakers are winking at the audience and making it often quite obvious what they want to say. An empty field can be hardly interpreted as hinting that a joyful wedding is being organized at the moment, for instance. It will always get a feeling of melancholy – and if the audience KNOWS that the girl is dead, well, then I would doubt that there is any spectator who would not understand that metaphor immediately.

At another point, I dare to say, that Alejandro misunderstood Bachelard. He says “As Tarr mentioned multiple times in his workshop, one of the reasons [not clear of what – PD's note] is to be honest with oneself and, consequently, with the viewer. It can be achieved by avoiding unnecessary aesthetic choices without alignment with the project's premise. In Bachelard's words: “Philosophical language is becoming a language of agglutination.” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 229) (p. 47) – Bachelard's quote, however, is taken from an absolutely different context, when he talks about prefixes and suffixes, proposing words as *being-there* for being use. I highly doubt Alejandro understands Bachelard's concept as it does not have anything to do whatsoever with honesty to oneself, aesthetic choices, or the project's premises.

I can see a certain scholarly contribution in the discussion of *The Turin Horse*, as Alejandro participated in Tarr's workshop, and might have asked the questions, that, perhaps, he already planned to include in his thesis.

The thesis is quite original, even when, as said above, I am missing the reason for discussing something fairly simple within such a complicated framework, that – to understand it fully – would require our background in all: semiotics, psychoanalysis, and philosophy (mainly phenomenology).

The utilization of the thesis in practice is, in my opinion, close to none.

3 points

Logical construction and structuring of the thesis: 10points

The structure of the thesis is logical – after the introduction Alejandro delves into the three films and analyzes them from a variety of perspectives, more or less being anchored in his discussion of metaphor.

However, in parts he forgets about the theory and gives us unnecessary summary of the film, e.g. pages 11 – 20 are devoted to detailed description of *The Wind Rises* with only occasional points about Miyazaki's style. Here we can also read a bunch of random quotes from the director that do not seem to refer neither to metaphor nor to the detailed summary. Nothing that is said here has any relevance to the discussion about metaphor, except on page 13, when he talks about “treating metaphor as a segment.” There are also a few mistakes, e.g. on page 26 Alejandro is talking about Jung's definition of metaphor, while not giving us any. Most likely he means the definition of the symbol, which we can read on the same page; and on page 39 Alejandro announces that he would switch to the 1st person singular with the explanation that he does it because it is a last chapter. That decision is unclear to me. However, he does it only partially anyhow – switching to the 1st person plural eventually again.

8 points

Formal requirements and requisite contents of the thesis, including its length: 20 points

The length of the essay fulfills the requirements, it is more than 60 pages. However, the problems of the thesis are elsewhere. For instance, a bibliography is not in alphabetical order, in fact, it is not in any order, it is badly formatted, leaving a half of empty line in the middle of word, and the articles are not in quotation marks. There is at least one wrong citation, and it is “BACHELARD, Gaston, 1964. *The Poetics of Space*. 22. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.” First of all, *The Poetics of Space* was published first time in English in 1964, but by The Orion Press publishing house and I doubt that this is the edition Alejandro worked with. Most likely he had in his hand the edition from 2014, which was really published by Penguin Classics publishing house. What does number “22” means is a mystery to me.

Filmography is not in alphabetical order either, some of the films are in italics, some not, in some entries is written “film”, in others not.

The decision to have the titles in quotation marks, instead of in italics, which is a common practice, is unclear to me. Also, Alejandro does not differentiate (formally) in the titles of the books and chapters (e.g. p. 6), which is also a problematic decision, and is very confusing.

Sometimes the quotations are in quotation marks and italics, and sometimes only in quotation marks (e.g. p. 4).

One quote Alejandro quotes four times, instead of referring to the first page it was mentioned (p. 3, p. 7, p. 22, and p. 38).

Mise-en-scene is constantly misspelled as mis-en-scene (e.g. p. 10, 11, 39)

Once, by randomly checking the origin of the quote I found out that Alejandro does not quote properly. This quote: “The fear does not come from the outside. It has no past, no physiology. In what shelter can one take refuge? Space is nothing but a &horrible outside-inside.” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 234)” (p. 47) is not complete! The whole quote reads: “The fear does not come from the outside. Nor is it composed of old memories. It has no past, no physiology. Nothing in common, either, with having one's breath taken away. Here fear is being itself. Where can one flee, where find refuge? In what shelter can one take refuge? Space is nothing but a “horrible outside-inside.””

