Film Form, Narrative and Genre

GERARDINE MEANEY

At its inception at the end of the nineteenth century, film was heavily influenced by existing narrative forms, particularly theatre and the novel. It continues to share with both of these forms a common repertoire of stories and story-telling devices. Film is nonetheless a distinct medium, with a very different relation to reality.[1] Film narrative differs from other narrative modes, in its peculiar plausibility which derives from the mechanical reproduction of 'real' people, places and actions. The development of film narrative is also much more overtly linked to technological, industrial and economic developments than the development of other art forms.

Reality and Form

> The realism of the cinema follows directly from its photographic nature ... The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making ... we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually as re-presented in space and time.[2]

As Bazin points out, film shares with (and indeed developed from) photography a physical relationship with that which it represents which is distinct from both the immediacy of theatre and the linguistic representational mode of the novel. The importance of this relationship has been much debated by filmmakers and film critics throughout the twentieth century. It was crucial to the initial claims made for film as an art form. Some early filmmakers and critics stressed the potential of film to be a truly 'objective' art with a privileged relation of authenticity and urgency in depicting real life. Others strenuously argued that film should move beyond both realism and its own mechanical and physical qualities. Direction and cinematography, in particular, create effects through, for example, the use of camera angles (high, low, level) or framing (e.g. close-up) which show us a picture, but show it from a particular point-of-view. 'Special effects', producing a cinematic world which exceeds or contradicts reality, are not a recent technique, but date from the earliest days of filmmaking: the pioneer film-maker George Melies produced a whole range of 'trick films', science fiction and fantastic shorts, including *La Lune à un Mètre* (1898, *The Astronomer's Dream*) where the moon descends from the sky and swallows an ageing astronomer.

The Persistent Trick of Vision: Space and Place

Much more fundamental than cinema's ability to create places we know we can never be is its ability to represent space and places in ways to which our eyes respond as they would to real spaces and places. What is the mechanism by which we experience a flat image on a two-dimensional screen as a three-dimensional object in space?

The answer to this is less physical and technical than cultural and historical. Since the Renaissance, Western art forms have relied heavily on perspective as an organizing principle for pictorial composition and as a mode of representing a three dimen-

sional scene in two dimensions in such a way that it is apprehended visually in three dimensions. Such a perspective is crucial to the emergence of a naturalistic art which renders the three dimensions of space, height and depth and for which verisimilitude is consequently an attainable aim. Techniques of perspective self-consciously manipulate the relationship between our position as spectator and the two-dimensional flat surface we view. Leonardo Da Vinci described the process thus:

> Perspective is nothing else than seeing a place (or objects) behind a pane of glass, quite transparent, on the surface of which the objects behind that glass are drawn. These can be traced in pyramids to the point in the eye, and these pyramids are intersected on the glass pane.[3]

The picture is organized in relation to the eye and the eye organizes what it sees around its own centrality. In 1981, Stephen Heath published a very significant account of the relationship between this 'quattrocento' system and spectatorship in film, in an article entitled 'Narrative Space'.[4] Heath argued that 'the concept of the quattrocento system is that of scenographic space, space set out as spectacle for the eye of the spectator. Eye and knowledge come together ... '[5] In effect, the screen becomes an illusory window frame through which we see the world of the film. The frame is not neutral, however. We do not see, we are shown; and the position of the camera, the use of close-up, medium or long shots and lighting are all narrative devices, investing what we see with significance.

Time and Narrative

One of the great innovators and theorists of early cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, argued that in film

> each sequential element is arrayed, not *next* to the one it follows, but on *top* of it. *For*: the idea (sensation) of movement arises in the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object's first position the object's newly visible second position.[6]

The cinematic technique which he derived to exploit this was *montage*, which creates meaning through the juxtaposition of shots, generating meaning from complex images rather than linear narrative. The most famous and powerful example of montage in Eisenstein's own work is the Odessa steps sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Montage in a more muted form has become an important component of mainstream cinematic narrative techniques, offering the opportunity to crosscut simultaneous events or to denote the passage of time.

