

## **The Rhetorical Interlude in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity*: Suggesting a Model for Examining Rhetorical Discourse in Film**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay advances the concept of the “rhetorical interlude,” a means by which scholars and teachers may examine how rhetorical messages are embedded in films. To illustrate, this study includes an examination of the rhetorical interlude in the film *Gravity* (Cuarón, 2013) as the film’s protagonist, Ryan Stone, is visited by the apparition of her dead colleague, Matt Kowalski, who instructs her on survival in space and on the significance of moving on from personal tragedy. In a pattern of ghostly apparitions appearing in perplexing outer space situations, *Gravity* situates scientific complexity as capable of being transcended with the help of supernatural assistance. We examine the rhetorical purpose of the climactic speech in the film, which is a vernacular reframing of scientific complexity in order to make abstract concepts more accessible. We argue that the film offers a practical and understandable answer to scientific complexity, enhancing the film’s themes of humanity conquering mortality and the unknown through vernacular simplicity. Finally, we conclude that this method of uncovering the persuasive potential of cinematic speech is an excellent pedagogical tool for higher education teacher-scholars and their students to learn about rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Rhetoric, Gravity, Science, Science Fiction, Film Aesthetics, Film Theory, Oratory

## INTRODUCTION

Numerous scholars have employed rhetorical theory to study how films communicate persuasive messages. The relationship between rhetorical theory and film is not new, going back to as early as John Harrington's (1973) writings about the rhetorical impact of cinema. In more recent years, cinematic rhetoric has been studied particularly in its potential for *affect*: "The affective experiences elicited by the film are homologous to those of the characters, thus encouraging spectators to share in rather than merely identify with [the characters'] states of being" (Ott & Keeling, 2011, p. 369). This is also what Christian Lundberg (2009) describes as "affective investment" (p. 387). The medium of film transmits affect freely to the audience, moving them into an affective state of being; the combination of film's use of loud volume, its darkened environment with minimum distraction, its capability for slow motion, and its use of stirring cinematic scores has the potential to create a visceral impact on the viewer.

As traditional and oratorical forms of discourse such as religion began to use media technology, film became a vehicle for rhetorical force (Milford, 2010). The rhetorical power of film in social movements has also been explored (Brinson, 1995; Bert, 2007; Olson, 2013; Ryan-Bryant, 2020). Additional research argues that cinema has the power to influence legal discourse (Schulte, 2012). Scholarship on film and rhetoric contains many ways to understand film as a model for public discourse. For example, Davies, Farrell, and Matthews (1982) constructed a model for linking cinematic discourse to Jungian archetypes: "Just as the human psyche—through archetypal symbols...film is similarly a balance between the rational...and irrational" (p. 332). Some studies have applied contemporary rhetorical theory to the study of cinema, such as Barry Brummett's (1984) exploration of horror films and Robert Terrill's (1993, 1999) study of *Batman*, supplemented with Kenneth Burke's (1969) concept of "equipment for living." Other similar studies apply Kenneth Burke's writings to contemporary film (Lundberg, 2009; Ott & Bonnsetter, 2007; Rushing, 1985; Yergensen, 2006) and mediated communication (Brummett, 1984).

Key voices in exploring the relationship between rhetoric and cinema is that of Brian L. Ott and colleagues (Ott & Burghardt, 2013; Ott & Keeling, 2011). Ott (2013) draws larger patterns of rhetoric's potential influence when on-screen, such as potential economic opportunity, as it is shown that film assists in the construction of "cognitive mapping" (p. 259). Ott and Burghardt's (2013) findings extend into the film's potential influence on worldview and lifestyle: "[We] see criticism ... as part and parcel of a pedagogical practice designed to engage the lived experiences of individuals and to promote agentive citizenship in an increasingly globalized world" (p. 29).

As seen in the literature, media studies and film scholars have a history of grappling both with film as a rhetorical force and rhetoric as an underlying force in cinematic narratives. Yet, while film and rhetorical scholars have studied cinema's psychological impact on audiences, the appearance of rhetoric in the speech of the characters has yet to be studied in the film literature. Likewise, the concept of linking the psyche, praxis, and aesthetics in the exploration of rhetorical oration in film remains underexplored in the research and curricula of communication studies, media studies, rhetorical theory, and film theory and criticism. Further, rhetoric in contemporary culture tackles the same social challenges in public discourse as it did in ancient times, as illustrated by Josh Chase's (2022) treatment of Hip Hop paralleling the work of Roman rhetorician Quintilian. Anciently, rhetoric took on a central form to public life and politics, implying a call for "modern cultural productions to reflect contemporary issues ranging from love and war to narrative technique and gender in a new light" (Day & Haller, 2014). There remains a need, therefore, for a systematic way to explore how film uses rhetoric at diegetic and extradiegetic levels because "the world of popular culture and mass media is a common immersion for most students" (Culton & Muñoz, 2016, para. 3).

