

Storytelling Essay
Kristin Thompson's Classic Film Narrative vs.
Syd Field's 1/4, 1/2, 1/4 Doctrine

Submitted By:

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Overview

“Storytelling is invoked in the arts of healing, as a way of defining one's journey through and beyond suffering (Berger and Quinney 2005).”

Thompson's reassessment of story structure in classical narrative films versus the so-called Syd Field doctrine will be presented in this paper along with examples from the following class films: *Tootsie*, *Back to the Future*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Groundhog Day*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Amadeus* and *The Hunt for Red October*.

First, some basic conceptions of a narrative before we compare Thompson's argument that “films of the New Hollywood continue to conform to the classical guidelines of the studio era” and Syd Field's attempt to formulize narrative with the 1/4/, 1/2/, 1/2 concept presented in his 1979, *Screenplay*.

Basic narrative origins

“Narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world (Gyori and Korösi 2002).”

The following distinction from Aristotle presents “two types of storytelling: *mimesis* (showing) and *diegesis* (telling)” (Gyori and Korösi 2002).”

Mimesis is predominant in the live theatre, where the events ‘tell themselves’. Diegesis is mostly present in the literary epic and the novel, where a story is told by a narrator. Cinema combines *both* ways of storytelling, which makes it a more complex medium, using a wide range of

narrative techniques (Gyori and Korösi 2002).” Perhaps, film can be considered a language as Field later mentions in the conclusion.

Communicating film narrative techniques becomes important, especially when you’re adapting work from other media.

“It’s a definite advantage to have the film adapted from an existing work. Ideally, the screenwriters basically use what can be best translated into visuals, but the constant battle to satisfy fans of the book never ends. It’s a different medium and every audience member has a specific view of what the film looks like from the book’s text (Berger 2005).”

The Hunt for Red October, *Amadeus* and *Silence of the Lambs* might be the most obvious classwork examples of book adaptations, but the screenwriting process must also be addressed here.

“Narratology is [also] the study of how stories work, how we make sense of the raw materials of a narrative, how we fit them together to form a coherent whole; the study of different narrative structures, storytelling strategies, aesthetic conventions, types of stories (or genres), and their symbolic implications (Gyori and Korösi 2002).”

Comparison

Field's *Screenplay* generally summarizes Act I as the first 30 pages, the Act II, conflict, as the next 60 pages and the last 30 pages as Act III, conflict and resolutions (Field 1979).

The formula proportion doesn't work and certain films, such as *Pulp Fiction*, but still understands how the narrative is driven by the characters various motivations and goals. It also seems that narratives tend to be composed of roughly equal parts, no matter how many acts there are because of pacing issues and Thompson's accurate claim of classical narrative remediation. These parts remain in this way because filmmakers learn their craft by watching the previous generation of films, so the length of parts and organization of these films are closely related with the occasional variations and groundbreaking changes in the narrative.

Field's Act I recognizes that the film narrative must orient the viewer with the characters, settings, goals and situations, which are based on classical Hollywood film principles. For example, the documentary-like sense narration is well achieved in "Amadeus" through the mix of narration strategies, such as flashbacks, to create a strong connection "between the film's narrative and Mozart's own music (Thompson 1999)."

Salieri's narration creates discourse much like a documentary film. He describes the music as the audience hears it and even gets to collaborate with Mozart himself near the end of the film using this same technique. For example, Salieri's reaction as he hides when he first sees Mozart is the only information the audience gets, enticing the audience even more after Salieri asks "Is talent like that written on the face?"

In *Back to the Future* the viewer is oriented to several instances of time, past, present and future, while *Groundhog Day* just as creatively chaotic, but occurs just in present time. In *The Hunt for Red October*, graphics are used to orient the viewer to places, times and events.

Field based his concept of ending Act I when “an event usually happened that shifted the storyline into Act II. That told me what most writers intuitively knew: after the first twenty or thirty pages of their screenplays it was time to move the story up a level, into the next stage of dramatic action. I went back to some of the films that inspired me, to *L'Avventura*, *The Wild Bunch*, *La Grande Illusion*, and found the same thing: there was a scene at the end of Act I that moved the story into Act II.” But how did the writers know to move up the story? Through the classical film narrative, otherwise all these films wouldn't have any similarities. More films would have different patterns because their filmmakers adapt narratives without so much influence from previous works. It's impossible to ignore this influence and remediation, so it has to be accepted and addressed (particularly when filmmakers cross the line of an honorable homage to one of their favorite filmmakers into direct plagiarism.)

Field uses Act II to embody the complicated action, which puts the characters' motivations and goals into action where characters, protagonist and antagonist, may or may not achieve their goals. Finally Act III, represents the climax which shows the result of the action, whether good or bad, where the protagonist, who usually has admirable, interesting traits, usually prevails (one recent exception is *15 Minutes* where dual protagonists were law enforcement officers and how the younger partner, played by Ed Burns, prevails after the death of the older partner, played by Robert DeNiro).