Film spatializes the temporal. It does so not only through montage, but also through a whole range of commonplace, ordinary and now scarcely noticeable devices. The impression of the passing of time is created by the manner in which images on screen are juxtaposed. The evolution of continuity editing techniques was crucial to the development of feature-length, complex narratives as the primary mode of filmmaking. Technically, film is composed from millions of stills, projected so rapidly that the eye sees movement on the screen, not in the projection. This combination and juxtaposition of images is responsible for more than the impression of movement, however: it is crucial to the cinematic construction of time and place.

Classical Hollywood narrative technique, which remains dominant, depended on continuity editing for verisimilitude and transparency. In other words it perfected a technique of editing that was invisible, reinforcing the sense of the screen as an open window into another world, drawing attention away from the constructedness of that world.

Until the recent advent of digital editing techniques, film editors cut and spliced film stock to compose scenes. Shots taken on location, close-ups shot in studios, and long, panning, establishing shots of cities scarcely visited by the cast were combined in the cutting room to make a coherent whole. Moreover, editing was crucial in effecting the seamless transition whereby days,

weeks and even years of 'screen time' or narrative time could be experienced in one hour and forty-five minutes of 'real time'.

In contrast to straightforward continuity editing, montage sequences often juxtapose locations, characters and plot developments for symbolic purposes. For example in the closing minutes of *Michael Collins* (1996), the scene of the ambush at Béal na Bláth is intercut with Kitty Kiernan shopping and trying on wedding dresses in Dublin. The use of continuity on the soundtrack is often used in this context to emphasize that the events shown are simultaneous; this function is fulfilled in this instance by Sinead O'Connor singing 'She Moves Through the Fair'. The conjunction of elements in this specific example also invokes an older tradition of representing Ireland in allegorical terms as a bride whose rightful lover never comes to claim her.

Film Genre and Social Change

Film genre was not really studied seriously until the last two decades. Previously genre films were considered as the opposite of good films, with those genre movies which were undeniably classics, like *The Big Sleep* (1946) or *Stagecoach* (1939), praised for the extent to which they managed to transcend genre conventions. A less value-laden analysis of genre is a more recent phenomenon. It owes a considerable debt to anthropology, to the study of mythic and narrative paradigms in culture and to structuralism. The most influential current film theorists, like Thomas Schatz, argue that genre is a narrative system that can be analyzed according to its fundamental structural components. These components vary, but the fundamental ones are:

- plot
- character
- setting
- thematics
- style

Not all films in a genre will have every one of these elements in common, but they will share some. For example, Westerns vary enormously in style and the themes have changed considerably over the years, but all have a basic setting and related plot elements in common; action movies share a particular visual style; and romances have the most consistent plot structure of all genres.

According to Schatz, a genre is a contract of expectations between filmmakers and the audience.[7] Genres work by satisfying their audiences' appetite for recognizable and consistent stories, but they must also have the ability to renew themselves. Without surprise, suspense and adaptation to changing social mores, genre films become either anachronistic or boring. They therefore walk a tightrope between static and dynamic components. They depend upon a relatively unchanging formula of interrelated narrative and cinematic components and often re-examine a basic cultural conflict (for example, the relationship between the individual and society in the Western). However, genres survive only if they are also flexible, adapting to changes in cultural attitudes as well as being responsive to the economics of the film industry.

Genre Example 1: Science Fiction

Science fiction is an excellent example for the purposes of introducing concepts of genre to a young audience, because they are familiar with it and because it is one of the most clearly marked and easily defined of genres. Many contemporary films are genre hybrids, combining, for example, elements of the romantic comedy and the thriller, as in *Out of Sight* (1998). Science fiction is unusually dominant in such combinations, however. Even if a film is concerned with a romance or a mystery set on another planet, on a spaceship or in the future, the film will be classified and understood as science fiction.