This essay explores how rhetorical speech occurs in film. We propose as a method of textual interpretation *the rhetorical interlude*, a schema through which scholars can examine how rhetoric is used in cinema, taking

into account its aesthetic affordances (visual and sonic) as well as the didactic function of that rhetoric in the advancement of the narrative of the film. The rhetorical interlude is also oriented toward pedagogy—it is a model that helps teachers address oratorical theory, aesthetic form, and contemporary popular culture in the classroom. Further, the rhetorical interlude allows disparate disciplines to be examined together in a cohesive interlinking of classical humanities theory and contemporary practice in popular culture, offering pedagogical tools in both cultural analysis and media practice, and expanding the “parlor of the 21st century” that otherwise “would be unrecognizable to classical and Enlightenment rhetoricians” (Tinajero, 2020, p. 17). The following essay explores the rhetorical interlude in the context of the 2013 science fiction film *Gravity*. We believe that the schema may be applied to other films that showcase traditional oratorical forms of rhetoric as well.

### **THE RHETORICAL INTERLUDE**

In theorizing the rhetorical properties of films, critics can look to the cinematic moments of oratory or, when characters deliver speeches to other characters. The technological affordances of cinema amplify the potential of these scenes for persuasion; the production elements that surround these interjection scenes, such as preparation and delivering of acting, visual and sonic aesthetics (Perez, 2019), cinematography, quality screenwriting, and other production values all contribute to their rhetorical power. All of these elements work together to situate a rhetorical interlude, which we define as a key moment of didactic rhetorical discourse that is intended to present opportunities for audience reflection. Rhetorical interludes, in short, are made possible by cinema's narrative form and production styles. Yergensen (2007) identifies them as narrative loci that “[are] concerned with the cultural and political climate [that] surround the context of a film” (p. 22). More specifically, they are “public address forms of expression within the heart of a film [which] are ripe for micro analysis” (p. 22). Additionally, because rhetorical interludes generally communicate a climactic potency, much of the film must be spent building the ideal conditions for that rhetorical interlude to take place. In other words, the narrative, sonic, and aesthetic elements of the film must work in concert to prime the audience for the rhetorical interlude.

This essay expounds upon and articulates the parameters of a model that has been vaguely theorized but never clearly articulated in the literature. For example, Yergensen's (2007) initial description is somewhat perfunctory—although it proposes the model, it is lacking a deeper discussion about the ways that rhetorical interludes are iterated in cinema and their related implications. One of the objectives of this essay is to develop the rhetorical interlude as a model for understanding the relationship between dyadic interaction at the diegetic level, the aesthetic affordances of cinema, and the rhetorical dimensions of the performed discourse within that scene. Rhetorical interludes are didactic because they operate in intimate moments, often comprised of moral counsel between characters. These cinematic speeches, then, though ostensibly intended only for the characters who receive them, are also offered by proxy to the audience who is situated to identify with those characters. These interludes are performed dialogues, exuding a strength that is not only limited to traditional, pulpit-style discourse, but also carefully crafted and intimate, dyadic conversation.

### **THE RHETORICAL INTERLUDE AS SCHEMA**

The rhetorical interlude model possesses a number of elements in structure, language, and plot that enable the rhetorical potential of a film. First, the film's setting is central to the preparation of the rhetorical interlude and the development of the protagonist's exigency, which can manifest in plot development, cinematography, character development, character relationships, and so forth. Second, the plot will center on ensuring the credibility of the interlude's orator. Third, the interlude is performed often not by the hero, but

by a character who is associated with them; protagonists as associates or mentors, are portrayed as being in need. As a result, the audience and main character who both receive the rhetorical interlude are summoned for action by someone with more wisdom than them. Therefore, the general ignorance of the protagonist is assumed in the plot and the interlude is the moment when a protagonist experiences crucial epiphanies that will develop the plot. Fourth, the interlude is a behavioral pivot for the main character, and its extent is often measured by how the protagonist responds to being persuaded. Fifth, because the interlude is the pivot point for the character's behavior, it is the moment of alignment between exigencies for the character and the audience. Finally, the interlude introduces a poignant and didactic insight necessary for the main character (and audience) to complete their journey. Further, enemies and villains in the narrative are typically oblivious to the protagonist's newly acquired wisdom, and victory for the protagonist is therefore assured as the plot moves toward its conclusion.

