

On the Presentation of Spectacle Aesthetics in Films

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Spectacle is instrumental in the artistic expression of movies. It is also a seismic factor that influences people to watch films, as an aesthetic activity. When the concept of spectacle was first proposed, it referred, in most cases, to the visual impact of movie images. As the art of cinema matures, in addition to the audio-visual part, the effect of spectacle in the narrative plot is gaining mounting attention. This paper focuses on the presentation of spectacle aesthetics in three dimensions: audio-visual, storytelling, and narrative.

Keywords: film, spectacle aesthetics, audio-visual, storytelling, narrative

The term “spectacle” was first coined by film director Guy Debord. The theories of this world-renowned visual culture master in the 20th century remain vibrant and subversive. The earliest definition of spectacle is “visual and objective scenery exhibited to view, which also refers to a conscious performance and show by the subject” (Kellner, 2003, p. 2). Specifically, it means the video images with strong visual impact that are presented on the screen with modern electronic technology in movies. It stresses on the extraordinary sound and picture effects to bring excitement and thrill to the audience. Spectacle is often narrowly defined as the audio-visual impact brought by movie special effects, typically the magnificent scenes in Hollywood blockbusters. That being said, movie spectacle is not limited to stunt images. Rather, it is a reflection of audio-visual cultural aesthetics, involving a variety of aspects such as odd twists and turns in the plot and unexpected storytelling. As such, the presentation of spectacle aesthetics in movies points to three pattern innovations: (1) audio-visual; (2) storytelling; (3) narrative.

Audio-visual

Audio-visual is the most direct way to present the aesthetics of spectacle in movies. Film is essentially a visual and auditory art. Therefore, sound and picture, the most external image performance, turns out to be the most basic carrier of film spectacle, bringing the audience the most intuitive and strong perception and experience. Key elements of cinematic spectacle include action, scenery, color, light, sound, and music. It is also these material carriers that structure a unique aesthetic world. *Goodfellas* is one of the masterpieces of Martin Scorsese, the representative of the New Hollywood generation of American directors. The movie has one such follow shot that the audience enjoys: The central character, Henry Hill, walks into the nightclub through the back door, the street, the underground corridors, the kitchen corridors, the lobby, and the stage, where he quietly appears and silently exits. As the door opens naturally, the audience seems to hear the sound of the door of fate turning. The arrogant and vain mentality of Henry Hill, the mobster, is perfectly captured in

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this short scene of only three minutes and three seconds with the film's smooth and natural sound and picture effects. No wonder Pauline Kael, the famous film critic, called it "the most exciting motion picture in American film history". This is simply the unique aesthetic charm created by the movie in the audiovisual part. Just a few minutes of footage produce the most direct and intense impact to the audience. In other words, they fully understand the natural flow of the footage without any need for side notes.

The audio-visual part of the movie spectacle utilizes modern special effects technology to create realistic images, which in turn covers up the traces of its pie-in-the-sky hypothesis, satisfying the dual needs of the audience's curiosity and real emotional experience. Looking at the contemporary movie world, agents with superpowers fight for their ideals in *X-Men*; elves, dwarves, and half-orcs of varying personalities and extraordinary abilities mingle with humans in the same land in the *Lord of the Rings*; and robots of steel and iron can take on all sorts of forms in *Transformers*... In the movie spectacles, filmmakers take on the roles of painters and musicians, leading the audience into the world of imagination and empowering cinema a fascinating aesthetic appeal that is not found in other arts. In short, the application of audio-visual spectacle has given the movie world the ability to shape imagination into reality, especially with the support of increasingly mature digital technology; the sound and picture effects of movies are even more delicate and colorful. The most classic scene is the "bullet time" in the *Matrix*: As Neo dodges the bullets, the camera suddenly shifts to slow motion. Neo slowly falls backward, and the bullet, with its spiraling airflow, slowly skims past close to his body before fading away with a wake. At the same time, the combination of pictures and sounds in the close-ups of the spectacle shots, i.e., the sound of bullets being discharged and their whistling in the air, makes the audience hang on to Neo's heart. Close-ups of audiovisual spectacles like "bullet time" are widely used in today's movies. It can not only grasp the audience's attention and spur the sense of tension in an instant moment, but also stimulate the movie's expressive power to the fullest in the alternation of distant and close-up scenes, as well as the transition between fast and slow rhythms. In a word, the shaping of spectacle in the audiovisual part of the movie world assumes a variety of functions such as rendering emotion, creating artistic conception and atmosphere, and conveying implications, bringing the audience with strong, direct, fast, heavy aesthetic enjoyment.