Science fiction narratives are structured by the relationship

between two basic narrative devices that define the genre, alienation and cognition. Alienation (sometimes rendered as estrangement) is a critical term derived from Brecht's theories of drama and describes a technique which actively seeks to prevent identification with characters and situations and places its emphasis on analysis and criticism. Cognition is the process by which audiences orient themselves in the alien environment of the science fiction narrative by identifying familiar situations and recognizable characters. It gives the audience a frame of reference to work with and a point of identification within the narrative. Usually, but not always, these familiar elements, characters or forms are there in order to be put into question.

Alienation provides a quasi-scientific or futuristic context in which the unexpected is plausible, part of the film's 'reality' which may cast light on our own reality. For example, the central narrative concern in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is the instability of the boundary between human and android (this is reinforced in the 'Director's Cut', which is now the version most widely available on video). This strange problem allows the film to pose questions about the appropriate relationship between the artificial and the natural, the commercial and the social. It further allows it to ask more fundamental questions about what it means to be human without becoming alarmingly metaphysical. This process is facilitated by the presence of a recognizable hero, complete with a raincoat and attitude inherited from the Marlowe of Chandler's novels and of *The Big Sleep*, who acts as point of identification and guarantor that the narrative will, ultimately, make some kind of sense.

Cognition is not simply a device of reassurance, however. Familiar elements are there to be made strange, for example, the noir romance in *Blade Runner*, maternity in *Aliens* (1986), sibling rivalry in *Gattaca* (1997). Alienation in science fiction is therefore the unfamiliar or exotic context which allows the recognizable,

familiar 'cognitive' element to be presented and seen in a new light and so made available for questioning.

Darko Suvin and Robert Scholes were key figures in developing this form of analysis of science fiction (both preferred the term 'speculative fiction'). The interaction of alienation and cognition that characterizes science fiction constitutes a speculative mode. It elaborates an hypothesis from a given premise, asking 'what if this were so?' For example, *Gattaca* asks 'What if genetic analysis were taken to one particular and extreme, but logical conclusion?' A work of speculative fiction calls into question some aspect of our commonly held assumptions; thus it could be argued that the category would exclude *Star Wars*, which conforms quite deliberately to previously established mythic and narrative paradigms.

The originary text for the genre of speculative fiction is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Working partly within the established narrative conventions of Gothic fiction, it also established a new genre where the narrative adopts a speculative relation to science, asking 'What if' contemporary scientific developments were to proceed to an extreme or unexpected conclusion. *Frankenstein* also laid the foundations for this new genre as a forum of social and philosophical analysis, questioning as it did the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality and progress. In the process, Shelley's novel generated a metaphor for the monsters created by science which would powerfully seize the popular imagination for two centuries.

Though the novel has been adapted, misappropriated, reinterpreted and exploited in a myriad of twentieth-century adaptations, *Blade Runner* is its most influential contemporary offshoot. Both *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* are centrally concerned with what it means to be human in the context of the denigration of the natural, physical and maternal and the valorization of the technical, metaphysical and patriarchal. Both

were produced at times of great ecological anxiety. Both are said to epitomize the fundamental uncertainty of their time about human identity.

Genre Example 2: Film Noir

Unlike science fiction, which is defined by a clearly identifiable narrative structure, film noir has often been described not as a genre, but as a style. It too has novelistic origins, in the 'hard-boiled' detective fiction of Chandler and Hammett. As its name insists, however, film noir is a fundamentally cinematic mutation, which draws plots from detective fiction and melodrama, but is defined by visual effect, not necessarily by plot devices. The look of film noir is unmistakable. The 'chiaroscuro' effect, in which shadows are used to depict the dark side of human experiences, is characteristic (see the still from *The Third Man*, overleaf). Low-key lighting effects, use of claustrophobic interiors and rainy, dark, menacing exteriors, extreme close-up and high angled shots juxtaposed to maintain a sense of unease and tension—all of the above give to this group of B movies a visual style that has had a powerful influence on contemporary cinema.