In the following section, we address one of the iterations of rhetoric: its vernacular form. This is important for our pending analysis as vernacular rhetoric is often used to frame the rhetorical interlude in order to make the speech accessible to the viewer.

### **Vernacular Rhetoric**

Vernacular rhetoric can be understood as reactionary to the public discourse delivered by the privileged and powerful; its particular brand of power emerges from its communal nature, which is both part of and emerges from its simple and compelling style (Hauser, 1999). It appears especially where the complex language of public policymaking exists and is therefore often impenetrable to the uneducated listener. Vernacular rhetoric employs simple language and a conversational style and its form leads to simple solutions. It is the opposite of the rhetoric of expertise, which can be cold, authoritative, and jargon-heavy. Vernacular rhetorical study presents a fascinating opportunity for analysis when it is supplemented and enhanced by the aesthetic affordances of cinema. As this study demonstrates and as argued by Larsen (2017), scientific complexity complicates and can disturb the relationship between scientific and non-scientific communities, and the significance of providing accessible language for general audiences of scientific processes is portrayed as essential in *Gravity*.

In the following section, we examine how the rhetorical interlude in the 2013 film *Gravity* uses vernacular rhetoric to solve complex technological problems. In the film, the cold, mechanical tone of technical rhetoric signifies danger and dread; this connection is evidenced by the changes of language that are seen as the levels of danger that the protagonist faces change. *Gravity* interweaves personal despair with misunderstanding of technical science, creating a narrative of distrust for technical language and therefore a justified demand for scientific simplicity. We also argue that this rhetorical interlude, in its vernacular form and even with cinematic sophistication and ornamentation, offers an accessible way to transcend what is scientific and technically impossible, and ultimately offers value and relief regarding assumptions of the afterlife.

### **TEXT OF ANALYSIS**

*Gravity* (2013) was highly celebrated during the 2014 film awards season; it was nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award and won seven others (Imdb.com, August 7, 2020). The film tells the story of Dr. Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock, an engineer who is isolated in space after the ship she is working on is destroyed by shrapnel from a Russian missile strike. Her only help is Lt. Matt Kowalski, played by George Clooney, who assists Stone in getting back to earth through his heroic sacrifices and through offering instructions, though posthumously, for flying the ship that he gives her as he visits her again after his death. His instructions are a rousing, inspirational speech that he delivers when it appears that Stone's fate is a sad and lonely death. In the interlude he explains how to operate the ship and, perhaps more importantly, inspires

Stone to continue pressing on despite the sadness she feels due to the loss of her daughter. The film takes place as she is simultaneously physically stranded in space and also emotionally distressed in her need to transcend her personal tragedy. Both of her problems are addressed in the film's interjecting rhetorical interlude as Kowalski's speech provides solutions to both problems.

### **Science Fiction and Ghostly Visitations**

To understand the context of *Gravity*'s rhetorical interlude delivered by an apparition, the context of science fiction cinema and ghostly apparitions needs to be understood. Specific to this study, we agree that science fiction is the medium for projecting humanity's relationship with technology (Kim, 2019), which *Gravity* also grapples with. Science fiction cinema also often explores the relationship between the mysteries of space and the idea of an afterlife, which is manifest in protagonists' hallucinations as they face the loneliness and daunting mysteries of outer space. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), astronaut David Bowman experiences an end-of-the-film, climatically abrupt confrontation with an older version of himself.

A similar ghostly experience happens in *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) as astronaut Cooper and his daughter Murphy both realize that the ghostly activity Murphy experienced as a child was actually from Cooper himself when he enters a different dimension of space later in the film. Protagonists' intimate familiarity with visiting apparitions is also shown in Dr. Chris Kelvin's deep space hallucinations of his dead wife in the movie *Solaris* and its remake (Tarkovsky, 1972; Soderberg, 2002). Apparitions serve important functions in films, appearing in scenes that provide direction by offering epiphanies to protagonists and viewers. In a Charles Dickensian way, apparitions in space give direction and clarity to main characters like Jacob Marley's interlude to Ebenezer Scrooge on the importance of living a life of generosity in *A Christmas Carol* (Dickins, 1988). In this same science fiction tradition of needing otherworldly advice, *Gravity* aligns the frustration of incompetence, personal tragedy, and the inherent vulnerability and danger of space, and ultimately shows transcendence over a situation with no apparent way out. The protagonist's crucial assistance comes from a vernacular rhetoric that shifts scientific technicalities into the realm of accessibility.

