RhetoricaScandinavica

Vol 30 / 2026

Tidskrift för skandinavisk retorikforskning

Nr. 91 – 2026

Abstract

RhetoricaScandinavica, ISBN 2002-7974
No 91, 2026, pp 26–44, Publisher: Retorikförlaget AB
https://www.doi.org/10.52610/rhs.v30i91.362

Author Amanda Adam, Ghent University, Belgium
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6198-3901
Prof. Dr. Kris Rutten, Ghent University, Belgium
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3170-1726

Title Vertical Clips and Insta Squares on the Big Screen: Aesthetic Identification in Teen Tech Films
["Vertikale klipp og Insta-rammer på stort lerret: Estetisk identifikasjon i teen tech-filmer"]

Abstract In today's digital culture, young adults actively engage with aesthetics as a means of self-representation and shared experience, especially through platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This paper examines how digital aesthetics are reflected in the teen tech film, a subgenre of young adult film that incorporates social media and digital interfaces into both narrative and visual form. Focusing on the Belgian film *Home* (Troch, 2016), the study employs Kenneth Burke's cluster analysis and dramatistic hexad to examine how digital aesthetic choices can impact affective modes of identification for teen audiences. By analysing vertical clips or Instagram-style frames in the visual language of this film, the paper argues that teen tech films do more than depict youth culture; they show how social media aesthetics can be employed rhetorically to construct (cinematic) forms of belonging and identification.

Keywords Teen tech film, digital aesthetics, cluster analysis, dramatistic hexad, identification, aesthetic affect

Amanda Adam, Ghent University, Educational Sciences, Belgium.
0009-0003-6198-3901 / amanda.adam@ugent.be

Kris Rutten, Ghent University, Educational Sciences, Belgium
0000-0003-3170-1726 / kris.rutten@ugent.be

Amanda Adam & Kris Rutten:

Vertical Clips and Insta Squares on the Big Screen

Aesthetic Identification in Teen Tech Films

In today's digital culture, young adults actively engage with aesthetics as a means of self-representation and shared experience, especially through platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This paper examines how digital aesthetics are reflected in the teen tech film, a subgenre of young adult film that incorporates social media and digital interfaces into both narrative and visual form. Focusing on the Belgian film *Home* (Troch, 2016), the study employs Kenneth Burke's cluster analysis and dramatistic hexad to examine how digital aesthetic choices can impact affective modes of identification for teen audiences. By analysing vertical clips or Instagram-style frames in the visual language of this film, the paper argues that teen tech films do more than depict youth culture; they show how social media aesthetics can be employed rhetorically to construct (cinematic) forms of belonging and identification.

Aesthetics and, more specifically, style have long been linked to the visibility and expression of youth cultures (see also Hebdige, 1979). In today's digital landscape, young adults increasingly engage aesthetically through the mediated presentation of online personas. This includes choices in fashion and lifestyle, often expressed through the rise of digital subcultures such as *cottagecore*, *e-girl*, and *dark academia* (see also Paßmann & Schubert, 2021; Schreiber, 2017). Through shared, platform-based practices, these forms of aesthetic engagement significantly influence how young people cultivate and express their personal tastes (see also Paßmann & Schubert, 2021; Schreiber, 2017).

As a result, the meaning of 'aesthetics' has expanded beyond institutionalised and art-historical understandings to encompass experiences in physical and digital environments. As rhetorical and media scholars have illustrated, digital artefacts

have increasingly shaped the way we understand, feel, and act (Berry et al., 2012; Hayles, 2000; McLuhan, 1964). In his work on the new aesthetic and post-digital rhetoric, Justin Hodgson (2019) analyses 'The New Aesthetic'—a creative movement characterised by human-technology artistic works—to "explore the New Aesthetic as a rhetorical ecology and to articulate its circulating intensities as operative guides for post-digital rhetoric" (p. 7). He demonstrates how new media practices produce "notable shifts in the practices of mediation and the corresponding aesthetic sensibilities of an audience" (p. 21) and stresses the importance of recovering the aesthetic perspective within rhetorical studies.

Building on this insight, this article argues that rhetorical criticism must not only attend to broad cultural movements but also to the concrete media forms and artefacts through which technological ecosystems produce affective engagement (see also Adam & Rutten, 2025). Whereas Hodgson examines the rhetorical effects of aesthetic movements and their formal features (such as the pixel aesthetic), this study turns to specific aesthetic conventions developed within social media platforms and investigates how they are mobilised rhetorically in teen tech films.

The analysis does not research young adults' media practices or audience reception directly. Instead, it focuses on the genre of the 'teen tech film' and proceeds from the assumption that the recognisability of social media logics—shaped through everyday engagement with platforms (TikTok, Instagram, etc.)—enables particular modes of (cinematic) identification. As Timothy Shary terms it, 'teen tech films' (2005) integrate new technologies such as social media into their narratives or visual design by adopting digital aesthetics[1] that mirror the daily online experiences of their young audiences.

To gain an in-depth understanding of digital aesthetic practices in this genre, the article offers a close rhetorical-aesthetic analysis of *Home* (Fien Troch, 2016), a Belgian film that exemplifies the teen tech film through its integration of mobile phone footage created by the actors themselves. The film's aesthetic strategies—particularly its use of smartphone videos and digitally mediated perspectives—blur the boundaries between productional authorship and character-driven mediation. This makes *Home* a productive case for analysing how digital aesthetics operate across formal, narrative, and affective levels. The film, thus, provides a profound exploration of the digitally mediated youth expression and embeds their expressions and experiences both in the formal and narrative structure of the film. This is underscored by the special mention from Film Fest Gent's Explore Zone Jury from 2016—a jury composed of young film enthusiasts who get to present an award to films that speak to them and their lived experiences:

> The film perfectly aligns with the world of Generation Y, portraying youth

1 Digital aesthetics refers here to platform-specific visual conventions and affordances that shape how content is produced, circulated, and perceived in digital environments. These include vertically oriented video formats designed for mobile phone screens (such as those common on TikTok or Snapchat), Instagram-style square framing, filters, and other stylistic markers that emerge from platform logics.

