

THFM 485

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## Mid-term Essay

Submitted By:

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March 18, 2005

## Overview

After viewing the first four films assigned for this semester and reading the correlating chapters in Kristin Thompson's 1999 book *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, I've gained a greater understanding of film narrative. "One of the potential sources of complexity in Hollywood films...is the medium's ability to move about freely in time and space (Thompson 1999)."

Each type of media has developed its own narrative rules and traditions, each with recognizable elements. In film, genres, conventions and effective filmmaking techniques such as the misc-en-scene influence narrative logistics that include logic, aesthetics and movement.

In *Groundhog Day*, the innovative plot plays with conventions of time and logic. The lead character Phil gets unlimited freedom within the constructed world of the film as he lives the same day over and over until he gets his life right. Time in the film universe of this film has a lot of creative avenues, but the narrative and character dialogue still provides enough information so the audience can understand what's going on. This film world seen through the camera visualizes special knowledge. Knowledge unknown to most other characters in the film, besides Phil and, eventually Rita. Narrative for scholars of various stripes seem to concur with the proposition that lived experience can be understood through the stories people tell about it. "Stories are ways not merely of telling others about ourselves but of constructing our identities, of finding purpose and meaning and our lives. (Berger 2005)."

In *Tootsie* also closely relates to *Groundhog Day* through characters and how Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michaels breaks rules/conventions as a cross dressing actor within the realistic world of acting and television. Filmmakers work with “something very bizarre and then make it plausible (Thompson 1999).” In *Tootsie*, it’s interesting that Michael’s most important & revealing conversations with women occur in the dressing room, a setting where he tries to hide his masculinity.

Like Phil, Michael eventually grows into a better person as they often face their own persona as an antagonist in the narrative. “Storytelling is invoked in the arts of healing, as a way of defining one's journey through and beyond suffering (Berger 2005).”

In *Back to the Future*, it’s the blending of genres and the challenge of time and space itself that define the protagonists, namely Marty and Doc.

In *Silence of the Lambs*, the film’s hauntingly realistic narrative makes the audience relate to Starling the closest as we learn more (plus more than we might want to know) about the worlds of two antagonistic serial killers, the film’s theme.

All of these films have several narrative elements worth exploring all related to the protagonists/antagonists paradigm.

## **Constructed world**

“In this created world, heroes & heroines are widely held to offer some kind of wish fulfillment, and our admiration for one or other of them is assumed to be the expression of, which we might, even unconsciously, want fulfilled (Turner 1999).”

*Back to the Future* represents a “product of an adult consciousness, a trend toward her recycling of the '50s teenage culture where Hollywood has been decisively ‘juvenilized’ (Cook and Bernink 1999).”

“The throwaway, unconscious artistry of the 1950s has been supplanted by a new kind of calculated and consciously and reflexive teen pic... the cinema films aimed at teenagers are not only more carefully marketed and calculating [sic] created, they also function more explicitly on two levels... teen pics can liken in their target audience and content, but their consciousness is emphatically adult (Cook and Bernink 1999)”

Doc has given considerable thought while the younger Marty, fascinated with sci-fiction, gets to put his limited knowledge into practice. Even at his arrival to 1955, Marty shows his inexperience by panicking at the scarecrow and hitting the pine tree, which factors into the climax (Thompson 1999). Marty’s experimental situation, parallels Phil’s in *Groundhog Day* where he faces himself as an antagonist, but Marty and Doc must also fight the convention of time itself, especially during the climax scene at the clock tower. In *Tootsie*, Michael fights conventions in the acting world, but eventually discovers how to conquer himself and understand why he’s so difficult to work with.

In the hauntingly realistic *Silence of the Lambs*, (the opposite tone of the other three films) the narrative antagonists are two-fold, Hannibal Lector and Buffalo Bill, who challenge the heroine, Clarice Starling, who must conquer some of her past issues and fears as well. Lately, audiences have been amazed at the mental toughness and physical strength of heroines like Sydney Bristow as she's tortured in the TV series *Alias*, yet she's still seen her wearing lingerie providing the same amazement in an aesthetic and feminine way. The audience really believes that these women can hold their own unlike the sometimes laughable roles of female action stars in the past such as *Charlie's Angels* or *Wonder Woman*. Times have changed. Other female lead movies and television shows, like *Dark Angel*, show how the women are tough under pressure while still showing emotional vulnerability especially to a love interest or her male counterpart. The problem with female characters in the action genre has usually been weak stories and lots of action. Not so in *Silence of the Lambs* where Clarice really has her hands full.

The respective goals of antagonists, Lector and Buffalo Bill seem selfish, but their minds don't think like most people. Even the antagonists' character names play an important role. Lector and Bill get their nicknames because they're separated, vilified and strangely fascinating to society.

