

## Narrative Elements

"Any element that does not have a clear function within the narrative framework has probably been used thoughtlessly..." p.10

### **6 Narrative Functions** p. 10-15

- 1) Realistic function
- 2) Dramatic function
- 3) Thematic function
- 4) Lyrical function
- 5) Comic function
- 6) Extraneous function or non-function

#### **Realistic function**

Communication of realistic effect...increases credibility...On the plane of events things that have a certain appearance simply because they look that way in real life....On the plane of discourse we may adopt a style that encourages the illusion of reality. E.g. Use of long, unbroken takes may enhance this illusion more than a style that relies heavily on editing.

#### **Dramatic function**

On the plane of events motive has dramatic significance if it influences the course of things. E.g. A knife requires significance if it determines behaviour, whether or not it is used, the fact it could be grabbed by anyone may prevent a fight. On plane of discourse inserting a close up reaction shot of a girl listening to a conversation, after something has been said shows it is of consequence to the girl...the close up/reaction shot focuses our attention and suggests her actions will now change. Some films try to give *appearance* of dramatic action using elaborate technical gimmicks, without having anything dramatic to say...seem superficial and affected...attempting to hide they have nothing to say.

#### **Thematic function**

A filmic expression is predominantly thematic when it acts as a *comment* on or *interpretation* of what happens on the Plane of Events...message from filmmaker to audience...

E.g. two doctors are discussing consequences of new technology, one is enthusiastic and is also trying to get a coffee machine to work. He fails. The coffee machine has no dramatic function...the incident works *thematically* by throwing an ironic light on the relation between man and technology...a comment on the discussion. ...it is a convenient trick in countries with strict censorship...

The *Plane of Events* = content of the film  
The *Plane of Discourse* = form of the film ...  
(the) narrative devices that a filmmaker uses to communicate...to the audience... the elements on the Plane of Discourse are imperceptible to the characters in the film. The various elements... (such as camera angle, shot composition, etc.) do not belong to the ... world constituted by the plane of events... **They often act as a comment on or interpretation of what happens on the Plane of Events; they express the filmmaker's attitude toward his subject.**

### **Lyrical function**

Often used as mere interludes...easily under or overestimated.

...should provide *support* for the dramatic or thematic elements.

Effects such as slow motion, backlighting, and extremely long telephoto lens, if not organically incorporated can throw the spectator far out of the film.

Consistency in atmosphere is a necessity...arbitrary changes are a common fault.

### **Comic function**

...make people laugh with and not at the film.

Comic relief only if the audience needs it. And funny needs to be set up e.g. we laugh at Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* when he sneezes into a box of cocaine because we just learned it cost \$2000 an ounce.

We do not laugh when we are aware of how hard someone is trying to be funny.

### **Extraneous function or non-function**

Extraneous functions should never appear but they almost always do...a lot of what we see doesn't mean anything, simply there unintended. *From the outside* the filmmaker has no control...financial, political, chance...

E.g. Your pan is jerky, you are unhappy but something is wrong with tripod head. A critic sees the jerky movement as a perfect expression of the hero's mind.

E.g. Hitchcock's *Marine* contains ugly back projection effects, critics interpreted as an expression of the heroine's anxiety. Hitchcock was mad about the bad job the lab had done.

E.g. In Bergman's *Sawdust and Tinsel* the director used over exposed scenes expressionistically and faded to white; a new style was born. But the second cameraman had misread the meter.

## **FILMMAKING NARRATIVE & STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES**

Bob Foss

1992

Silman-James Press