> culture in a layered manner from various perspectives. Troch succeeds in bringing characters to life despite the large number of them. The disconnect between children and their parents is depicted in a claustrophobic 4:3 format. Combined with the seamlessly integrated mobile phone footage created by the actors themselves, this results in a fusion of form and content. It is a film that will not leave any viewer indifferent. (Explore Zone Jury, 2016)

Despite the prevalence of digital aesthetic markers in contemporary teen films, scholarship has mostly focused on the ideological and representational content, rather than their aesthetic and affective power (Colling, 2014). Yet, as Klevan notes, "It is important not to fall prey to a popular misconception that aesthetics is equivalent to formalism" (2018, p. 410). Instead, we should recognise that film is "essentially an affective art form" (Tarvainen et al., 2015, p. 1) and analyses should therefore attend to the affective and experiential dimensions steered by narrative and aesthetic elements (Bordwell, 2012; Bordwell et al., 2010).

Recognising these (digital) aesthetic properties as rhetorical resources (Booth, 2004, p. xi) allows us to examine how visual and formal choices generate affective responses and facilitate identification beyond character alignment. As David Blakesley stresses: "film rhetoric—the visual and verbal signs and strategies that shape film experience—direct our attention in countless ways, but always to foster identification and all that that complex phenomenon implies" (2004, p. 3). However, identification in film extends beyond identification with the characters; it includes affective responses to aesthetic and formal properties themselves (see also Franco, 2023; Perez, 2019).

Building on Hodgson's (2019) insights on new aesthetic sensibilities, this study argues that rhetorical criticism must examine how digital aesthetic conventions structure affective (cinematic) identification. Rather than analysing audience reception directly, the article investigates how teen tech films mobilise these conventions rhetorically to shape cinematic identification. Methodologically, the study employs Kenneth Burke's cluster analysis[2] and dramatistic hexad[3] in a two-way analytical process. First, it examines how teen tech films incorporate and remediate digital-native aesthetics and artefacts into formal and narrative structures. Second, it analyses how these digital aesthetics function rhetorically to foster modes of identification. In doing so, I argue, digital aesthetics in teen tech films operate as a form of cinematic rhetoric that resonates affectively and aesthetically with digitally native audiences (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021; Bruns, 2008). This approach foregrounds aesthetic form before advancing interpretive claims about meaning or ideology, allowing identification to emerge from the analysis of how digital aesthetics operate within *Home* (2016).

2 An analytical method that charts "the symbols that cluster around (those) key symbols in an artefact" for a rhetor (Foss, 2004, p. 68).

3 The dramatistic hexad is more widely known in its first variant; the dramatistic pentad but with the addition of 'attitude' as a sixth analytical element; a methodological framework to identify the narrative 'actors' in a text and map their relations.

Methodology

While many rhetorical analyses of films—especially young adult films—offer ideological readings, this article applies Burke's principles (Slater, 2018, p. 6; Burke, 1966, 1969a, 1969b, 1973) to the aesthetic dimensions of teen tech films. It proceeds from the premise that, like language, film and digital videos are systems of symbols that infer and make meanings, not just through representation, but also through the affective responses they elicit in viewers. Drawing on Burke's notion of artefacts as 'equipment for living'[4] (Burke, 1973), I approach the film as a rhetorical artefact that illustrates how young adults engage with digital aesthetics across online and offline spheres. In this sense, *Home* illustrates how digital aesthetic practices can be mobilised rhetorically to foster (cinematic) identification.

Case Study

The article offers a close reading of *Home* (Troch, 2016) as a single case study. The film follows Kevin, a teenager recently released from a youth detention centre after serving a sentence for a violent encounter with peers. Upon his release, he moves in with his aunt and uncle in an attempt to rebuild his life. He forms a close bond with his cousin Sammy and their timid friend John, both of whom struggle with their own strained parental and peer relationships. John, in particular, is subjected to severe emotional, physical, and sexual abuse by his mother. Additionally, a romantic rivalry between Kevin, Sammy, and Sammy's girlfriend Lina further destabilises the group dynamic. As tensions within the families intensify and conflicts among the friends escalate, small acts of rebellion gradually lead to more serious transgressions. A final tragic chain of events culminates in John murdering his mother with Kevin and Sammy as witnesses.

The narrative provides the backdrop for themes of alienation, generational conflict, and the harsh realities of youth. Through a raw and realistic portrayal, *Home* explores the pressures and vulnerabilities of these teens while experimenting with the digital dimension of the characters and their experiences. The film's 4:3 aspect ratio—a narrow horizontal frame—creates an oppressive visual frame that often traps characters in the centre with little room to move. These classic, formally composed shots are intercut with mobile phone footage: vertical, handheld, fast and jittery clips made by the young actors themselves. These include impromptu skateboarding videos, group moments filmed on the streets or during parties, or moments of aggression captured by accident. This interplay between cinematic and "amateur" constructs a multi-protagonist narrative in which aesthetic form and content are inseparable, which showcases the complexity of being a teenager.

In addition to textual analysis, the study draws on paratextual materials provided by the film's distributor, including interviews with director Fien Troch and cast

4 Burke considers specifically literature and by extension other forms of art as equipment for living. These artistic products offer potential tools and strategies to navigate life and society. In this sense, for example film can teach us about (new) tendencies and trends in how we interact with each other and/or our context.

members published in the press kit and educational folder (JEF, 2016). These interviews offer insight into the filmmakers' intentions and production choices. While they are not subjected to full rhetorical analysis, they are used to contextualise key aspects of the film's aesthetic and affective strategies. Authorship is thus considered as part of the rhetorical situation, acknowledging production as a relevant factor in dramatistic analyses of artefacts (Kimberling, 1982, p. 11). This is especially pertinent as most of the mobile footage was unscripted and entrusted to the young adult actors.

