

Purpose: Use this modeled example of the Week 3 Written Assignment to explore the elements that make this an exemplary submission. Hover over the number or scroll to the end of the text to read about what the student has done well in this assignment.

Money & Power in *Goodfellas*

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ENG 225: Introduction to Film

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Martin Scorsese's film *Goodfellas* (1990) is a gangster drama that shows the audience what it is like to be a part of the Mafia. This film is mainly told from the point of view of Henry Hill, played by Ray Liotta, who knew as a child that he wanted to be a part of the crime family. This film shows Henry Hill's "thirst for and rise to power," which is its major theme (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2014, Ch. 4.2, para. 12). The movie *Goodfellas* shows the power that comes with money, the power of choice, and the power of persuasion, all of which are established through cinematography, acting, costuming, and design.

With money comes power. This is shown in "The Long Take" scene in which Henry Hill and his date are walking into the Copacabana nightclub. Scorsese uses a continuous tracking shot to show Henry gladhanding the nightclub staff the resulting respect he is given, not only by the staff of the nightclub, but the other patrons inside. This cinematographic technique portrays Henry Hill as a man of importance. The camera stays low, making him look tall, and stays with him through the back entrance, a hallway, the kitchen, and into the dining room where he is given his own table in front of everyone else. Also, a bottle of wine is sent over to him from another table in the club, to show as a sign of respect. The color in this clip is desaturated to appear more realistic, so that the audience feels they are right there with the actors, getting the VIP access that comes with the rise in power. Another point to make in this scene is how it shows the flashy car, fancy suits, and money being thrown around like it's a normal way of life. This is Scorsese's way of demonstrating that these things are essential elements of the gangsters' lives, (Castellitto, 1998. P.3). The power theme is established in many visual layers; attention is drawn to money exchanging hands, to material items, and, because money buys both material

items and respect, the viewer understands this to mean gaining authority over others. Moving up the social class, even in this mob culture gives Henry a power of his own.

Throughout *Goodfellas*, Scorsese chooses to use the color red to symbolize death, violence, and the anger that the characters portray in the film. For example in *the beginning* (2010) scene, Henry and his crew are going to kill and dispose of Billy Bats body. There is a red hue from the brake lights on the mobsters' faces. This color effect communicates to viewers that these men have chosen a different way of life. The camera angle showing Billy Bats in the trunk of the car and the gangsters' standing above, looking down on him, can be interpreted as the control, the power, they have over him. It is literally the power of life and death. A different, more unhinged power is amplified by the use of red light in the "Funny How?" scene in which Tommy (Joe Pesci) threatens Henry, the restaurant manager, and the waiter. Here, the red lighting casts a threatening pall over the light-hearted atmosphere, and signals a more violent turn. The use of the color red and the camera angles, as well as the props of guns and knives, tie into the power theme in this movie. If this scene had been shot in natural lighting, with the characters holding balloons, the audience would not have gotten the correct feel for the characters or scene.

The last way power is used as a theme in this film, is through the act of persuasion. The characters persuade us as an audience to believe they were the actual people that they were playing in the film through specific acting styles. For example, Ray Liotta uses method acting as a way to inhabit his character in the scene where he pistol whips Karen's next door neighbor. According to *IMDb* (n.d.), Liotta's mother passed away during filming and he uses that emotion to help him show rage in the scene (p. 1). His embrace of this acting style helps show his authority over others. Another example is how Henry Hill and the other gangsters in Jimmy's

crew, have their own ways of using their power to get others to follow their demands. For example, after the big heist on John F. Kennedy International Airport, Jimmy (Robert De Niro) distributes the money to his guys and tells them not to spend it. Jimmy only wants to keep the police's attention away from them in regards to the crime. Some of the men don't listen to his commands. They spend money on luxuries, like a pink car and a fur coat, which makes them look too flashy. Jimmy has the couple killed in return for their disloyalty to him. Even though he was a gangster himself, Jimmy "appeared to be a greater threat to other gangsters, than law-abiding citizens,"(Goodykoontz, & Jacobs, 2014, Ch. 4.2, para. 12). This was a definite way to convince the others not to spend their money. The mise en scene showing the luxury pink car and the way the wife and husband are dressed fancy in the "He'd rather whack 'em" clip, shows that the couple had money, but they did not have the ultimate power like Jimmy, to make the call that they should die.

In conclusion, Martin Scorsese's film, *Goodfellas* (1990), gives us a look into the life of mobsters. When watching this film, one can see the theme of power portrayed throughout it. The use of continuity editing increases the audience's awareness of the characters and their surroundings in the film and how they are given a certain authority over others because of the lifestyle they live. With the red color hues and camera angles, the viewer can see how the mobsters earn power by taking it from others. Adding in props, like guns and fancy clothes, along with the actors' style of acting, help enhance the audiences' perception of how much power these characters in the film, truly hold.

References

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1. The author clearly presents the thesis for the paper, explaining how a discussion of the various required elements will establish theme.
2. This is a great way to show the immediate effect of cinematography in a film. The way the camera treats a character tells the viewer how we should perceive that character. Here, the author not only notes the specific cinematographic technique, but describes what that technique does to establish the major themes of the film.
3. This very astute observation identifies the actions and objects captured on camera and interprets their meaning accurately as it corresponds to and constructs the film's theme. It's as simple as noting what appears on camera (the *mise en scène*), how the camera treats it (cinematography), and what it suggests about the story (theme).
4. Color and hue, whether created by light or filters on the camera's lens, has a very palpable effect on how we perceive a scene and how a director might signal what's to come. This is a very strong use of examples and analysis to show exactly how color contributes to the film's theme.
5. Using specific examples establishes the support necessary for the claims the author has made.
6. This conclusion does a great job of reflecting the thesis statement, and reiterating the major points of each paragraph as relates to the overall theme of money and power. A great model for a conclusion is to rephrase the thesis, address each paragraph, and tie these points together in a summary statement about the topic of the paper.