## **PRIMING THE AUDIENCE AND PREPPING THE INTERLUDE**

### **Real Time and Repeated Despair**

The right conditions must be created for a rhetorical interlude to maximize its offering to a character and the audience. In the case of *Gravity*, there are several elements in the plot that help prepare the audience for the rhetorical interlude. The running time of *Gravity* is around 91 minutes. This real-time depiction of Stone's life-threatening situation injects a feeling of authenticity into the film because her time sequence is nearly identical to that of the audience. The audience is only made aware of the film's few short jumps in time because of the reports from NASA headquarters that the rapidly moving shrapnel will do its damage every ninety minutes. The potential of shared trauma between character and audience also creates a sense of intimacy. Similar to how cinematic scores can communicate a sense of fear for viewers (Martin, 2019), shared time sequences connect the audience with the film's protagonists, and therefore both the viewer and the character are primed for an interlude.

Additionally, the extensively long single camera shots add to the feeling of authenticity; the trauma cannot be simply ignored as the audience must endure it alongside Stone. The intimate feeling of shared time is bolstered by these long takes. The first shot of the film, for example, runs continuously for nearly fifteen minutes. It follows Kowalski as he floats around his ship-repairing crew. Moments into the scene, Kowalski leads the audience to a view of the earth that recognizes the breathtaking beauty of the planet, and the scene foreshadows his importance as he speaks of the earth's majesty. As Kowalski declares, "You can't beat the view," the camera pans in a circular form, eventually returning back to Kowalski's face. His importance in the film

will come full circle, which parallels his wise, visually circular perspective of the earth. The display of continual long scenes without cutting to new camera angles invites the audience to follow the scenes in real-time, share trauma and burden with the protagonist, and also foreshadow the supporting character's eventual interlude.

The film leads Stone (and, by extension, the audience) through profound demonstrations of exhaustion and desperation. Stone's drawn-out panicked gasps for air in two early scenes demonstrate her ongoing physical trauma. Later in the film, Stone's failure to operate the ship during an attempted launch sequence compounds the potential audience-engaging interlude. Stone's fear, coupled with her apparent inability to fix the spaceship, further aligns the audience with her; it can be assumed that the vast majority of the film's audience lacks the ability to operate highly technical spaceships. The scene features Stone screaming as a result of her lack of technical skill. Her screaming echoes the feelings of the audience, who also have or can experience a feeling of dread that comes from the fear of imminent death. At a less immediate level, the visceral impact of this scene recalls a larger cultural fear—that of “modernity's gamble,” the tension between technical and scientific progress and its potentially devastating risks (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). The communicated feeling of dread creates an impact, not just because of Stone's precarious position, but because it evokes iconic images of technical failures and tragedies, such as the crash of the Hindenburg or, even more relevant, the Challenger explosion.

This dread takes root during the first traumatic scene as the audience accompanies Stone inside her claustrophobic mask as she is first thrust into space only moments after the singular camera shot that provided a breathtaking view of earth and a transcendent accompanying score. The audience is compelled to assume Stone's perspective by viewing the situation from inside her space mask, and therefore experiences the same panic as the protagonist. Through her eyes, Stone, the object of the film viewer's gaze, becomes de-objectified and then humanized as the audience sees her view of a terrifying space that is vast and silent as the scene lacks the comfort of a musical score. The fear associated with being helplessly propelled into space alone becomes amplified sonically as well; her loud, panicked breathing accompanies her view of nothing but open space. In this scene, the earth's beauty can no longer be observed. Stars are unobservable from her view. Her only relief is in the form of Kowalski's voice that eventually comes over the radio.

Audience sympathy for Stone continues to grow as she is further humanized through this shared trauma experience. Early in the film, after the initial hit from the speeding debris that is circling the earth, Stone and Kowalski begin to make their way toward the Russian space station with nothing but Kowalski's jetpack, which is nearly depleted of fuel. During this scene, Kowalski asks Stone about her life and background, which also satisfies the audience's curiosity. This conversation provides essential context for the rhetorical interlude that follows.

Kowalski asks Stone if she has anyone “down there,” on Earth. With the soundtrack becoming progressively more somber in this scene, Stone responds, “I had a daughter,” then proceeds to describe to Kowalski the tragic death of her daughter. The camera shots intermittently oscillate between Stone's sober facial expressions and the view from Kowalski's position as he looks down at the earth while he is next to her. The mirror view on Kowalski's arm presents him as a divine character, guiding Stone through the perils of an environment over which she has virtually no control. Stone appears small on Kowalski's mirror and at his mercy, as if she were a figurine in his hand. The discussion of Stone's daughter is abruptly put on hold as Kowalski's attention is drawn to their now-close proximity to the space station they are pursuing.