Strategies of Data Analysis: Cluster Analysis, Dramatistic Hexad and Identification

Rather than subordinating aesthetic features to ideological interpretation, this study reverses that order[5]. It departs from a close analysis of aesthetic form—specifically mobile video aesthetics—and focuses on understanding these aesthetic forms on their own and within the 'text' before contextualising this within the affective engagement of audiences. This approach prioritises aesthetic effects before moving to broader interpretive claims.

The analysis proceeds in three stages (see Figure 1), moving from aesthetic surface to narrative structure and finally to audience engagement. After a cluster analysis, clusters (referred to by constructed titles) will be recontextualised within the film's narrative (through the dramatistic hexad) to understand their narrative functions. Finally, the clusters will be linked to the viewing experience through the concept of identification.

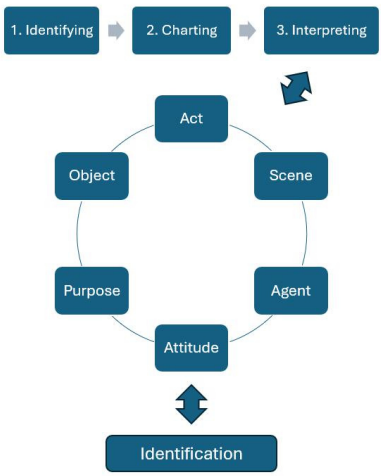

Figure 1: Illustration of the methodological framework.

5 Similar to Michael Leff's (1992) distinction between textual criticism and ideological criticism, this study prioritises the analysis of aesthetic form before situating these elements within narrative or audience contexts.

First, cluster analysis identifies dominant visual and stylistic elements that shape the film's formal language. While cluster analysis traditionally focuses on key verbal terms, scholars have demonstrated its applicability to visual communication (Foss, 2004b; Reid, 2004). Drawing on Reid's extension of cluster analysis to visual rhetoric, this study treats the mobile phone footage in *Home* as a "microcosm" of integrated aesthetic elements that serve rhetorical purposes (2004, p. 82). The cluster analysis involves three steps:

(1) *Identifying Key Elements*: Recurring visual motifs, stylistic choices, and thematic elements are identified, paying attention to both film and social media-specific characteristics.

(2) *Charting the Clusters*: These elements are mapped together in clusters to reveal patterns of visual and narrative coherence.

(3) *Interpreting Aesthetic Choices*: The clusters are interpreted in relation to the narrative structure (through the dramatistic hexad) and affective engagement (through identification). This analysis will help us see how the film's visual style and thematic choices contribute to its overall narrative and emotional effect (Foss, 2004b).

Second, Burke's dramatistic hexad is used to map the film's narrative and setting. Originally developed as the dramatistic pentad (1969a), the model analyses the 'grammar' of a symbolic act by stating what happens (the act), by whom it is carried out (agent), the setting in which the act takes place (setting) and the act's objective (purpose) (Foss, 2004b). By examining ratios between these elements, the critic gains insight into dominant terms, the act itself and underlying motives (Foss, 2004b). However, Burke added a sixth element: attitude (1969a). When applied to film analysis, the hexad allows for a more detailed examination of how characters' attitudes influence the narrative and how these attitudes contribute to the film's overall impact. This makes the hexad particularly useful for a more nuanced understanding of character development and its expression in films. Since parts of the visual language analysed are filmed by the 'characters', this element is especially relevant.

Finally, Burke's insights into identification are used to examine how aesthetic and narrative forms work together to engage the audience[6]. Unlike persuasion, which involves explicit appeals, identification often operates subconsciously, creating a subtle connection between the audience and the text (Blakesley, 2004, p. 15). This connection, however, is always in tension with the forces of division, highlighting differences even as it fosters unity (Blakesley, 2004, p. 15; Burke, 1969b, p. 22). Following Burke and Blakesley, this study treats identification not as straightforward alignment, but as a potentially ambivalent and dynamic process. This is

6 This study does not rely on empirical viewer reception data but provides a rhetorical criticism of the film as a rhetorical artefact (Foss, 2004b), departing from aesthetic and affective cues within the film itself to assess potential modes of identification.

especially relevant in teen tech films, where digital aesthetics potentially reflect viewers' media habits. While the sixth element in the hexad (attitude) allows us to relate the symbolic acts of the film to the characters and, in that way, understand their development and motives better, being aware of our identification with properties of the film prompts us to consider our (the viewers') own reactions and emotions towards it. By analysing these dynamics in Fien Troch's *Home*, this study aims to discover how the film's use of mobile video content engages viewers (characters) of mobile videos in the film and how it aims to shape the film's audience's interpretation and emotional response.

1. Clustering Aesthetic Patterns (Results of Cluster Analysis)

From the beginning of the film, the mobile phone is a prominent, eye-catching feature. Two of *Home*'s protagonists, Lina and John, are introduced to us with phones in their hands. Their phones establish an extra layer of narration. For example, John's relationship with his phone is immediately marked by control and tension; we see his mother calling and texting him repeatedly, even during school hours. Here, the phone acts as a conduit for his mother's surveillance: a digital tether that reinforces her emotional dominance. Throughout the film, the central role of the device is recognised through both its physical presence and the film's visual layout. As is typical of teen tech films, the mobile phone is not just present but also impacts the film's visuals. Especially interesting are the videos recorded on the characters' personal mobile phones or uploaded to the online cloud via apps like Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat. These clips often 'hijack' the screen and 'interrupt' the narrative sequences. The article examines how these digital videos and their aesthetic properties actively produce interpretive and affective effects within the film[7]. In what follows, I discuss and explain the following clusters: (a) A Nice Bunch; (b) All Action Aside; and (c) Our Digital Memories[8].

