

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale

Language is a system of communication between senders and receivers to achieve various purposes. Senders often make use of both elaborate choices of words and visual images to help them communicate successfully, that is, to get the receivers to interpret or react to their message as desired. Particularly in films, it is also important for filmmakers to express their ideas clearly and concisely by using appropriate choices of words and images. Tony Rose, who wrote *The Complete Book of Movie Making* (1972) contends that apart from the mechanics of movie making such as how to operate a camera and how to plan and arrange a series of shots in a way that will make sense on the screen, filmmakers ought to learn the fundamentals of film “language” as well.

As a genre of media, films serve not only as an artistic way of communication which provides entertainment but also as a means to influence audiences in subtle ways. In other words, film is like a literary work in that it can be enjoyed and at the same time communicates powerful ideas and values through the dialogues, cinematography, acting, and soundtrack. As soon as movies are presented, the reality is constructed through the filmmaker’s framing technique. As Rose suggests, “...[Y]ou (filmmakers) are the one who must decide what the audience will look at...The film medium gives you this unique power to guide their attention... stressing what you consider important and ignoring what you consider irrelevant”(17). Thus, with or without the audiences’ awareness, films can affect the film watchers’ attitudes

and behaviors. People's decisions about how to live and what sort of person to become will be made in reference to social pressures and normative expectations and films are an important contributor to such social codes. They are even a force for social control. In this sense, films can affect audiences in subtle ways and cannot be overlooked as mere entertainment. This is to say that a film can be regarded as a kind of social discourse.

To create awareness in the audience, discourse analysis is an essential means of exposing the fact that a story seems to exist in a cinematic world, and that this story has been constructed through language by the filmmakers. According to Guy Cook (1989), discourse is “[p]hilosophy, psychology and psychiatry, sociology and anthropology, artificial intelligence, media studies, literary studies-which often examine their object of study-the mind, society, other cultures, computers, the media, works of literature-through language” (12-13). It is therefore reasonable to state that discourse study is a crucial means for understanding films. Then, Cook in *The Discourse of Advertising* (1992), mentions that in fact, language has to exist within the context of communication, and further states that discourse is “[t]ext and context together, interacting in a way which is perceived as meaningful and unified by the participants” (2). Furthermore, he remarks that in discourse analysis, one has to pay attention specifically to both the society in which the discourse exists and the purposes of the discourse participants. Based on the concept of discourse, film is regarded as a construction, not only by the technical personnel such as the director or cameraman but also by the larger institutions like Hollywood. Nowadays, film is a genuine expression of popular tastes. Major motion pictures today are always test-

marketed to see if they appeal to audiences. Hollywood's musical films are one of the most successful film genres in giving audiences pleasure as well as communicating certain ideas behind the production itself. Therefore, it is quite interesting to study how the appeal in musicals influences and manipulates film watchers by looking at a musical as a discourse and analyzing the language used in it.

Chicago (2002), directed by Rob Marshall, is one of the best recent musical movies, enchanting audiences with an intoxicating blend of expressionist crime scenes and drama with exciting dances and wonderful music. Moreover, the female casting of this new film adaptation is excellent. The three main actresses, Renee Zellweger (Roxie), Catherine Zeta Jones (Velma), and Queen Latifah (Mama Morton), earned several Oscars and Golden Globe nominations. The film also received many awards and nominations for excellent cinematography and film productions (www.amazon.com). Adapted from Bob Fosse's stage musical, *Chicago* is set back to the jazz age of the 20s. It is a story of a chorus girl, Roxie Hart, who shoots her unfaithful lover. Landing in jail, she meets Velma Kelly, another chorus girl and murderess, who enjoys media attention and legal manipulation with the help of her attorney, Billy Flynn. Once Flynn takes Roxie's case as well, Velma finds herself old news as Roxie is now the most famous murderess in Chicago. Besides getting out of jail, Roxie also wants to become a star. The two murderesses, Velma and Roxie, go through a series of attempts at getting their own freedom and fame. In this movie, the story follows the lives of criminal women, living in the tough city of Chicago in the 1920's. The struggle for liberation of the main female characters is clearly seen through the professional techniques of film and musical conventions at a

superficial level. However, at a deeper level, the opposite image, that is the oppression of these women by the society as represented by the filmmaker can still be detected, especially in the expressionistic visual language of the film. Therefore, through the concept of discourse, it would be worthwhile to study the notions of female liberation and oppression together with how such notions are constructed and presented in the film. It is hoped that this study will be an academic source for readers to learn the mind-set of the filmmakers based on their film mechanisms.

1.2 Purposes of the study

- 1.2.1 To observe the construction of female liberation and oppression in the film *Chicago* (2002).
- 1.2.2 To study how mechanisms of verbal and non-verbal language are used to liberate or oppress of women in the film.
- 1.2.3 To highlight the significance of theories used in media discourse analysis by studying how a film can frame audiences' perception.

1.3 Hypothesis

This paper argues that although in the literal sense, the film *Chicago* (2002) portrays the liberation of women, some cinematic conventions such as visual, musical and expressionist mechanisms seem to represent female oppression.

1.4 Research questions

1. Does the film *Chicago* (2002) portray the notions of female liberation or oppression?
2. What mechanisms does the film use in constructing liberation or oppression of women?
3. What are the ideologies inscribed in the film in relation to liberation and oppression of female?