The focus of the film then moves squarely onto Stone's state of mind; her tendency to panic and her lack of confidence in her ability to survive are essential to the film. Ironically, she has very advanced scientific equipment in her hands and yet she is unreachable by others both physically and emotionally, as she has shut down her ability to have relationships with other people. These factors demonstrate the need for discourse that provides relief and direction for Stone. The discussion of her daughter's death and Stone's subsequent state of mind has thus been earmarked for the audience to review at a later time during the rhetorical interlude.

### **Womb Imagery and Symbolic Weeping**

The theme of unconsciousness repeatedly emerges throughout the film, demonstrating Stone's psychological anxiety and corporeal trauma. The cinematography carefully anticipates the interlude as Stone takes on the symbolic qualities of an unborn baby, floating in the air and seemingly unconscious. After Kowalski is fatally detached from Stone and subsequently floats to his death, Stone narrowly escapes her second disaster and barely makes it inside the Russian space station in time to use the abandoned Russian ship's oxygen. After removing her space suit, she rests as her body assumes a fetal position, floating in a circular form as the sun shines on her through the window. Accompanying her deliverance from her space suit, gentle music evoking a lullaby plays as she floats in what seems like slow motion. This womb metaphor suggests that Stone is not yet ready to be delivered or to become a new person—she is not yet ready for the interlude.

Her symbolic digression into deeper and more frequent levels of unconsciousness continues throughout the film. Minutes after her awakening from a floating fetal position, the womb and slow-motion imagery returns again when she is knocked unconscious by debris inside the ship. Then, later and just before the interlude is delivered, Stone turns the power off on the ship and prepares herself to die. She has accepted that she is incapable of piloting the ship safely back to Earth. It is in this sleepy state that the rhetorical interlude is delivered. The accumulation of her troubles, despair, and desperation provide the appropriate setting and warrant for the interlude to take place.

Another early element in the film that sets the conditions for the interlude is the accompanying soundtrack. It sonically enhances Stone's sense of despair as she prepares for death in the scene prior to the interlude. Tender lullaby music accompanies her while she cries, pleads on the radio for rescue, and expresses regret that she was never taught to pray. Her rate of speaking slows down as she folds her arms and appears to embrace death. Like a child being prepared for sleep by a parent singing a lullaby, the music's poignant tone lulls Stone into her unconscious state. Although this is unclear at first, she enters a vulnerable dream state as the music dissipates. She is prepared at this point to be instructed, and Kowalski is about to miraculously return from the dead to deliver the rhetorical interlude.

### **Kowalski's Ethos Derived from Mystical Status**

Understanding the relationship between the speaker and the audience is an important aspect of rhetorical potency; in *Gravity*, the relationship between Kowalski and the audience is important to the story. He provides most of the rare feelings of relief in the film. Kowalski takes on the role of humorist, leader, and sacrifice. His role as comfort-giving agent is disappointingly snuffed out when he dies rather early in the film. This sudden change leaves the audience in the grips of despairing anxiety for much of the film. During most of the film and up until the interlude, Stone is not good company; her terror precludes any warmth or likeability. Her answers to Kowalski's questions are short and cold. She is emotionally distant and pessimistic about her own ability to solve problems.

In contrast, Kowalski is portrayed as amusing and encouraging—in short, as a nice traveling companion. Early in the film he irreverently plays cowboy music as he helplessly but whimsically floats off to his own death. Then, in his posthumous return, he jokingly celebrates his record for the longest jetpack float in space history while he sips vodka. One character's anxiety and loneliness is the opportunity for the other's comfort and mentorship. One character is ineffectual both socially and technically. The other is charming, charismatic, seemingly death-defying, and capable of offering *vernacular* explanations as he eloquently offers simple answers to technical complexities to Stone and the audience.

In the scene just before Kowalski's disappearance and presumed death, he encourages Stone to continue to fight for survival. The film leads viewers to assume he dies as he floats out of view while running out of oxygen. Presumed dead but not entirely sure, he becomes a mystery to the audience, floating perilously

somewhere in space but certainly missed by both Stone and the audience. The idea of hearing Kowalski's voice again is welcome amidst Stone's relentless desperation and panic.

Kowalski's return is a spectacle that defiantly challenges the impossible. At the advent of the interlude, Kowalski surprisingly opens the door of the ship to join the discouraged Stone in a move that, were it real, would kill Stone instantly because she is not wearing her helmet. The prelude in which the film spells out the dangers of space is particularly significant: "At 600 KM above planet Earth the temperature fluctuates between +258 and -148 degrees Fahrenheit. There is nothing to carry sound. No air pressure. No oxygen. Life in space is impossible." This preface to the story clearly shows the impossibility of Kowalski's return, and the danger of opening the spaceship door in space has been made known to the viewer. Therefore, the setting for the interlude immediately casts doubt on whether it is a conscious, physical conversation.