1.1 A Nice Bunch

Shortly after most of the protagonists are introduced, we see their surroundings and the group to which they ascribe. The videos in this first cluster are distinguished from the rest of the film and other clusters due to the teenagers' creative agency. As

7 Due to copyright restrictions, this article does not include images from *Home*—besides the official stills. For readers seeking a visual reference, the film's official trailer (available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-7HnyvAu-4) offers a representative selection of the mobile video aesthetics that form the basis of the cluster analysis.

8 Due to the actors' active involvement in capturing footage on mobile phones, it remains ambiguous to what extent each clip was filmed by the characters or orchestrated by the production team. Therefore, when discussing aesthetic clusters, I refer to the videos from the point of view of characters or accidental surroundings, emphasising the internal logic and intentions suggested within the diegesis. In contrast, the dramatistic hexad and identification analysis are based on productional intention and narrative framing, allowing for rhetorical interpretation of the medium beyond the diegetic perspective.

research has illustrated, mobile videos and films have a distinct 'aesthetic' compared to other forms of moving pictures: they differ in technological aspects (Berry & Schleser, 2014, p. 11), bodily language (Baker, et al., 2009, p. 103), or framing (Neal & Ross, 2018). Similarly, these videos in *Home* break typical film language conventions (camera range, angle, movement, and montage) by experimenting with extreme flashlights, abrupt zooms on faces or objects (e.g., weed, skateboards), and exaggerated high or low angles. Much like the "MTV aesthetics" found in feature films (Dickinson, 2001)—a similar dynamic and fast aesthetic attributed to youth—these videos are characterised by fast-paced editing and rhythm, often supported by music and humorous or bold statements. This dynamic style contrasts sharply with slower scenes centred on adults, where music fades, and images become almost static. As Dickinson notes, speed is central to teen identity (2001, p. 7). Here, it marks the divide between 'digital natives' and adults who cannot access these social platforms (Rutten & Soetaert, 2011). The videos reveal a space where teens present themselves and their often rebellious behaviour, like twerking, drinking, smoking, and skateboarding.

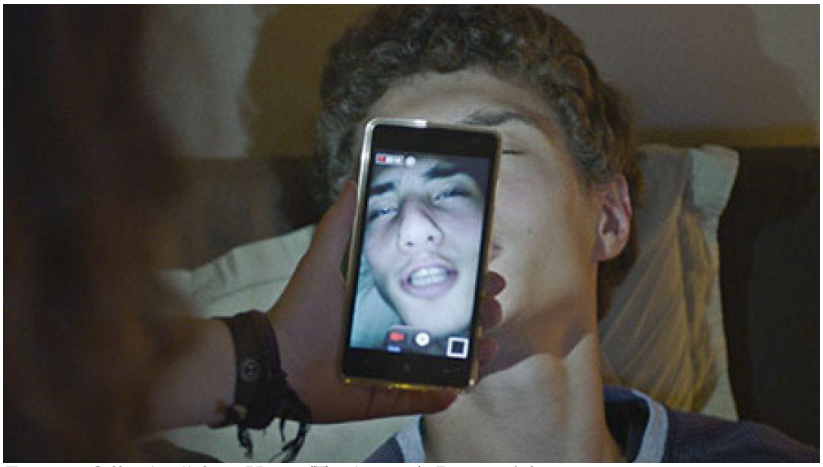

Figure 2: Official still from Home (Troch, 2016). Retrieved from https://www.cineart.nl/pers/home.

1.2 All Action Aside

While all videos in *Home* are shot on mobile devices and could plausibly appear on social media platforms, they differ significantly in both purpose and aesthetic. This is most evident when Lina scrolls through online platforms on her phone and discovers a video of Kevin recorded by a bystander rather than a peer. The footage, captured with a shaky handheld phone camera, shows Kevin aggressively kicking another boy on the street. The framing is unsteady, zoomed in, and the shot cuts off abruptly, as if the person filming was unsure whether to keep recording. Unlike the playful, self-aware framing in the "A Nice Bunch" cluster, this clip lacks intentionality or creative agency; it is raw, observational, and arguably voyeuristic. The focus

is solely on the act of violence, offering the audience a stark, unfiltered glimpse of Kevin's capacity for aggression, without commentary or aesthetic mediation. There are no filters, transitions, or edits, but only the grainy immediacy of a violent moment.

Yet this roughness is not a lack of aesthetic; it is an aesthetic of *raw hypermediacy*. The grainy and unvarnished nature of the video makes us "hyperaware" of the mediating device (Hodgson, 2019). Drawing on Hodgson's interpretation of the New Aesthetic in post-digital rhetoric and hypermediacy specifically, we might argue that the *very visibility* of the recording act is part of the video's rhetorical function. As Hodgson notes, "the hyperawareness of the mediating act... is itself a way of adding context, clarity, and condensation" to what might otherwise seem merely incidental (2019, p. 170). In this sense, the video's accidental nature doesn't strip it of aesthetic function. This becomes clear when Sammy accidentally records Kevin while they're waiting outside John's home. Their behaviour is initially muted but shifts once they become aware of the recording: they perform, exaggerate, and adopt the self-conscious tone more typical of the 'A Nice Bunch'-cluster. The scene switches between unintentional capture and playful interaction with the camera, which illustrates the characters' and viewers' awareness of the medium itself.

These examples reveal that the so-called 'accidental' or incidental footage in *Home* is not devoid of (aesthetic) significance. On the contrary, their lack of aestheticisation—no stylised framing, editing, or soundtrack—becomes an aesthetic in itself: one of raw immediacy and discomfort. By clustering these moments separately and analysing them through the dramatistic hexad and the lens of identification, we can better understand how these unscripted, often unregistered glimpses of teenage life construct a different kind of engagement for the viewer. It moves the viewer's engagement away from character identification and toward a more confrontational distance. These accidental videos serve narrative and rhetorical functions that differ markedly from the expressive, self-filmed clips in other parts of the film.

1.3 Our Digital Memories

While the first cluster highlights group dynamics with quick cuts between characters, the videos in this cluster shift focus to individual protagonists. Unlike the previous cluster, which provides background information, these videos encourage deeper reflection on the characters themselves. For example, in one video, Kevin watches Lina, who is unaware she's being filmed until the end. Although the footage is blurry, the focus remains on her, which invites contemplation of her character and Kevin as the observer.