The narrative creates a division between the antagonist killers and the protagonist, Clarice Starling most notably when Catherine's mother, the Senator pleads for her daughter's life on television. The audience already knows that the Senator and Starling are on the "good" side, but the audience also gets to hear Starling's reaction to the plea, saying how smart the Senator is by

talking about her daughter's family and caring personality so it's possibly harder for Buffalo Bill to hurt her. Clarice also cares and respects Catherine's life, but the antagonists do not.

Genres usually set the construction of the film world, but sometimes genre blends, like *Back to the Future*, break new ground. *Tootsie* is set in a realistic world full of people, but has a comedic touch. *Groundhog Day* is similar to *Tootsie* except Phil can alter time and logic in his world.

“Phil, first seen as a thoroughly loathsome protagonist, has by the end of the film become a near saint, acutely aware of the preciousness of life and that it is best lived with love (Pope 1998).”

“In general, the function of genre is to make films more comprehensible and more or less familiar. Even where a genre is parodied or criticized, this depends on the audiences recognition of and familiarity of the target (Turner 1999).”

*Groundhog Day* “compensates for the complexity of its plot by being extremely redundant, even for a Hollywood film and especially for one otherwise so complex and subtle (Thompson 1999).”

Thomas Pope further describes *Groundhog Day* in the following:

“depicted with little explanation, Phil's transformation from an egocentric loser into a humble mayor say it is entirely believable, rarely has a popular comedy demanded so much of a protagonist's growth or at audiences intelligence, probed so deeply into moral or philosophical questions, or left so much unexplained, yet remained so clear and

entertaining ...the philosophical questions that the script raises don't end with the observation that everyone is worthy of note, and has the potential to change their own lives, just as we have the potential to change their's... it is this collision of ideas that powers the script and animates the story. Phil, and his journey to greater consciousness, represents the audience as he travels through his endlessly repeated days (Pope 1998).”

### **Diegetic/non-diegetic**

Both diegetic and non-diegetic elements combine to create a Hollywood Film narrative where the audience is invited to believe that what they are seeing is real. The audience is drawn into the film’s constructed world without being addressed directly.

In *Silence of the Lambs*, a diegesis of the Harris book, we are lead to believe that Catherine’s mother is a Senator even though we don’t see her in her office or voting in Washington D.C.

Non-diegetic elements, such as the film musical score by Oscar® winning composer Howard Shore and locations and/or discussions about the other films/books, *Hannibal*, *Manhunter* and *Red Dragon*, also play a role in the narrative and affect the audience.

Non-diegetic music heightens attention of Lector’s escape in the ambulance as he reveals himself to the audience and prepares to kill the medic. The music gets louder and the rhythm matches the motions of Lector’s slow actions and rise from the stretcher. Then the climax hits and the music explodes as Lector takes his “mask” off. Now the scene immediately cuts to Starling’s co-worker getting off the phone and racing down the hall to tell Starling what happened. The

characters action has now accelerated along with their continuing non-diegetic music, but the music is still at the same rhythm of the characters action.

An opposite example of this sound rhythm would be Clarice's flashback in the funeral parlor. She sees the body in the casket, and then we see her face react as she slowly walks toward the casket. We hear the background noise of people talking slowly fade because this flashback of her father is only in Clarice's thoughts. Non-diegetic music is added to dramatize this sequence to help create/maintain the audience's emotional attachment to the protagonist.

In *Back to the Future*, we see an even deeper involvement of non-diegetic elements such as Marty's knowledge of Chuck Berry which factors into the narrative even though we don't see Berry (Thompson 1999). "The result is to reinforce the idea that in this particular narrative world, such circular causality can exist (Thompson 1999)."

## **Techniques**

The contrast between the sound tone of Starling and Lector's voices indicate a noticeable difference between the two characters. Lector's voice is monotonous and doesn't change much, but occasionally his loudness does. Starling's voice is determined, but very emotional when the dialogue between them gets intense. Lector's phone call to Starling in the final scene illustrates this point well. Starling's voice is solid at first, but when Lector tells her he is going to kill Dr. Chilton, the timbre of her voice is reduced to a whisper.

In *Silence of the Lambs*, smaller storytelling techniques like motifs such as Buffalo Bill's moths/butterflies explain character traits, goals and actions and larger ones like continuity (events occur even if they're actually shot out of sequence) allow Demme to create special alterations to space and time within the film narrative. *Back to the Future* also uses "motifs [to] build up associations: current time (the clocks), past time (the newspaper stories), inventors and scientists (the portraits) (Thompson 1999)." All these motifs give the protagonists an idea of what the protagonists are up against and who wants to stop them and why.