12 points

Work with information sources: 5 points

Some of the claims do not have a quotation, therefore we do not know from which sources they are coming, e.g. “Guillermo del Toro describes Miyazaki's rhythm as contemplative and compares him with Yasujiro Ozu” (p. 12), or, “Guillermo Arriaga, Screenwriter of “Amor Perros,” believes that life does not happen in a three-act structure; our memory is fragmented” (p. 36).

9 points

Level of language, style and terminology: 15 points

At some parts, Alejandro makes mistakes that make the understanding of the text more difficult, even impossible. E.g. the sentence: “To expand Aristotle’s definition of the metaphorical effect in films and to grow the understanding of film language by studying the master’s selected works” (p. 3) is not, in fact, a sentence – does not make sense in the English language. Similarly “Comparing Tarr’s decision to be off the film set to the experience of his characters” is not a sentence.

Elsewhere Alejandro claims: “Gaston Bachelard’s essay “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside” enhances this chapter by elaborating on the consequences of being captive in “The Turin Horse” (p. 46) as if Bachelard actually writes about *The Turin Horse*.”

On p. 12 Alejandro uses the word custom while he means “costume.”

At one point Alejandro quotes in French (p. 11): “Le vent se leve, il faut tenter de vivre,” while making three mistakes in this 9-word quote (correct quotation is: “Le vent se lève! . . . il faut tenter de vivre”). Paul Valéry, its author, should be written with “é” instead of “e”.

Sometimes it is unclear what Alejandro means, e.g. ““The Wind Rises” uses solid film language” (p. 12) – what does it mean, “solid”? The thesis is full of bold statements that are unclear, and never explained, such as “In cinema, a filmmaker can build an absolute reality, which is the equivalent of the human psyche within the piece of work” (p. 30) or “The implications of treating metaphor as a mental event inside a film can be positive and negative” (p. 36).

10 points

Evaluator’s overall summary: 25 points

Here I have some additional comments, in bullet points:

* In some parts Alejandro makes decisions that are not well explained. For instance, he claims “we will go back and forth between filmmaking and poetics and vice versa as synonyms,” (p. 3), while, of course, those words are indeed NOT synonyms, since poetics, as Wiki tells us is “the theory of structure, form, and discourse” (Wiki) – while poetics is “the theory”, the filmmaking is very much “the practice.”

* At other moments, he is simply not right. For instance, he claims about Tarkovsky: “Despite the Russian filmmaker is widely known for being reluctant to use deliberate symbolism in the poetic imagery of his films [...],” while there is maybe no other filmmaker that uses “deliberate symbolism in the poetic imagery of his films” as much as Tarkovsky! Is there even anything else besides symbolism in his films?

* In Conclusion, Alejandro asks: “Can metaphor be a framework in cinema that constructs a new meaning?” (p. 52) – it seems to be a nonsensical question as the metaphor is pretty much defined as “constructing new meaning,” so yes, it does construct new meaning, as otherwise it would not be a metaphor, but an icon.

* While during the whole thesis, Alejandro repeats again and again, that metaphor is a noun, and it can be in the film delivered by the aspect of mise-en-scene, suddenly we read “One of the most significant findings is to consider metaphor as a behaviour” – I have not seen that coming, being honest.

18 points

Questions and topics for discussion at the oral defence:

1/ My first question is “Why?” – Why did you decide to use so complicated frameworks from multiple fields that each should be studied thoroughly before using it for one’s research when your findings are fairly banal? How this complicated framework – or, being precise, MULTIPLE complicated frameworks – did help in understanding the use of metaphor in the film?

2/ The theme of your thesis is metaphor, however, you are using three different texts for the analysis of the three films you have chosen. Can you summarize, how different is the use of metaphors in those three films?

**Recommendation of the thesis
for the oral defence:** Yes
Recommended grade: C
**Date of elaboration of this
assessment:** 19th of May, 2024

Petra Dominková, PhD.
Name of the thesis supervisor



Prague, 18th of May 2024
(date and signature)