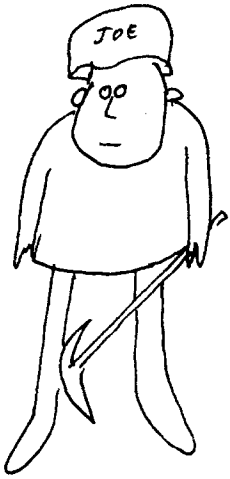

JOE: AN ESSAY IN THE RHETORICAL CRITICISM OF FILM

By Thomas W. Benson

When undertaking rhetorical criticism of any work of art, the critic must clarify, at least for himself, his position on two fundamental questions: In what sense can the work in question be said to be rhetorical? How will the critic's account of an event help to explain the potential or actual interaction of an audience with the work?

I propose a method of conducting rhetorical criticism of film. I shall implement the method in a discussion of the rhetoric of *Joe*, an American film released in 1970.[1]

It is by now commonplace to speak of the rhetoric of a variety of non-oratorical sign systems, from political confrontations to architecture. But the rapid expansion of the rhetorical critic's field of inquiry carries with it the risk of overextension. Not all comments on all sign systems are rhetorical criticism. There is a certain wisdom, in my view, in reserving a special place in rhetorical theory and criticism for discourse which is verbal and public, which addresses civil questions with arguments drawn from shared systems of values and exercised in competing claims about probabilities addressed to persons in an open society who have the power to make meaningful choices. Even if such a rhetoric is now historically irretrievable, the attempt to preserve it as an intellectual tradition is not merely utopian or antiquarian. Classical rhetoric as an ideal of culture may serve as a touchstone by which to measure the drift of contemporary technological society.[2] If we are to use rhetoric in a broader sense than that foreseen by its classical inventors, we do so at the risk of losing sight of rhetoric not simply as a technique but also as a vision of society. The risk may be justified, however, by the observation that rhetorical culture is in any case impossible to recover, and that the ancient vision may well be worth risking for the chance to reinvent a rhetoric capable of integrating a culture plunging headlong toward technological self-destruction.

But let us, having stated our urgency, undertake the more modest task of attempting to see whether there is a rigorous way to employ rhetorical method to the understanding of popular film. Although I think a considerable variety of approaches can justly call themselves rhetorical criticism, for our purposes a fairly narrow, cautious, and conservative extension of the ancient tradition will do.

Rhetorical artifacts are signs, and as such exhibit structure, significance, and consequence. Let us argue that a rhetorical artifact bears meaning of an intentional sort, best characterized by discursive structure but also present in non-discursive forms which exhibit the marks of discourse, that is, which reveal meaning units in a syntax which tends towards a propositional synthesis. Such rhetoric can operate formally, as a series of implicit propositions about structure, governing the shape of the work as it unfolds.[3] Or rhetoric can operate internally, predispositionally, to create the context of values and relevant knowledge which allow the work to be apprehended.[4] Or rhetoric can operate externally, in the well-understood sense of rhetoric as the mode of arguing about how we should evaluate, understand, or act in the world.[5]

It has been argued that film is non-rhetorical in its essence. Siegfried Kracauer says that film arises from images whose associations he characterizes as unstaged, fortuitous, endless, and indeterminate.[6] "The cinema," he argues, "can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life."[7] But as Kracauer well knew, even if film were inherently and ideally a medium lending itself to the photographic contemplation of physical reality, it has historically been a medium burdened since its inception with proto-discursive, extra-visual messages whose structures are determined by narrative, commercial, and ideological motives and contents. Our public visual culture exists to tell stories and to sell products and ideas. Visual images in technological society serve as adjuncts to an endlessly repeated round of verbal structures. Eventually visual images become not primarily iconic (resemblances) or indexical (evidences) but symbolic—visual shorthand for a variety of social myths.[8] In the analysis that follows I shall try to show how popular film uses images as rhetorical tokens, and how an analysis of the iconography of these tokens reveals the rhetoric of a film. An analysis of the tokens, the icons in their rhetorical dimension, must proceed by a close analysis of the images themselves, their immediate context in a sequence of images that constitutes the film as a whole, their aural and dramatic context as constituted on the sound track, and the larger context made up of socially available images, events, conventions, techniques, and structures relevant to the image being examined. Such an analysis would have as its end the clarification of any particular filmic image as the result of symbolic choices about values.