1.5 Scope of the study and Methods

This paper studies the film *Chicago* (2002) as a discourse and focuses mainly on the use of verbal and visual language in representing the liberation and oppression of women in the film. The notions of liberation and oppression are examined through the film's structure, dialogue, visual images and songs. Regarding the verbal parts, the primary theory is from Guy Cook's *Discourse* (1989) which suggests both formal and contextual links as the ways of approaching language. Regarding the visual parts, general film cinematic techniques such as points of view, shots, sizes, angles, lightings, colors and signs are considered to accompany and illustrate the film analysis. The "gaze" in feminist film theory of Laura Mulvey (1990) is used as a means to demonstrate imbalance power between male and female characters in the film as well. Furthermore, elements of musicals and Expressionism are also examined as a means to understand the film techniques at a deeper level.

1.6 Application of Advantages

It is hoped that this study will enhance the understanding of media discourse analysis as a practical field of linguistics. The study can also be used as an academic source for readers to understand the mentality of the film producers based on their film techniques. This study could also be an important step towards creating awareness for many film watchers so they will not let such an entertainment control their thinking.

1.7 Definitions

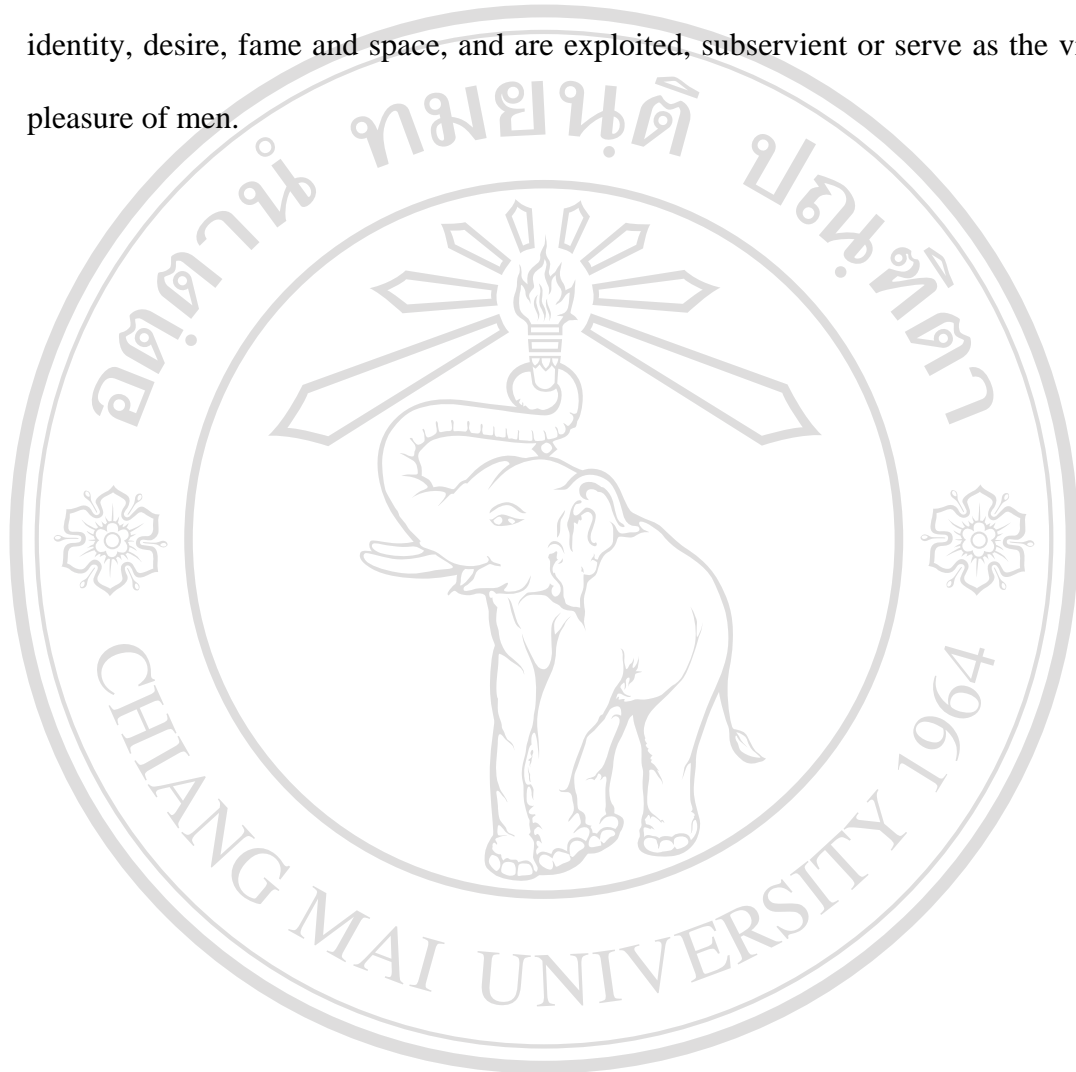
Verbal mechanism refers to the use of words in the film's dialogues and lyrics, which are expressed verbally.

Visual mechanism refers to non-verbal conventions which relate to sight.

Ideology refers to beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, and attitudes that are commonly shared and accepted by members of a society and serve as fundamental motives for their behaviors.

Liberation refers to the state of women achieving their own individuality, identity, desire, determination, fame and space but without being in confinement, servitude or the object of male gaze. Women are said to be liberated in the film if they achieve these conditions.

Oppression refers to any state where women are deprived of their own individuality, identity, desire, fame and space, and are exploited, subservient or serve as the visual pleasure of men.



ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
Copyright© by Chiang Mai University
All rights reserved