Field himself even concedes the remediated influences of classic narratives by stating how *Silence of the Lambs* became “the absolute horror movie...a story about letting go of the past, [which] took the horror film to a new level (Field 2001).”

Class films

In the class films, there were multiple protagonist goals, but it was more interesting to see how far the narrative progressed before the protagonists realized their goals. The characters provide most of the motivation in any given film, but conventions and elements of the genre beyond the control of the character(s) can also provide motivation. *Parenthood* was closely grounded to most people’s lives while *Back to the Future* created a recombined genre mixture of comedy and science fiction to create great escapism. Both films motivate the audience in different ways because they had unity, clarity and closure.

Desperately Seeking Susan demonstrates how narratives can be effectively motivated and/or justified, explicitly or implicitly, by other elements in the film. Both female characters, Roberta and Susan have an interesting relationship. Susan lives for today but eventually settles down while Roberta has settled down but wants to live more for today. These women represent two ends of the spectrum that actually pass each other during the course of the narrative.

This integrated double narrative supports Thompson’s view while presenting elements of both in the following quote:

“Classical structures often seem to follow two separate narrative paths that are in fact always causally unified. In *Desperately Seeking Susan* for instance, the plot follows two protagonists separately without having them meet each other until the end of the picture. The entire plot is built around the farcical construction of the two main characters continuously missing each other, which leads to the complications that make up the plot (Hassler-Forest 2001).”

The setup, actions and ending resolutions all follow an event-consequence type style that makes the narrative easy to follow. In *Parenthood*, Gil quits his job, which consequently increases his stress already compounded by his son Kevin’s problems at Little League and his wife’s pregnancy.

In *The Hunt for Red October*, viewers discovering the narrative through the action of the characters, mainly Jack and Marcus. There are “several narrative elements worth exploring all related to the protagonists/antagonists paradigm. text (Turner 1999)”, but overall there’s too many to regulate in a fail-safe formula like Field’s.

It’s a definite advantage to have the film adapted from an existing work, like books. Ideally, the screenwriters basically use what can be best translated into visuals, but the constant battle to satisfy fans of the original never ends. It’s a different medium and every audience member has a specific view of what the film looks like from the printed or performed original.

The studio makes the movie and audience watches the movie based on remediated processes.

The only way most members of an audience communicate with a studio or the producer of the film is through box office/video sales, public opinion and critic reviews. This communication also filters to the actors, directors, producers and film crew.

Hollywood even remediates itself in the scene in *Parenthood* where Gil's daughter gets sick and he makes a reference to the film *The Exorcist* exclaiming that he's just waiting for his daughter's "head to spin around." In *The Hunt for Red October*, Jack Ryan even references the persona of Sean Connery, who plays the protagonist Marko Ramius, by imitating his trademark Scottish voice. Overall, these relatively small elements combine into a common theme where classic works are remediated into new products on the Hollywood assembly line.

Conclusion

Overall I agree with Thompson's claim that films (especially directors) continue to adhere to "classical guidelines" and "reveal the enduring power of the classical tradition (Thompson 1999)." It's the basic principle of remediation. There's no such thing as an "original" work anymore, but filmmakers can come close by making "groundbreaking" films that update Hollywood genres and negotiates/redefines the meaning/trends of what is important in film narrative. Field doesn't account for these groundbreaking films (e.g. *Pulp Fiction*), but certainly does recognize them in his later writings, such as *Going to the Movies*. Field's concept does provide a useful guideline and a helpful template where filmmakers can plug in their work and see how it compares with others. Field's following exclamation illustrates his need to recognize

that narratives are remediated from the classic Hollywood films, though he does understand the necessary element of good narrative for a successful film:

“Movies are a source of both entertainment and enlightenment. So, when I read some of the comments of these filmmakers about pushing the form to another level, I’m a little confused. I love their passion, love their take on things, but when I see what they declare to be their “forward-looking” films, it seems obvious they don’t understand the distinction between form and formula.

To me, film is a language that speaks directly to the heart. When I see a movie I like, I can talk endlessly about the visual brilliance of the director, the great acting of the actors, the broad sweep of the photography, the poetry of the editing or the ingeniousness of the special effects. But when I get right down to it, there’s only one thing that holds the whole thing together.

And that’s the story (Field 2001).”

Thompson’s argument succeeds because every aspect of life, which directly relates to film narrative, has certain cultural units based on action that’s repeated verbally or by action, which most people don’t question. “The exact origins of the current notion that the three ‘acts’ of a film should be temporarily proportioned at $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{4}$ are unclear (Thompson 1999).” They are unclear because they can’t have an original source because everything is based on past narratives, an unavoidable certainty in this remediated world of Hollywood film and life.

References

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