The most poignant examples of this cluster feature John after he has killed his mother, showing him in mundane activities like smoking, with sentimental music and a static camera that lingers on his presence. This is followed by videos from the first cluster showing the group performing skating tricks, which starkly contrast with the slower, more introspective videos of John. While John is no longer part of

the film's active narrative at this point, these videos—and particularly the contrast they create with the more dynamic group sequences—serve to reintroduce him.

Each of the three clusters—A Nice Bunch[9] (group dynamics with playful, fast editing), All Action Aside (accidental, raw footage), and Our Digital Memories (slower, introspective focus on individuals)—uses distinct aesthetic and narrative approaches. To further explore how these videos shape the film's narrative and identification, I will apply the dramatistic hexad in the following analysis.

2. Mapping Narrative Through Aesthetic Clusters (Hexadic Reframing)

Building on the results of the cluster analysis, I now analyse the film's use of mobile videos through the lens of the dramatistic hexad. While the hexad can be used to map the narrative and use all elements of the dramatistic situation, Burke was particularly interested in the ratios or relationships between two or more components from the hexad. Consequently, most pentadic or hexadic analyses emphasise the most compelling elements and the relations between them. In *Home*, as in many young adult films, the prominence of the teenagers (the agents) is a central focus. These films often explore themes of 'Sturm und Drang', depicting how young people confront and overcome challenges on their journey toward adulthood (Smith, 2017, p. 18). This focus is heightened in *Home* through a multi-protagonist structure that "eschew(s) the individualistic plot-driven, and causally coherent narrative organisation of classical film narratives—(and) tend to be narratively polyphonic, situational, more or less externalist, and have their main emphasis on character" (Israel, 2010, p. 124). This structure invites us to reflect on the agents' relationship to the scene, encompassing their immediate surroundings and the broader social and relational contexts in which they operate (p. 124).

A hexadic analysis of the entire film would likely focus on *agent-scene* or *agent-action* to understand the motivations behind the characters' actions, as the film's challenges and actions appear as direct consequences of these interactions. However, our cluster analysis prompts an exploration of the relation between the agents and the aesthetic clusters. It urges us to explore why the agents produce or consume these videos. This approach, thus, encourages us to reflect on the characters' attitudes toward the events and each other captured in the videos. By relating these clusters to components of the hexad, I delve deeper into the characters' psyches and examine how they are affected. Therefore, our hexadic analysis will focus on the relationship between *agent and attitude*, analysing the characters' attitudes towards the videos belonging to the distinct clusters.

2.1 Nice Bunch

In *Home*, teenagers are portrayed as fundamentally social beings, as the film avoids

9 These headings are based on the results from the aesthetic cluster analysis.

focusing on a single protagonist. Instead, the perspective constantly shifts, often leaving us unsure whose point of view we're following. This is particularly the case in the first cluster of mobile videos, where authorship and focalisation are shared within the group. These videos function less as individual portraits and more as collective self-portraits that offer us a general impression of the group's lifestyle, atmosphere, and sense of belonging through both their content and aesthetic choices.

By considering the *agent-attitude* dimension in relation to 'The Nice Bunch'-cluster, this cluster foregrounds a mode of agency that is shared and relational rather than individualised. It becomes evident how these videos—both the act of recording and their digital aesthetic choices—reveal the characters' desire to assert their identities and control how they are seen within their peer group. Agency here is expressed through aesthetic performances rather than just narrative sequences and events.

This reading aligns with the film's production context. Director Fien Troch deliberately handed creative control of these videos to the teenage cast, aiming to capture an authentic "smartphone-aesthetic" (JEF, 2016). She wanted to avoid imposing an adult perspective, stating that teenagers' energy and aesthetics were best represented by the actors themselves (JEF, 2016, p. 5). Troch explained that today's youth prioritise being in the frame over traditional aesthetic values, allowing for a raw, less polished style (JEF, 2016, p. 10). By letting the teenagers control the (aesthetic) production of these videos, the film allows for this alternative style and disrupts conventional filmmaking norms to provide a more genuine portrayal of teenage life in the digital age. The mobile videos and production context thus underline a central concern of *Home*: the role of digital media in shaping teenage identity as a collective, peer-oriented form of presentation and identification.

2.2 All Action Aside

Due to the accidental nature of the videos in the second cluster, the individuals being filmed are unaware they're being recorded, which creates a stark contrast with the intentional performative videos in the first cluster. The lack of clear authorship and aesthetic considerations in these videos means they are less about self-presentation and more about revealing unguarded moments.

The primary function of these videos is to offer context and information relevant to the story. For example, the video Lina watches of Kevin offers insights into his character and hints at his living situation. Unlike the first cluster, where characters use the camera to shape their identities, the second cluster captures spontaneous moments that reveal characters' unguarded behaviours and motivations. They highlight aspects of characters that are challenging to portray in films and add depth to character interactions and relationships. Unlike the first cluster, these videos serve as narrative tools and sources of information regarding the attitudinal and characteristic dimensions of the characters, rather than as tools for social

profiling.

2.3 Our Digital Memories

These videos function almost as personal memories, prompting us to consider why characters revisit certain moments. For instance, Kevin's search for a video of Lina reveals his romantic interest, providing insight into his feelings. This cluster also includes videos, especially those featuring John, where it is unclear who the viewer is. In these cases, the lack of an identifiable viewer or producer diverts our attention away from the production or reception of the video and toward the individual depicted. The presence of these videos within the narrative functions as a mechanism to (re)introduce a character and provide a guiding force in the narrative.

Thus, while the dramatistic hexad is often used to map the relationship between prominent narrative components, combining it with a cluster analysis of aesthetic properties invites us to reflect on the film's content in alternative ways. Specifically, we gain new perspectives on how characters' roles as "produsers"[10] influence both the narrative and viewer experience.