The notion of context is dialectical. It implies that meaning is to be found in the relation of elements in the image, and in the relation of the image to other images in the same film, to visual culture generally, to the film's soundtrack, to traditions of narration, and so on. Dialectic analysis provides a

way of talking about style in its rhetorical dimension as a part of the meaning of a work as opposed to speaking of style as a bundle of techniques. Further, the idea of dialectical criticism, with its focus on the structure of oppositions, invites the critic to examine the politics of a work as an unavoidable aspect of its context. Hence the function of rhetorical criticism as social criticism.[9]

In summary, I take the rhetoric of filmic images to encompass the messages which emerge from the interpenetration of visual images and their context, context being understood to arise from such fundamentals as repetition, juxtaposition, duration, in short, any situation in which it is possible to speak of the dialectical relationships within a film and between a film and its audience. What makes the analysis rhetorical is its focus on the way the contextual relations provide clues as to how audiences are likely to apprehend the imagery.[10]

Let me turn now to *Joe* itself, and sketch out a critical response to the film. Bill Compton, a $60,000 a year advertising executive, murders his daughter's drug-pushing lover. A casual remark Compton lets fall in a bar leads Joe Curran, described by scriptwriter Norman Wexler as "a heavy set, balding, blue collar worker,"[11] to guess that Compton is the murderer. But instead of blackmailing Compton, Joe strikes up an admiring friendship, leading to an absurd dinner party at Joe's Astoria house, a search for the runaway daughter through various Village hangouts, and a hippie pad where Compton and Joe smoke marijuana and make love to three teenage girls. Friends of the girls steal the men's wallets, and Compton and Joe trace them to a country house where they shoot the thieves and several other adolescents. The film ends as Compton shoots down a girl who is running from the house. She is his daughter.

The plot I have paraphrased has an obviously rhetorical shape. As a simple moral fable, a work of clearly didactic structure, the narrative lends itself to the convention that violence breeds violence, that brutality comes home upon its perpetrator. The references to hard-hat viciousness toward a youth culture of drugs and dissent are strictly topical. Shortly after the film was completed, in the Spring of 1970, construction workers attacked war protesters in New York city—not for the first time. Not long afterwards a case came to light in rural western New York of three men being hired by deputy sheriffs to rough up a farm commune, where they shot one of the residents. In terms of its superficial content and its simple narrative line, *Joe* appears to be a lament for a divided country, and an outcry against the brutality of its fathers.

Quite the contrary. I will argue that for all its homage to humane values and for all its vaunted authenticity, *Joe* is a significantly inauthentic and serious failure. *Joe* may be a trivial film, but that should make it all the more familiar to rhetorical scholars, who have developed an important tradition for dealing with a trivial artifact, the public speech. For *Joe* is trivial not only because it is trashy art and second-hand thought, but, to return to the root sense of trivial, from the Latin *trivialis*, "from the crossroads, hence commonplace."[12] And for the student of human values, it is the commonplace, just as much as the elevated, by which we may judge and through which we must endlessly re-constitute culture. The structure of *Joe*'s failure reveals much about films in general and about American popular films as constitutive of American values. *Joe* is at the crossroads of

rhetoric and the popular arts.

Joe wants it both ways. On the one hand the film is a simple condemnation of the middle-aged, middle-class child-haters whose experience of American corruption in work and disillusion with marriage leads to bigotry and destruction. As it deepens and develops this theme, the film creates various reinforcing ironies. Compton kills his daughter's lover Frank when Frank says: "You done a real groovy job on her. I see you still got some balls. . . . She's got a real thing about you. When I met her she was ballin' her way up the aisle at the Fillmore." This conventional Freudianism, suggesting the symbolic corruption of father love, becomes the motive for a murder. Later, the uneasy friendship of Compton and Joe turns into a corrupt imitation of brotherhood, with fatal consequences. And again, the search for the beloved daughter and the quest for revenge converge at the final slaughter. These ironies exist in the film to reinforce its "humane" theme and as gestures in the direction of a deeper, darker vision of what ails America. What is their structural function in the film?

The film's ironic twists serve not merely to deepen the liberal rhetoric of the film, but formally they stand opposed to two very strong elements. One is the pornographic appeal of the sex, low comedy, and violence that pervades the film, threatening always to reduce the experience to an only incidentally relevant burlesque.[13] The other element, even stronger, is the immense authority and appeal of Joe himself as written by Wexler and played by Peter Boyle. The sensationalism of much of the film undermines its liberal rhetoric, unmasking the liberalism as the conventional price of admission to another cheap thrill in the tradition of *Crime Does Not Pay* comics and Cecil B. DeMille's Biblical flesh-epics. The second appeal, that of Joe himself, is a divided and contradictory image. It stands opposed to the flimsy narrative line of the film, and constitutes the film's central and most problematic image.