With Kowalski's credibility already established and enforced by the earlier divine-like imagery of him holding Stone in his hand, along with his sacrificing his life for her as he disconnected his suit from Stone's and allowed himself to float away from the ship in order to give her enough leverage to safely secure herself to the ship, it becomes apparent that Stone is going to have a conversation with someone who is defying the physics of space. At this point in the film, Kowalski becomes something greater than an experienced astronaut. He becomes a mystical persona with a message of otherworldly significance. The established status for Kowalski further primes the audience for the rhetorical interlude that is to follow.

## THE RHETORICAL INTERLUDE IN GRAVITY

As mentioned earlier, language related to scientific expertise is complex and often inaccessible to viewing audiences. This creates a divide between speaker and audience as they attempt to explain complex scientific ideas. The technical language in the film relating to operating a spacecraft could appear daunting, leading lay audiences to crave a simplified explanation. As vernacular communication is appealing because it is intimate, engaging, and informal, the scene's discussion allows for contrast between jargon-heavy complexities and the accessible descriptions in *Gravity's* rhetorical interlude.<sup>1</sup>

The film does not definitively clarify whether Kowalski is dead or alive during the interlude, though it later becomes apparent that he was not physically present with Stone because of his rapid disappearance after delivering his speech. During the interlude it is not apparent to Stone how he arrived to once again join her, what he intends to do, or what is happening during the confusing, surreal scene. This moment creates another moment of convergence between text and audience. Her shocked facial expression upon seeing him again is evidence of her confusion that she shares with the audience. Stone tries to speak to him, but struggles to find the words to make sense of what she is seeing; his mysterious appearance bewilders Stone and audience alike. Kowalski has now transcended his previous role as emotional and physical support for Stone. He is a manifestation of spirit, which will carry meaning for Stone in regards to her dead daughter. Despite this epiphany, Kowalski's interaction with her carries the same familiar tone of levity as before he drifted off to his death. Without greeting her directly, he first declares humorously, "Call Anatoly, tell him he's been bumped!" as Kowalski now supposedly holds the record for longest spacewalk. He chats with Stone, expresses gladness about her survival, and drinks the Russians' hidden vodka in celebration. At this moment, Stone's drawn-out despair is starkly juxtaposed with Kowalski's abrupt confidence that she will survive.

They begin by arguing about the technicalities of operating the spaceship. Kowalski suggests that he is going with her, "We're about a hundred miles to the Chinese station. A little Sunday drive." Stone insists that it will not work and that she cannot make the ship function. He continues to prod her, "Well, there's

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<sup>1</sup> Contrast, for example, the vernacular descriptions and overall accessibility of technical concepts offered in *Gravity* to the more abstract and denser descriptions of the physics of space and time in another space film, Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*.

always something we can do.” This is followed by his assertion that landing a ship is the same as launching, something she tried in simulation. Her rebuttal is additional reasons not to try, “I never got to land the simulator.” Kowalski’s response is simple: “But you know about it.” The argument continues as Stone replies, “And I crashed it every time!” Kowalski interrupts her stubborn responses and forces her to make a decision. As he gives a monologue, he also presents a metaphor, saying that living life is similar to operating a ship: “Listen, you want to go back or do you want to stay here? I get it, it’s nice up here. You can just shut down all the systems, turn out all the lights, and just close your eyes. And tune out everybody.” He then acknowledges how easy it would be to just turn the ship’s lights off:

Your kid died. It doesn’t get any rougher than that. But still it’s a matter of what you do now. If you decide to go then you’ve gotta just get on with it, sit back and enjoy the ride...Hey Ryan—it’s time to go home!

Stone then awakens from this dream-like state and turns to face Kowalski, but he is gone. He was an apparition with a posthumous rhetorical mandate similar to Jacob Marley’s charge to Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, to deliver a message that inspires change, to save the time left in life that can still be used, and to call for attitude and behavioral adjustments despite the protagonist’s tendency to be stubborn.

At the end of the interlude, Stone’s nonverbal reaction is apparent: a disgusted look on her face. This is triggered from Kowalski’s statement, “Your kid died. It doesn’t get any rougher than that.” Kowalski’s interlude has pinpointed a pivotal moment in the film. After Kowalski shows his awareness of what has caused her emotional shutdown, Stone does not open her eyes. She shakes her head at his audacious insertion of himself regarding the pain of losing her daughter. But the interlude has addressed the technical challenges Stone faces, which are symbolic references to the exigency at hand. His metaphor about her state of mind is connected to and intimately parallels her physical exigency of facing death in space. The two become intertwined and both able to be transcended.