3. Viewer Engagement and Identification

While film rhetoric can take on many forms for different purposes, Blakesley argues that the primary strength lies in identification: "As a predominantly visual medium, film makes identification even more inviting than it might otherwise be" (Blakesley, 2004, p. 129). Previous sections utilised Burke's cluster analysis and dramatistic hexad to explore how the film's aesthetic elements align with its narrative. However, to understand how these components affect audiences, we must shift focus from *what* is shown to *how* viewers are positioned and engaged: how they are invited to relate to and interpret what we see on the big screen. This brings us to the rhetorical concept of identification.

Kenneth Burke's theory of rhetoric, centred on symbolic identification, provides a foundation for understanding how viewers align themselves with characters, narratives, and ideologies. As Samuel Mateus (2018) argues, affects can be rhetorically mobilised to persuade and shape how identification functions within Burke's framework. This is particularly relevant in film, where aesthetic properties such as camera movements, textures, or framings operate symbolically; not only in terms of meaning but also through recognisable aesthetic conventions. These formal decisions generate affective atmospheres, inviting viewers to identify through embodied experiences. Jenny Edbauer Rice extends this perspective by showing how publics are not formed through rational deliberation alone but through "sticky" affective linkages that circulate and bind audiences to certain discourses or representations (2008, p. 210). Affect can thus be seen as both a mechanism and a result of identi-

10 The concept of the produser is used to "describe consumers as producers on social media" (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021, p. 125).

fication, not only through content, but also through aesthetic elements. In *Home*, this plays out through the film's digital aesthetics. They do not merely illustrate characters' emotions but structure how viewers are affectively drawn into the digital world. For an audience of "digital natives," these aesthetic markers are familiar, enabling identification and inviting the audience to become part of the diegetic online world. Identification, therefore, is not only cognitive or ethical; it is an affective process powered by the film's aesthetic-symbolic choices.

Consequently, one way to understand the aesthetic affective experience is through identification. As Blakesley points out, "identification is an insistent force" in film (Blakesley, 2004, p. 130). He posits that identification can require "abandoning thoughts of the self as a unique identity" (2004, p. 130), urging viewers to align themselves with characters or narrative elements. However, this perspective can be expanded by returning to Burke's insights into identification and consubstantiality[11] (Burke, 1969b). For Burke, identification is about finding 'common ground', often facilitated through (material, ideological, or aesthetic) shared properties (Burke, 1969b, p. 23; p. 305). In this view, identification can occur not only with characters but also with the formal and aesthetic elements of a film, as viewers seek shared experiences or patterns. This broader conception of identification, which includes both narrative and formal elements, can be especially useful when analysing the aesthetic affect of a film.

In *Home*, identification extends beyond the characters; the film uses affective responses to aesthetic and formal elements to invite the audience into a perceived *networked public* (boyd, 2011). The film introduces us to these "publics that are restructured by networked technologies" (p.39). The networked public refers simultaneously to "(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39). Whereas the group in the film also connects offline, the film creates the illusion of an online platform, functioning as a networking space. It collapses the contexts of the characters' digital and physical interactions, inviting the audience to connect with them as well (p. 49). In this sense, the viewer is similar to the "invisible audiences" typical of a networked public: we are granted a view inside the protagonists' lives through mobile videos or on digital platforms without being acknowledged as a participant (p. 49).

As such, the film creates a recognisable context that invites us in and evokes identification by leveraging social media logics—the mechanisms and dynamics that underpin platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 3). They identify four key principles of social media logic: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. However, scholars like Maria Schreiber, Lev Manovich and Sofia Caldeira argue that these platforms and the networked publics also follow specific aesthetic conventions—conventions that emerge through and in response to the affordances of the medium and platform. As

11 The idea that two entities are "substantially one" while remaining unique individuals (Burke, 1969b, p. 21).

noted in the earlier cluster analysis, *Home* utilises these affordances through stylistic decisions such as raw, cropped, and shaky mobile clips. These choices produce what Hodgson terms a hyperawareness of mediation (2019, p. 170), which highlights rather than conceals the presence of the camera. In doing so, *Home*'s aesthetic form does more than reflect the mediated nature of digital communication; it encourages viewers to consider how visibility, control, and exposure structure both the characters' experiences and their own participation in digital culture.

By replicating these social media conventions, *Home* creates an authentic digital environment that mirrors the viewer's personal experience. This positioning persuades viewers to identify with its characters and videos in multiple ways. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how these mobile videos and social media logics make the film (1) recognisable, (2) understandable, and (3) relatable. Ultimately, this analysis connects the aesthetic analysis to the viewer's narrative positioning to understand how (cinematic) engagement can be achieved through digital aesthetic features in film.

3.1 Recognisable: The viewer is part of the group

In the first sequence of mobile videos, the audience is introduced to a group of teenagers through their own self-produced content. These videos mirror the social media posts encountered in daily lives, ranging from group selfies to casual moments captured on camera. By mimicking these formats, the film makes the characters immediately recognisable: as if we, the viewers, are part of their social media circle. These videos, captured by the group itself, exhibit a degree of formal experimentation that suggests active self-profiling. The videos present the group's lifestyle, their interactions, and their self-representations, similar to how social media introduces us to individuals and communities in real life.

This recognisability is reinforced by the principle of programmability, which van Dijck & Poell define as "the ability of a social media platform to trigger and steer users' creative or communicative contributions" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). The characters in *Home* exercise the agency inherent in social media platforms to shape their own online personas and interactions. In turn, the film constructs an algorithm for the audience and programs a sequence of these videos that draws us into their digital space. As we witness them using social media tools to produce content and represent themselves, we get to know them on their own terms through the lens of their social media aesthetics. This recognisability positions the viewer within the group, making their world accessible and relatable from the start.