The character of Joe is a combination of extraordinary brutality and of a rather safe convention of television comedy. Joe's first speech is delivered in a bar, just after we have seen Compton murder Frank. He says:

> . . . the niggers . . . the niggers are gettin' all the money. Why work? You tell me. . . . Why the fuck work when you can screw, have babies and get paid for it. Welfare. They got all that welfare money. They even get free rubbers. You think they use 'em? Hell no, the only way they make money is makin' babies. They sell the rubbers and then they use the money to buy booze. Nobody has a right to buy booze unless he earns the money. It oughta be a law, you don't work, you don't drink. . . .[14]

The Joe who speaks these lines is demonic (see Fig. 1). He is the American liberal's nightmare of a middle-income, lower-class, blue-collar, red-neck white racist, and he surfaces with such speeches at serveral points in the film. The face appears in close up after a shock cut, facing the camera, sneering and blustering, almost whining. The teeth are bared, the eyes fixed, white showing above the iris. The harsh light casts dark shadows across the face and under the chin,

Figure 1

throwing his face in relief and emphasizing the black stubble of whiskers. The background is dark, and he wears a dark shirt and hat—there is no avoiding the face.

Joe is one of the few characters in recent American films, perhaps the first since Humphrey Bogart in *Black Legion*, to give voice to a complex of beliefs shared by many Americans. And the speech is stated with a shocking, gutsy, barroom belligerence which liberals and media-disfranchised bigots alike can recognize as authentic. The speech, once it has occurred in the film, stands for the set of attitudes which the film calls into being in order to refute. The rhetorical strategy of *Joe*, in my view, is to depict the logic of American bigotry and then to refute it by calling upon a battery of traditional comic and tragic devices. I will argue, however, that the refutation is not sufficient to counter Joe's affirmation of bigotry and destruction.

For example, Joe's attitudes are refuted by spelling out their consequences. Joe's hatred of the young and the black, his over-valuation of money, and his superpatriotic and paranoid gun collecting lead to the final moment in which Compton unwittingly shoots his daughter. But audiences who want to reject this refutation can easily do so. First, audiences who sympathize with Joe have pointed out that, after all, the kids got what they deserved. Second, and more subtly, the murders are not supported by tight narrative logic as the inevitable consequence of Joe's position. Joe may be a bigot, but he is also a cunning schemer. It is therefore improbable that he would force from the teenage girls a confession as to the location of their boyfriends' commune, and then, leaving the girls in their New York apartment, load his guns in his car, drive to the commune and kill the children he finds there. Everybody who watches movies knows that you don't commit a crime when there will be witnesses left behind. Joe knows it too—that's why he and Compton kill all the children in the house, and not just those who stole their wallets. The filmmakers ask us to overlook this narrative improbability if we are to accept their implied argument that Joe's racism leads to mass murder. But an audience sympathetic to Joe can easily dismiss the murders as unlikely, as arbitrarily tacked on by the filmmaker. An audience hostile to Joe's view of the world may be likely to accept the murders, but it must do so at the expense of the very critical faculties the film is ostensibly trying to promote. And so the refutation of argument from consequences is self-defeating either way.[15]

Some attempt is made to give Joe a social context. As rhetoric, such contextualizing works in a complicated way. Joe is a vicious racist, but from his own point of view he is taking revenge upon young people—and by extension blacks—who constitute a repudiation of his existence, an existence that he himself recognizes as narrow and unrewarding. There is one brief scene of Joe at work. He is standing in front of a kiln or furnace, sweating and swearing. And when we see him at home, Joe is complaining about his wife, his children, or his neighbors. Or he is arranging a dinner party for Compton and his wife, by sending out for Chinese food. What is the rhetorical function of Joe's domestic and vocational context? At first it might seem to enhance his moral authority by showing us that Joe has something to complain about. His life is not satisfactory. But at second glance, of course, we are invited to see that Joe is not so much a moral agent as the brutalized object of the social structures which determine and define his life. This is the scene-act ratio with a vengeance.[16] Joe is tasteless and crude, a type rather than a man. The film's rhetoric invokes a secondhand dogmatist's version of Marx and Freud, proposing to deepen our understanding of the social and psychological nature of man but instead replacing man with a lump controlled by biology and economics. In the film, the refutation is to the effect that Joe is wrong because he obviously does not know any better: his vicious thoughts are a socially conditioned ideology.[17] Joe's social context, in this view, does not *justify* his ideas, it *explains* them. But again, such a refutation is self-defeating: if Joe is controlled by the scene, refutation is irrelevant.

