English 207: Introduction to Cultural Studies Video Traces Assignment

For the video traces assignment, groups of students will verbally annotate a clip from a class film. The annotation should provide an analysis of how the scene's cinematic codes and contextual references produce particular ideological effects.

The video traces assignment involves three parts: preparation, group annotation, and evaluation.

Part I: Preparation (20 points)

Prior to collective discussion of the clip, individual group members should prepare a one- to two-page typed analysis of **one** of the following areas and a one- to two-paragraph answer to the ideology question. I've provided questions to guide your investigation of the each area, but feel free to address additional issues or disregard questions that do not apply to your scene. **Group members should email their analyses to each other and to me before the group's joint discussion of the scene**.

Narrative
- How does the scene work within the film's larger narrative pattern? Does it set up the story? Foreshadow later events or echo earlier ones? Present or develop a conflict? Represent a shift in goals? Depict the plot's climax or resolution?
- Does the scene encapsulate major oppositions at work in the film?
- What are the underlying issues in the scene? In other words, what is the scene "really" about? How does the scene communicate its "real" meaning?
- How does the scene's narrative contribute to the film's ideological stance?

Visuals I
- Is the setting realistic or stylized? What atmosphere does the setting suggest? Do particular objects or settings serve symbolic functions?
- How are the characters costumed and made-up? What does their clothing or makeup reveal about their social standing, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or age? How do costume and makeup convey character?
- What is illuminated, what is in the shadow? How does the lighting scheme shape our perception of character, space, or mood?
- How does the film cue particular reactions on the part of viewers (sound, editing, characterization, camera movement, etc.)? Why does the film encourage such reactions?

Visuals II
- What shot distances are used? What purposes do the shot distance serve?
- How do camera angles function? How do they shape our view of characters or spaces?
- How do camera movements function? What information do they provide about characters, objects, and spaces? Do they guide the viewer's eye toward particular details? Do they align the viewer's perspective with that of a character?
- What types of cuts are used? How are the cuts used (to establish rhythm, shift between characters, transition between spaces, mark passage of time)? Does editing comment on the relationships between characters and/or spaces?
- What is the music's purpose in a film? How does it direct our attention within the image? How does it shape our interpretation of the image?

Context
- What social, economic, industrial, political, and cultural conditions existed at the time of the film's production? Are these conditions reflected or alluded to in the scene?

- How is the film similar to and different from other films made during the same era?
- What does the reading assigned for the film tell you about the film's reception?
- What contemporaneous culture icons or symbols does the scene incorporate? Why does it do so?
- Do you see parallels between the film's contexts and the current day? How might these similarities influence our reading of the film?

Ideology (A Question for Everyone)
- Does the scene reinforce, question, or challenge dominant ideologies?

Part II: Group Annotation (70 points)

After group members review one another's preparation, the group will meet to collectively discuss the scene, respond to each member's analysis, and select elements to include in the verbal annotation. Although groups will have a wealth of material to work with, they will not be able to reproduce verbatim each member's entire analysis. Instead, groups will have to decide which elements contribute most significantly to the film's ideological project.

Once they have discussed the scene, groups will use the Video Traces program to complete a verbal annotation of the scene. The program allows users to record a voiceover onto the clip. As users provide commentary, they can freeze, fast forward or slow down the clip and use the mouse to point to or circle visuals of note. The program also lets users mute or lower the source clip's soundtrack.

While there is no single way to annotate a clip, groups should begin by defining the ideologies the film promotes, complicates, or subverts and outlining the methods by which the film accomplishes its ideological goals.

Groups should plan on producing 7-10 minutes of commentary, with each group member speaking roughly the same amount of time. Group members should identify themselves before beginning their commentaries.

The Video Traces software is available on Macintosh machines in Mary Gates 082, a restricted-use lab. The lab is open Monday and Tuesday 2:30-8:00 p.m., Wednesday and Thursday 2:30-9:00 p.m., Friday 2:30-7:00 p.m., and Sunday from 2:00-8:00 p.m. Groups that cannot meet at these times may arrange to check out a Macintosh laptop.

I will provide instructions on how to use the software; the lab attendants in Mary Gates 082 can also help should groups encounter problems.

The trace is due by 5:00 p.m. on the due date listed on the syllabus. Groups may burn their traces to a CD-ROM or save them on the machine in the lab.

Part III: Evaluation (10 points)

By the class meeting following the trace due date, each group member should email short answers to the following questions:
- What is the most effective aspect of the group's commentary? What would you change if you had the chance?
- How did your work on the project contribute to your ability to analyze the cinematic codes and ideological functions of film?
- Was the Video Traces software easy to use? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing a verbal commentary rather than a written analysis?
- If you could rewrite the video traces assignment, what elements would you keep, omit, or change?