The term 'film noir' was coined by French film critics who were the first to argue that, far from being a perverse and decadent deviation from cinematic standards, these films constituted a powerful artistic achievement. The genre is usually defined as beginning with *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and ending on a high note with *Touch of Evil* in 1958, but noir elements continued to surface in films like *Klute* (1971), and the 1980s and '90s have seen a wholesale revival of the genre, notably in *Body Heat* (1981), *The Last Seduction* (1993), and *The Usual Suspects* (1995). *Payback* (1999), the recent remake of *Point Blank*, achieved an effective reproduction of the visual effects of film noir, which are usually diluted by the use of colour. John Boorman's *The General* (1998) uses black and white to extraordinary effect, adapting noir conventions to a

Chiaroscuro in The Third Man *(courtesy British Film Institute)*

portrayal of Dublin in the 1980s. In the last instance, the use of film noir's visual techniques is very much part of the narrative strategy, suggesting as it does a social context of corruption and moral ambiguity.

Critics have extensively debated the historical context in which film noir developed its distinctive style and thematics. A

range of factors has been identified as contributing to its emergence: post-war disillusion and cynicism; the influence of existentialist and psychoanalytic thinking during this period; a crisis in gender identity with men returning to civilian roles and women pushed back out of the work force; the onset of the Cold War; and the influence of immigrant directors, particularly given the genre's undoubted debt to the German Expressionist movement. Like most Hollywood genres, film noir had both an international origin and an international influence.

The Third Man

In *The Third Man* (1949), the British director Carol Reed combined many of the stylistic and thematic features outlined above in the untypical setting of post-war Vienna. In many respects the film itself offers an account of the historical triggers for film noir's dark aesthetics. The American author Holly, in seeking to resolve the mystery of his friend Harry Lime's disappearance, must confront a world in direct contradiction to the optimistic fantasies from which he makes a living. Holly writes popular Westerns. The dark interiors of film noir have often been contrasted with the open spaces of the traditional Western. *The Third Man* in effect inverts both the geography and philosophy of the Western. At the outset, Holly has journeyed east from the open frontier of the imaginary West, to the new frontier against which America will define itself. He encounters there a ruined urban claustrophobia where even the lives of sick children are commodities and the manoeuvring of the erstwhile allies for strategic dominance moves people from 'zone' to zone, like chess pieces on a board. In this environment, the cowboy is only a nuisance and, while his journey has educated him, he has learned not only that the world is darker than he knew, but that evil may be more attractive than good (Harry's former lover, Anna, rejects Holly and persists in her grief for the morally worthless but charismatic Harry). The film

concludes, not with the hero riding off into the western sunset, but with his gazing wistfully after her indifferent retreat to the east.

Unusually, however, the central enigma, the puzzle to be solved which is always at the heart of film noir, is not a *femme fatale*, a fatally attractive and dangerous woman, but an attractive and dangerous man, Harry Lime. It is through his investigation into the nature of Harry that Holly develops: the similarity of names implies they are two sides of the same coin, each realizing aspects of himself, in post-war Europe, that were unimaginable when they were old friends 'back home'. Lime's famous 'cuckoo clock' speech about the productive capacity of chaos and destruction is very close to the heart of film noir's fascination with the nature of evil. The setting of *The Third Man* reminds us that the context for that preoccupation was very specifically one of post-war destruction. A ruined domain of ordinariness frames film noir's adventure into the shadows. Harry Lime's ultimate predecessor is Milton's Satan, who gets all of the best lines. Holly, lacking the vitality which goes underground and into the shadows with his friend, can offer no heroic alternative. Powerless and rejected, he typifies film noir's pessimism about the viability of the old narrow codes by which he longs to live.

Classroom exercise 1: *Michael Collins*

- Ask students to identify each shot in the montage discussed above, counting the number of shots in each action sequence at Béal na Bláth and comparing it to the number of shots in the Dublin scene.
- What are the dominant colours in each location? Is colour used to create contrast or continuity? In what way?
- What is the role of the soundtrack in establishing a relation between the two scenes?