Another crucial difficulty with the domestic scenes of Joe is that they do not inhabit the same level of authenticity as the racist speeches. The question of authenticity is an important one for the film. One filmic gesture in the direction of authenticity is the use of brand names. In a drugstore or in Joe's kitchen, the claptrap of lipsticks, deodorants, Alberto VO5, frozen pies, Heinz ketchup, and Budweiser beer is insistently visible. But in context the reference is not to the things of this world so much as to the fantasy world of the television commercial, where what passes for authenticity is a New Yorker shopping for a pickle and an Alka-Seltzer, or a grocer squeezing toilet paper.

As we move into Joe's house or meet his bowling team we do not encounter a new sociological authenticity but shift gears to an old convention. There are two Joes. The Joe of Figure 2 is not an aspect of the bigot we met in the bar or the murderer we saw in the commune but a direct descendant of the lower middle class heavies of television comedy. This Joe has been played out for us by Sid

Figure 2

Caesar, William Bendix, Ernest Borgnine, and Jackie Gleason. He is a stock character, a comic for whom we have ready a set of stock responses. Joe at home or at the bowling lanes is totally apart from the bigot and murderer, and so the domesticating context cannot act to refute him.

We cannot pass by the attempted conversion of comic heavy into bigot-hero without noting the appearance, soon after *Joe*, of *All in the Family*. Archie Bunker is clearly another descendant of Jackie Gleason's Ralph Cramden and a euphemism for Joe.[18] *All in the Family* works rhetorically in very much the same way as *Joe*, by setting up Archie with a particular anti-social attitude at the beginning of a show and then "proving" by narrative development that Archie is wrong. And as with *Joe* one of the major contradictions in *All in the Family* is its implied snobbery: Archie is asked to give up his bogotry but he is also told to stay in his place, to respect the class system that renders him a comic butt.

I have argued that there is a contradiction between Joe's bigotry and his comic familiarity. We would expect such a contradiction to be resolved in favor of one of its poles or transcended by the structure of the complete film. Since the contradiction has to do with the question of authenticity, a major issue in film theory, we might expect some insight to be provided by a close look at the visual style of the film. A close inspection of the visual images shows that the filmic style fails to resolve the film's contradictions.

Joe was filmed in New York City, on forty-two authentic locations, we are told.[19] Yet the style of the filming does not permit the location shots to realize fully the authenticity of their locations, so they come off looking like cheap studio sets. Because the film was shot in color, often at night or in dimly lit interiors, the camera was not able to pick up unstaged ambient visual activity. There is little camera movement and rarely more than one or two set-ups in a location shot. In most locations we see, in a given sequence, only one or two walls. The camera is typically in close to the characters, with two-shots or close-ups. And so a location is a brick wall, a phone booth, or a hallway. The screenplay is saturated with dialogue. Most of the time someone is talking, and most of the time the camera is in close picking up the talking face. This visual style is a contradictory mix of film and studio-television technique, the result of which is to cast doubt on the authenticity which the filmmakers have so carefully established as one of the major premises of the film. The visual style of *Joe*, expressing the filmmaker's implied view of the world, is compromised, indecisive, and inauthentic when set against the authentically expressed racism of the central character. The filmmaker is therefore less convincing than that part of his own creation that the film is meant to refute.

Set against Joe's bigotry, the rest of the film is a formally unsuccessful attempt to create a counter-rhetoric. The counter-rhetoric fails because of the weakness of its filmic realization—a failure of narrative logic, of film style, and a failure of trying to have it both ways, trying to play Joe for laughs and for shock, a gambit that founders on its own snobbish hypocrisy about the nature of white racism in America's lower middle class.

The film fails to provide any consistent moral base from which to launch its rhetoric. Compton is a hypocrite, Joe a vicious boob. Their wives are

cowardly bitches, Frank is a dope peddler. Compton's daughter Melissa is a sentimental neurotic. And if we turn away from the characters to look for a moral ally in the filmmaker, we find an aesthetic of pornography, shock, and despair.[20] In what is clearly a rhetorical shape we can find no consistent, fully realized rhetorical position. Instead there is the image of a social evil doing battle with a parade of *ad hoc* and self-cancelling pop cliches.