### **Pivot of Behavior: Character’s Newfound Determination**

Attempting to use Kowalski’s advice to operate the ship, Stone finds that it works. The effect of his interlude then continues as she realizes that if he is correct about how to operate the ship, then this genuine experience also is evidence of her daughter’s posthumous existence. As Stone prepares the ship for departure, she continues her dyadic interaction with the deceased Kowalski, even though he is no longer on screen and never returns again in the film. She asks him to tell her deceased daughter, Sarah, that she loves her. The result of the interlude’s rhetorical objective has been immediate. The lullaby music that had accompanied her drift toward death just minutes before is replaced with increasingly upbeat instrumental music that represents her newfound instinct to survive. Her resolve comes from the rhetorical interlude, which is simple in style but resolute and stern, and is performed with emotion, humor, and personality. Kowalski’s comforting, vernacular speech makes the complex seem simple, and the overwhelming difficulty of technical processes becomes manageable.

Kowalski’s vernacular approach as a solution to both technical and personal problems becomes Stone’s framework for understanding and coping with her difficult situation. She endearingly speaks of her daughter’s shoes and of taking her “last ride.” Her sentences become short, simple statements with the inflection of her voice rising. She laughs easily and quickly. Her previous dry, unemotional eyes and blank facial expression rapidly transition into a more emotional state as she laughs and speaks with energetic inflection in her voice. Kowalski’s style of rhetoric has impacted her, and so Stone, as post-interlude camera shots take direct views of her face, speaks in the same playful language used by Kowalski. Notably, the technical rhetoric that he could have used with Stone is never referenced in his speech. Rather, he uses a vernacular style, one that the audience can also understand. This choice of language to fit the rhetorical situation indicates that the speech is not just to comfort the protagonist on screen, but also to offer emotional connection for the audience.

The effect of the rhetorical interlude is significant and immediately observable. Stone is witty, brave, and engages in problem solving in creative ways, such as using a fire extinguisher to float directionally in space and navigating buttons labeled in a language that she doesn't read. Finally, Stone adopts Kowalski's personality as she begins to retell and finish the story that Kowalski was never able to complete. He tried twice to finish the story but could not because life-threatening trouble arose that demanded his attention. The story is that he was once at Mardi Gras in New Orleans and saw his friend walking with a man, who he then realized was not a man at all, but a hairy woman, whose androgynous identity was initially difficult to distinguish.

After the interlude and as Stone is about to enter the earth's atmosphere as she has succeeded in operating the ship to return to earth, she attempts to tell Kowalski's humorous Margi Gras story, but only directly to the audience. It is important to note here that Stone is not connected to NASA or any other astronaut when she attempts to re-tell Kowalski's story. Her only audience is the film viewer, as she was Kowalski's only audience. As Stone attempts to finish Kowalski's story, though she does not know its end, she is cut off by the violent tumbling of the dropping ship. She abandons the story, then declaring as she prepares for her final descent to earth, "I'm ready!" As she takes on his communicative style, it is as if Stone has become Kowalski and the audience has become Stone. Transference of his problem-solving skills and approach to life has been complete.

### **Supernatural Means of Transcendence**

There are also supernatural dimensions to the pivotal speech. Kowalski's rhetorical interlude never explicitly mentions the possibility of an afterlife, but the implication is clear: if Kowalski still exists, so does Stone's daughter. If Kowalski is okay in the afterlife, so too is her daughter Sarah. Stone's anguished feelings related to her daughter's death is tempered after hearing the interlude because Kowalski presumably still exists. Kowalski's interlude transcends the technical in both prescribed action and persuasion. Implications include that a beautiful setting cannot always soothe a parent's broken heart, even when she is placed in space with breathtaking views of Earth, as though Kowalski provided an earlier tour of the Earth. However, visitations from the dead can indeed provide such an answer. Supernatural visitations function to overwhelm and overpower both technology and mortality, and they do so by adopting vernacular rhetoric.

The final scene of the film shows Stone emerging out of a lake after her ship safely lands. As she then swims to shore, she struggles to pull herself out of the water. Then, painfully and falling at first, she stands on her feet. The Oscar-winning soundtrack intensifies as she stretches out her arms, crying in a state of joy. Just before her triumphant struggle to her feet, which is difficult due to experiencing no gravity to being back on Earth, she whispers "thank you." Whether this expression is directed to a deity or to Kowalski, her reference is back to the moment of interlude that changed her understanding of her deceased daughter, the cosmos, and her capacity for transcendence and survival after loss.