Classroom exercise 2: Genre

- Ask students to identify three contemporary popular genres, then three films or television programmes within each genre.
- Identify common elements in each group of three under the headings listed below:

1. plot
2. character
3. setting
4. thematics
5. style

Classroom exercise 3: Genre II

- Returning to your examples from exercise 2, ask students to identify the ways in which each of the films in each group conforms to and differs from the norms of its genre.
- Are they satisfied that each honours the genre 'contract'? If so, why? If not, why?
- To what extent is their satisfaction dependent on the films' endings?
- Can they identify ways in which the films reflect the social attitudes of their time?

Classroom exercise 4: Science Fiction Genre

- Ask students to identify elements within a science fiction film or television series with which they are familiar, which are alien or strange, then elements which are recognizable or familiar.
- Ask them to identify the relationship between these two elements.
- Have these films or programmes made them question their usual assumptions about any given topic? How?

Classroom exercise 5: What if ... ?

- Ask students to return to the examples they took for exercise 4 and examine whether they are speculative fictions.
- Examine the way in which these examples deal with time and plausibility. Are they set in the future? How is this established? Do they present alien or strange events occurring in the present?
- Classroom debate: is *Star Wars Episode One* speculative or merely science fiction?

Classroom exercise 6: Comparative study of *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*

- Compare *Frankenstein*'s monster with *Blade Runner*'s androids.
- To what extent can either the novel or film be read as an ecological parable?
- Consider the significance of a sense of the past and of an origin in both film and novel. How significant is the absence of 'real' mothers for the monster and the androids in this regard?

Classroom exercise 7: *The Third Man*

- Can you identify the following elements in *The Third Man*?
  - low-key lighting effects
  - use of shadows
  - use of claustrophobic interiors
  - menacing exteriors
  - extreme close-up
  - high angled shots
  - ambiguous characterization

Further Reading

Jill Nelmes (ed.), *An Introduction to Film Studies* (1996; second edition London: Routledge, 1999). A very good introduction to film studies, lively, accessible and comprehensive. Originally aimed at A-level and first-year university students, the second edition also operates as a handbook for teachers, with a wide range of case studies and suggestions for further viewing and reading.

John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). This provides a more advanced introduction, with a very broad range of essays. While most of these are eminently readable as critical essays, the volume is most useful as a reference work.

Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (1996; second edition, London: Routledge, 1998). This is more than a glossary of technical and critical terminology. Concepts and approaches to film studies are outlined. A very useful reference work.

Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (1974; fifth edition, New York: Oxford University

Press, 1999). Regularly revised since 1974, Braudy and Cohen's anthology offers an overview of thinking about film as a medium, its relation to other cultural forms and its place in society over the course of the twentieth century. Despite the title description as introductory, this material assumes a good deal of knowledge and represents a more advanced level than the other three texts outlined above. It includes material from Bazin, Eisenstein and Schatz, cited above.

Notes

1. I am distinguishing here between 'reality', the world we experience, and 'realism', the aspiration of art to represent that world and that experience as accurately as possible. The relationship between these two is not straightforward: our experiences differ, the reality we know may not be the reality of our neighbour. Narrative realism is ultimately an aesthetic goal bounded by the conventions of plausibility on the one hand and the 'beginning, middle, end' structure which storytelling imposes on the other. Both the concepts of reality and realism have changed over time and it is worth remembering that a narrative which seems the epitome of harsh realism in one context can seem sentimental and artificial in another era (*Oliver Twist* is a classic case in point).

2. André Bazin, 'Theatre and cinema', in Braudy and Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, p. 416.

3. Cited in J.P. Richter (ed.), *The Literary Works of Leonardo Da Vinci* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), vol. I, p. 150.

4. Stephen Heath, 'Narrative space', *Screen* 17, 3 (1976), pp. 19-75; reprinted in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 379-420.

5. Heath, 'Narrative Space', in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 387.

6. Sergei Eisenstein, 'The dramaturgy of film form', in Braudy and Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, p. 29.

7. Thomas Schatz, 'Film genre and the genre film', in Braudy and Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, p. 642-53.