The conclusion is not simply to blame the filmmakers for failing. They did fail and are responsible for their creation. But it is more interesting, and more important, to see the film as a mirror of American values, which may not provide, at this moment in history, the aesthetic and ethical materials out of which to construct the rhetoric which *Joe* so conspicuously fails to achieve. The failure may be in part a failure of American liberalism, with its materialism, its class snobbery, and its claim that social ills are a matter of "problems" and not of values. *Joe* forces us to ask whether the popular arts, as the repository of social images, are debased to the point where with the best will in the world they cannot escape the contradictions of which *Joe* is a victim. Is the rhetoric of the popular arts the rhetoric of a system of values which trivializes any protest made in its own terms? If the film can force us to confront that question and its implications, its failure may be a useful one.

NOTES

[1]For another discussion of the rhetoric of film, see Jerry Hendrix and James A. Wood, "The Rhetoric of Film: Toward Critical Methodology," *Southern Speech Journal*, 39 (Winter 1973), 105-22.

[2]Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "An Autopsy of the Rhetorical Tradition," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 64-77; Walter Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964); Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Thomas W. Benson and Gerard Hauser, "Ideals, Superlatives, and the Decline of Hypocrisy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59 (February 1973), 99-105.

[3]Formal commitments become rhetorical when and insofar as they take on moral force. As purely formal contracts they partake of poetic. But in practice, all formal commitments may arguably have a rhetorial dimension. For example, genre influences both form and response.

[4]Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).

[5]It will be evident from the foregoing that I am proposing to discuss film rhetoric without first seeking a definitive position on "film language." In my view such a procedure avoids an unnecessary tangle of theoretical problems that frequently have little to do with film criticism and are not logically prior to rhetorical criticism. This paper is influenced by but makes no claim to represent orthodox semiology or structuralism. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 65-67; Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

[6]Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 18-20, 33-37, 60-74.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 300.

[8]Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972),

pp. 109-59; Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 116-54.

[9]Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), and *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947); Vladimir Nilsen, *The Cinema as a Graphic Art*, trans. Stephen Garry (New York: Hill and Wang, n.d.); Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 60 (February 1974), 1-13; Ted Perry, "A Contextual Study of M. Antonioni's Film *L'Eclisse*," *Speech Monographs*, 37 (June 1970), 79-100.

[10]But there are even broader senses in which criticism might be called rhetorical. In its narrowest sense rhetorical criticism has been taken as the analysis and evaluation of verbal works which are essentially or substantially persuasive. Such criticism restricts itself (a) to certain methods of arguing (b) about a certain class of events. But the boundaries of both methods and event may usefully be violated in the search for insights about rhetoric. In its broadest sense, any commentary on a "rhetorical" form, or any "rhetorical" speculation about any artifact or event, may be a form of rhetorical criticism.

[11]Norman Wexler, *Joe* (New York: Avon Books, 1970), p. 34.

[12]*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1958).

[13]Cf. Kenneth Burke's remarks on "The Grotesque," in *Attitudes toward History* (rev. ed., 1959); rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 57-69; also Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 405.

[14]Wexler, *Joe*, pp. 34-35.

[15]On the subject of the film's climactic massacre, it is interesting to note how often in the films that welcomed the 1970s a film ends by showing its central character making a gesture which repudiates social order in the name of social order. Joe murders children; Harry (*Dirty Harry*) shoots the "liberal" murderer and throws away his own badge of office; Popeye (*The French Connection*) shoots a fellow cop; the Stampers brothers (*Sometimes a Great Notion*) tow their raft of logs past the unionized town with their dead father's amputated arm, middle finger upraised, lashed to the mast of their tugboat.

[16]Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; rpt. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962) pp. xvii-xxv, 127-70.

[17]Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 113-15; Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936).

[18]The formula for these shows is standard. The comic heavy is played off against a sidekick or antagonist (Flintstone-Barney; Gleason-Carney; Curran-Compton; Archie-Michael). Two married couples mirror and support one another. The scene is a stage set of which we never see the fourth wall. The comic heavy sets off the action by blundering into trouble with a perpetual comic hubris.

[19]By Judith Crist, in an "Introductory Review" of the screenplay; Wexler, *Joe*, p. 11.

[20]For an exploration of the relation between pornography and political despair, see Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "Politics and Pornography," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59 (December 1973) 413-22.

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