The violence in *Silence of the Lambs* is not very commercial and contributes to the integrity of the story to show just how shocking the character's action was and how far they would go to get their new life. Buffalo Bill wants to be reborn as a woman and Lector wants freedom, travel and "a room with a view." In this world, there is no happy ending.

Director Jonathan Demme orchestrates all the elements in an interesting and intriguing way to reflect a deep level of fascination with serial killers in our society. Demme sews this world together with creative filmmaking and an enthralling experience for the audience with misc-en-scene, music and sound without using special effects, which heightens the realism.

Filmmakers use the misc-en-scene to create a haunting vision of a dark crime world for the antagonists *and* protagonists. No bright colors or happy tones are communicated to the viewer.

Filmmakers visualize what causes the antagonists to act in extreme detail. This plot sets up a chain of events - cause and effect situations and relationships creatively within a specific time

and space. Tak Fujimoto's cinematography accurately sets the mood and theme of the plot – dark, sinister characters in dark worlds doing dark things and the people who try to stop them.

Time is not a big factor in *Silence of the Lambs*, but location plays a major role. Filmmakers consistently use dialogue hooks, where one scene references something that is going to happen in the next scene. For example, Jack Crawford is notified that Lector is being transferred to Memphis. Next we see the transfer occurring in Memphis. Another dialogue hook occurs when Starling realizes Buffalo Bill knew his first victim. They mention her home in Belvedere, Ohio and the following scene, Starling is in Belvedere.

A sound bridge is seen when Dr. Chilton listens in on one of Starling's conversations with Lector. We see and hear Lector telling her information about Buffalo Bill. Then we see Dr. Chilton listening in on the tape recorder with Lector's voice still audible.

We view a sound over when Starling is watching the senator's plea on television. We get Starling's expression while the plea is still seen and heard from the television in the background.

The actions of other characters accentuate the antagonists' motives and allow the audience to assess the levels of challenges that the protagonist must conquer.

A frightening use of sound occurs when Catherine sees marks from fingernails in the pit and realizes what is eventually going to happen to her. She screams with incredible loudness and high pitch which greatly heightens the tension of the scene.

The audience gets another dramatic shock when the antagonist Buffalo Bill answers her screams. The first one is relatively soft but haunting. The following screams are still haunting but now very loud with a quivering timbre in them. These two different kinds of screams coincide with Buffalo Bills character traits - careful and soft (when catching his victims) and violent (when things go wrong). The synchronicities of the rhythm of these sounds match exactly with the visuals we see.

There are also techniques shown through movement, such as in *Back to the Future*. In the beginning sequence where Doc's gadgets accomplish early morning tasks, like feeding the dog "the camera now moves back toward the left, revealing elements that suggest that all is not well (Thompson 1999)." We usually view from left to right, just like we read.

We see great use of camera placement and spotlighting is when we first see Buffalo Bills place. The camera slowly navigates Buffalo Bill's lair through directions where the audience discovers his world through the camera. While the camera is moving through the house, we hear a sewing machine which draws our attention to Buffalo Bill. Then we hear a woman yelling which draws us to the pit where Catherine is being held. The audience now has a sense of orientation for the later scene when Starling enters the house during the film's climax.

Camera placement is used to achieve similar, more dramatic and frightening results in a scene where Starling investigates a rented storage space purchased by Lector. The misc-en-scene is

very detailed with the limited space as Starling works to navigate through Lector's increasingly disturbing items.

Selection, one particular sound emphasized over another, is another well used technique in this film. For instance, when Chilton forces Lector to tell him Buffalo Bill's name, we get the selection of Lector's breath when he sees the pen Chilton drops. The sound of the breath is non-diegetic and tells the audience Lector is the only one who knows about the pen (just like no one else can hear his voice except the audience).

Another solid example of selection in the movie is when Lector is taken to give information to the Senator. As he starts to change his tone and dialogue to scare and insult the Senator, a plane engine, gradually getting louder, is selected to emphasize the increasing tension in the dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

Movies can become a business, instead of an art form when the studios depend solely on audience support. As an art form, the relationship between a studio showing their finished product in a theater (or at home) and the audience watching their work can be a highly extraordinary way people communicate.

Hollywood films explore fantasies and are meant to be entertaining, but filmmakers must not forget that these narratives leave a lasting impression in the minds of many people in our society, even though Hollywood seems more of a business instead of a creative storytelling. "Film has shamelessly and consciously exploited every convention of the action adventure serial, milking

every situation for its dramatic potential in order to offer as many thrills as possible (Turner 1999).”

Genres, conventions and effective filmmaking techniques are constantly being challenged along with narrative logistics that include logic, aesthetics and movement. These four films demonstrate how the protagonist/antagonist paradigm functions and will continue to do so in future films. “Intelligent audiences fuel innovative cinema (Cousins 2004)”, which is why these films are still prominent today.

## References

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