Stone's brief performance of the evolutionary process as she climbs out of the water at the end of the film parallels her transcendence over the trouble of being trapped into a depressed state of despair. Before the interlude she lacked passion and was emotionally distant from everything around her. Here we have identified an essential theme of the film. *Gravity* is not an outer-space adventure as much as it is a film about the transcendence over pain due through perceived supernatural intervention. It is a private story. Hope for the afterlife emerges as an epiphany for Stone. Kowalski, an accomplished astronaut, only needs to speak in simple terms to provide resolution. Abstract advice to "just get on with it!" is the means for personal transcendence. The absence of Earth's gravity, which compels her to physically float in space, functions as a metaphor for her loss of liveliness because of the trauma of death. The overcoming of familial loss and safely flying back to Earth happen only as a result of the rhetorical interlude, demonstrating the birth theme coming full circle as she enters Earth as a new person.

Persuasion and instruction takes a traditional, oratorical form in our age when everyone is an orator via social media. *Gravity* represents a case for the vernacular availability of discourse to take on interpersonal

style, and the performance of persuasion is shown in the narrative and the protagonist's acceptance of the interlude. The personality of Kowalski's relatability, combining with Stone's new practicality amid scientific complexity, resolve the personal and technical exigencies threatening survival. The interlude in *Gravity* is manifested in the last words of the film as Stone revisits the interlude, the brief oration is crystalized as she has accepted her new purpose. Immediately following her verbalized "thank you," Stone steps in a small puddle of water, causing a splash onto the camera lens, which invites the audience to be impacted as was Stone. The transference of the rhetorical interlude's didactic potential is offered, an identification between Stone and audience becomes more apparent, and the rhetorical potential of the film becomes more pronounced.

### **MODEL FOR POPULAR CULTURE SCHOLARSHIP AND PEDAGOGY**

The rhetorical interlude in *Gravity* offers a contrast to more common forms of public discourse analysis. It is dyadic rather than oratorical. Amidst complex technical language and the perils of nature, it offers a place for problem solving, allowing for emotional distance from once-paralyzing exigencies.

*Gravity's* rhetorical interlude possesses a combination of brevity and style that appeals to the contemporary audience. Humor trumps articulation, wit surpasses complexity, and the colloquial challenges eloquence. It should also be noted that, ironically, this austere rhetorical style collides with *Gravity's* expensive and detailed production quality. While the film explores the gamble of modern technology, it is nevertheless technically exceptional, having won the Academy Awards for Best Cinematography, Best Visual Effects, Best Sound Editing, Best Sound Mixing, and Best Production Design. In this analysis, we align the technical and authoritative with the practical and vernacular, although the latter is accompanied by the faith-driven hope for an afterlife.

It is important for higher education teacher-scholars of popular culture to be able to explicate both rhetorical function and aesthetic form, largely driven in the rhetorical craft as observable for both scholars and students in the screenwriting process. The rhetorical interlude model intertwines pedagogical priorities in both classical rhetorical theory and contemporary practice in media production, enabling historical humanities to obtain the respective role that it has echoed over the ages of human inquiry.

While Kowalski has died, Stone continues to converse with him even after the interlude. She also fully accepts her Dickensian rebirth as a real experience and therefore begins to operate differently, both personally and in the way she operates the ship. In the intimacy of the rhetorical interlude, the film suggests a need for exploring the reality of death and the possibility of life after it. These existential answers are accompanied by skills and knowledge that are transferred during life-threatening exigencies, both technically in the physical setting and in the emotions of life's traumas, all of which are resolvable in the cinematic rhetorical interlude.

The rhetorical interlude is a portable tool for scholars and teachers. The need for rhetorical interjection is underscored by opportunities for persuasive discourse to frequently occur in cinema. Rhetorical interludes, then, are crucial moments for cinematic meaning. The scholarly importance of rhetorical interludes is that they allow for exploration of efforts for the promotion of change, establishment of nostalgia, enforcement of public memory, issuing of public warning, promotion of conscience and counsel, and the prescription for solace, among others. Scholarly analysis can be focused on the contexts of films, and subsequently rhetorical interludes' strategic structures can be understood as rhetorical effort worthy of scholarly attention. Additionally, acknowledging and examining the rhetorical interludes that exist allow teachers to discuss the potency of persuasive messages in films. In conclusion, when teachers address this method of textual interpretation, it reminds students of the larger point that films are more than "mere entertainment"—they are containers of rhetorical meaning.

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