3.2 Understandable: Seeing Through the Eyes of the Characters

Beyond content production, the characters in *Home* engage with social media as active users, watching each other's videos. For instance, Kevin and Nina are shown browsing others' videos online, highlighting their dual roles as produsers. These moments emphasise the connectivity inherent in social media logic; the characters

maintain their relational dynamics through digital consumption.

In these instances, the audience is not directly addressed, as becomes apparent through the way the videos are shown on the screen. This is reflected in the cinematography; we get to see the videos as full-screen captures and as content displayed on the characters' physical mobile devices. This framing highlights that the characters, not the audience, are the primary users. The characters are watching, and we are watching along, bringing onto the screen the pillar of connectivity. It persuades us to identify with them specifically, giving us more insight into their emotional and societal developments behind closed doors. This provides a deep sense of understanding: we're not just passive viewers; we see their world through their eyes, which enhances our ability to empathise with their emotions and struggles.

3.3 Relatable: The Viewer Becomes a Character

In some scenes, the film moves beyond merely presenting the characters' experiences or urging the audience to identify with one of them specifically, and it positions the audience to become a character themselves. For instance, John's videos are presented in a way that lacks a clear viewer. Instead, we, the audience, are invited to step into the role of the intended viewer. This shift also mirrors the way social media exploits the connectivity principle to make users feel actively involved in an unfolding drama rather than passive observers. The effect is an intensified emotional response, as we are led to experience the characters' emotions as if they were our own.

By manipulating social media logics and leveraging their aesthetic conventions, *Home* forces the viewer into different roles—recognising, understanding, and even becoming (part of) the characters' emotional world. This strategy uses social media conventions—both structural principles and aesthetic markers—as a powerful rhetorical tool to deepen identification. The resemblance between the digital experiences in the film and the audience's own lives strengthens the emotional impact for those who navigate these platforms daily. This transforms the film from a mere visual experience into a deeply personal one[12].

Concluding remarks

This study explores (digital) aesthetics in the form of mobile phone footage as a rhetorical force within Fien Troch's teen tech film *Home*. The analysis demonstrates how mobile phone footage and social media-derived aesthetic conventions operate rhetorically by drawing on young adults' prior affective and identificatory relations

12 It is important to note that this analysis is particularly relevant for audiences familiar with certain social media logics and affordances. For those less acquainted with these digital environments, identification through its aesthetic elements may be less pronounced due to different terministic screens that shape their understanding of social media. This also aligns with the film's intent to reach young adult digital participants through its approach in filming and its educational material provided with school screenings.

to digital media. In this sense, cinematic identification in *Home* does not originate within the film alone; rather, it emerges from the recognisability of (digital) aesthetic logics that young audiences already inhabit through their everyday engagement with social platforms.

Through a close analysis of the film's use of (digital) aesthetics, narrative construction, and its affective address, this article demonstrates how the film employs digital aesthetics—particularly mobile phone footage and social media conventions—to fulfil narrative and affective functions. Particularly, the article illustrates how digital aesthetics can be employed rhetorically to enable identification rather than merely representing digital culture. By aligning with the viewer's experience of social media in their personal lives, the film positions viewers in different roles that invite them to identify with its characters and videos, rendering the film (1) recognisable, (2) understandable, and (3) relatable.

In doing so, this paper rethinks rhetoric in light of digital and technological transitions. As digital developments and platform-specific affordances reshape our communication practices, it becomes crucial to examine not only *what* is communicated but *how* it is communicated. This necessitates a rhetorical engagement with (digital) aesthetics and their affect, acknowledging that digital media are *experienced* as much as they are read. In that sense, this approach reaffirms "the necessity of (if not recovery of) the aesthetic perspective" (Hodgson, 2019, p. 7) as a central concern in rhetorical research, not as secondary, but as core to the meaning-making and affective work performed by texts and media. In the case of *Home*, the use of familiar digital aesthetics is not merely representational; it mediates how viewers relate to the characters, navigate the narrative, and relate to the overall viewing experience.

This study analyses this digital aesthetic rhetoric through teen tech films, illustrating how this genre can serve as a productive site for investigating rhetorical affect. The film's remediation of mobile video aesthetics and platform vernaculars demonstrates how cinematic form can mobilise digital modes of perception to invite affective engagement and recognition. Troch's attempt to recreate the immersive and addictive feel of social media opens space for exploring how digital aesthetics engage viewers and how their rhetorical affect operates across platforms. Although *Home* was released in 2016 and reflects a slightly earlier moment in our evolving algorithmic culture, it still offers valuable insight into how digital visual forms can be recontextualised to evoke recognition and reflection.

Looking ahead, rhetorical research can build on this approach by further examining how digital aesthetics operate across cinematic, artistic, and platformed contexts, and how aesthetic form shapes the conditions of affect and identification in increasingly mediated environments. As audiovisual content becomes more entwined with algorithmic design and platformed attention economies, understanding its rhetorical function requires close attention to form, feeling, and engagement. Beyond questions of representation and meaning, it also becomes important to ask how media feel, how they move us, and how they shape the conditions of identification in an increasingly mediated world.

Bibliography

Adam, A., & Rutten, K. (2025). "Elusive, Symbolic, and Nameless": Theorising Aesthetic as Rhetoric Through Josephine. *Topoi*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-025-10352-8

Baker, C., Schleser, M., & Molga, K. (2009). Aesthetics of mobile media art. *Journal of Media Practice*, 10(2–3), 101–122. https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.10.2-3.101_1

Berry, D. M., van Dartel, M., Dieter, M., Kasprzack, M., Muller, N., O'Reilly, R., & de Vicente, J. L. (2012). *New aesthetic, new anxieties*. V2_ Publishers.

Berry, M., & Schleser, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Mobile media making in an age of smartphones*. Springer.

Blakesley, D. (2003). *The terministic screen: Rhetorical perspectives on film*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Blakesley, D. (2004). Defining film rhetoric: The case of Hitchcock's Vertigo. In C. A. Hill & M. Helmers (Eds.), *Defining visual rhetorics* (pp. 111–134). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bordwell, D. (2012). *Poetics of cinema*. Routledge.

Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2010). *Film art: An introduction* (Vol. 7). McGraw-Hill.

boyd, d. (2011). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self* (pp. 39–58). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876527

Booth, W. (2004). *The rhetoric of rhetoric: The quest for effective communication*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Braun, L. N., & Mateus, A. M. V. (2024). Contemporary ethnographic aesthetics: The TikTok turn. *Visual Anthropology*, 37(3), 195–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2024.2330268

Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage* (Vol. 418). Peter Lang.

Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action*. University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1969a). *A grammar of motives*. University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1969b). *A rhetoric of motives*. University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1973). *The philosophy of literary form : studies in symbolic action* (3rd ed.). University of California Press.

Caldeira, S. P. (2023). Instagrammable feminisms: Aesthetics and attention-seeking strategies on Portuguese feminist Instagram. *Convergence*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231171048

Cinéart. (n.d.). *Home* (2016) film still [Photograph]. Cinéart. https://www.cineart.nl/pers/home

Colling, S. (2014). *The aesthetic pleasures of girl teen film* [Doctoral dissertation, Manchester Metropolitan University].

Dickinson, K. (2001). Pop, speed and the 'MTV aesthetic' in recent teen films. *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*.

Driver, S., & Coulter, N. (2018). Introduction: Open-ended and curious explorations of youth mediations and affective relations. In S. Driver & N. Coulter (Eds.), *Youth mediations and affective relations* (pp. 1–14). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98971-6

Edbauer Rice, J. (2008). The New "New": Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 94(2), 200–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630801975434

Explore Zone Jury. (2016). Julia Ducournau wint met *Grave* de Explore Award 2016. *Film Fest Gent*. https://www.filmfestival.be/nl/nieuws/eclectisch-film-kijken-de-explore-zone-jury

Foss, S. K. (2004a). Framing the study of visual rhetoric: Toward a transformation of rhetorical theory. In C. A. Hill & M. H. Helmers (Eds.), *Defining visual rhetorics* (pp. 303–314). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410609977

Foss, S. K. (2004b). *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice* (3rd ed.). Waveland Press.

Franco, A. B. (2023). The aesthetic value of film. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 57(2), 36–53. https://doi.org/10.5406/15437809.57.2.03

Gansinger, M. A., & Al-Aridi, K. (2023). Pseudo-individualization? An analysis of the incorporation of subcultures into commodified aesthetics on TikTok. In M. A. Gansinger & A.

Kole (Eds.), *Media technology in education: Uganda and beyond* (pp. 222–249). Ethics International Press.
Guerrero-Pico, M., Masanet, M.-J., & Scolari, C. A. (2019). Toward a typology of young produsers: Teenagers' transmedia skills, media production, and narrative and aesthetic appreciation. *New Media & Society*, 21(2), 336–353. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818796470
Hayles, N. K. (2000). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. Routledge.
Hodgson, J. (2019). *Post-digital rhetoric and the new aesthetic*. Ohio State University Press.
Israel, S. B. (2010). Inter-action movies: Multi-protagonist films and relationism. In M. Grishakova & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Intermediality and storytelling* (pp. 122–146). De Gruyter.
JEF. (2016). *Home* [Lesmap]. https://www.jeugdfilm.be/film-zoeken/home?lesmap=1
Kimberling, C. R. (1982). *Kenneth Burke's dramatism and popular arts*. Popular Press.
Klevan, A. (2018). *Aesthetic evaluation and film*. Manchester University Press.
Krijnen, T., & Van Bauwel, S. (2021). *Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming*. Routledge.
Leff, M. (1992). Things made by words: Reflections on textual criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 78(2), 223–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639209383991
Manovich, L. (2019). *The aesthetic society: Instagram as a life form*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/41332065/The_Aesthetic_Society_Instagram_as_a_Life_Form
Mateus, S. (2018). Affective rhetoric: what it is and why it matters. In L. Zhang & C. Clark (Eds.), *Affect, Emotion, and Rhetorical Persuasion in Mass Communication* (pp. 67-80). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351242370
McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. MIT Press.
Neal, D., & Ross, M. (2018). Mobile framing: Vertical videos from user-generated content to corporate marketing. In M. Schleser & M. Berry (Eds.), *Mobile story making in an age of smartphones* (pp. 151–160). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76795-6_15
Paßmann, J., & Schubert, C. (2021). Liking as taste making: Social media practices as generators of aesthetic valuation and distinction. *New Media & Society*, 23(10), 2861–3136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820939458
Perez, G. (2019). *The eloquent screen: A rhetoric of film*. University of Minnesota Press.
Reid, K. (2004). The Hay-Wain: Cluster analysis in visual communication. In S. Foss (Ed.), *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration & practice* (3rd ed., pp. 78–93). Waveland Press.
Rutten, K., & Soetaert, R. (2011). Intermediality, rhetoric, and pedagogy. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13(3). https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1797
Schreiber, M. (2017). Audiences, aesthetics and affordances: Analysing practices of visual communication on social media. *Digital Culture & Society*, 3(2), 143–164. https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2017-0209
Shary, T. (2005). *Teen movies: American youth on screen*. Wallflower Press.
Slater, J. B. (2018). *Style unbounded: Somatic figuration, play, and sublimity in the stylistic (re)turn and Kenneth Burke's writings about style* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Minnesota.
Smith, F. (2017). *Rethinking the Hollywood teen movie: Gender, genre and identity*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474413107
Tarvainen, J., Westman, S., & Oittinen, P. (2015). The way films feel: Aesthetic features and mood in film. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 9(3), 254–265. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039432
Troch, F. (Director). (2016). *Home* [Film still]. Cineart. https://www.cineart.nl/pers/home
Troch, F. (2016). *Home* [Film]. Prime Time & Versus Production.
van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and communication*, 1(1), 2-14.

This article is co-authored in the context of a PhD project on aesthetic literacy and rhetoric