Storytelling

Romantic or beautiful, bizarre or thrilling, the movie is literally telling a story. To be more specific, the movie is to stimulate people's emotional experience with a rich and full storyline. Spectacle in the movie world is nothing but pushing the envelope with some odd twists and unexpected storylines. In a nutshell, novel events are used to interpret the world and fulfill the audience's emotional expectations. As art master Paul Klee once said, "Art does not reproduce the visible, rather, it makes visible" (Iwasaki, 1988, p. 80). An excellent movie or television production is certainly not to take some well-known clichés to perfume the audience; instead, it builds on the original resources, and fascinates with the spectacle of storytelling, leading viewers to savor the world and understand the deeper meaning of the film's story in the spectacle it depicts. For example, the movie *The Truman Show*, which receives multiple accolades, features a baby adopted by a television production company who is deliberately groomed. He then becomes the main character of the world's most popular documentary soap opera, *Truman's Show*, for which the company delivers great success. There are thousands of cameras on Truman every second, while the world is watching him every minute. But Truman is oblivious to this, seemingly living an ordinary life like any other. He does not even realize that his wife and friends around

him are all actors and actresses. This is such a unique and creative movie. It has the humor that makes people smile; more importantly, it possesses thought-provoking and touching contents. It seems to be an absurd life fable, but it is literally profound and even chilling after deep thought. It is said that life is like a play. Is it true that everyone around you in daily life is also acting? From the famous ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* in which the sun god predicts the killing of his father and marrying his mother, to *The Truman's Show* in which the dramatic life is arranged to be played with, both are strong metaphors and symbols of reality. Art always provides humanity food for thought with incredible storylines and an aesthetic view of what the spectacle of the movie offers.

If the audio-visual is the outer layer of the aesthetic presentation of the film spectacle, then the storyline is the backbone that holds up the outer layer. On top of the exquisite sound and picture effects, any movie that is praised owns a storyline, producing the audience a novel emotional experience. Its theme generally sets people thinking and makes people enlightened. Jean-Paul Sartre, a well-known philosopher and social activist of the 20th century, proposed the "Concept of the other". It is precisely because of the attention of others that people have self-awareness. For example, if a person takes a stroll in the park and suddenly notices that someone else is staring directly at him, his instinctive reaction is to check his own attire and behavior, rather than to think about what is wrong with the person who is staring at him. As a matter of fact, the enduring charm of movie art lies in this interpretation of the other. The story of the other is being told on the big screen. Even though every view knows that it is something that happened to someone else, he will always compare it to himself and think about love and hatred, life and death as the movie makers expect him to do. In fact, over the centuries, mankind has long exhausted all kinds of themes and meanings. However, the spectacle of storytelling in the movie world has always managed to inspire people's ever-lasting pursuit for feelings and souls through innovations and the expressions of characters. Robert Flaherty, known as the "father of the documentary film", had his groundbreaking film *Nanook of the North* judged to be dull when it was initially submitted for review. The manager of Paramount even told him, "It's way too much to ask the audience to see a movie like this". But when it was premiered at the Capitol Theater in New York City, it was a huge hit. Critics were unstinting in their praise, and to this day, film critics are still full of praise for it. *Nanook of the North* is the outcome of Robert Flaherty's 16-month journey to the Arctic to live with the Nanook family of Eskimos in Harrison Harbor. He perfectly reproduced the primitive scenes of life such as hunting polar bears with pikes and eating raw seal meat. Robert did not use too many sophisticated film techniques, but just plainly recorded the daily life of the Eskimos with the camera. He showcased the exotic landscape far away from modern civilization to the people in the hustle and bustle of the city. The story of the Eskimo spectacle in *Nanook of the North* can be credited with making it an insurmountable peak in the history of world documentary film. The people who are wandering outside the modern civilization live in such an ancient way that the stories happening in between seem to be ordinary but have a unique style. This undoubtedly captures the audience's attention and provokes thoughts about the fate of mankind and history. Moreover, the aesthetic significance of the documentary film is richer in connotation.

Narrative

Narrative is the sinew of the film spectacle, harmonizing sound and pictures with the storyline to enhance its aesthetic effect. Filmmakers always apply all kinds of possibilities to influence and even control the emotional experience of the viewers in an attempt to convey the intended meaning smoothly. And the magic key to that is

narrative techniques. How a movie begins, how the story proceeds, how the characters are presented, how the plot develops and how it ends... There is no doubt that the arrangements of every element and sequence in the film are carefully laid out by the producers. Their innovations in narrative techniques are integral to the aesthetics of movie spectacle. Cinematography is similar to literature in that it also “tells” stories. Whether or not the story on screen meets the audience’s aesthetic expectations and gains their recognition depends on whether or not the “storytellers”, such as the director, are skillful enough in their narrative approaches. The deep meaning of *Run Lola Run* is to make people take tender care of themselves by showing the unpredictable ending of fate. But instead of adopting the classic Hollywood narrative pattern, director Tom Tykwer employed three different alternatives. The narrative is structured as a rewritten pattern. The classic narrative of the last-minute rescue is completely absent from the movie. Along Lola’s running journey to rescue her boyfriend, she encounters different people, different events, and different situations, leading to different endings. The genuine meaning of the butterfly effect is implicitly expressed in the fast and furious pictures mixed with violent electronic music and Lola’s frantic footsteps, giving the audience a sense of relief and exhilaration. In the course of the movie’s storytelling, the fate of the characters is brought to a screeching halt; time is reversed and then restarted. A story is told in a mix of three time periods: the past, the present, and the future. In other words, the cliché crime and love story are told in jumping time periods. With the help of a more splendid story presentation of the film spectacle, the viewers gain a more novel viewing experience beyond question.

Narrative technique is an expression of the movie theme, but it must be carefully considered whether the audience accepts it or not. The narrative technique of spectacle is to leverage the audience’s curiosity and stitch it tightly into the story interpretation. To put it more specific, it eliminates their initial skepticism, then induce them to empathize with the story, and ultimately, invisibly stimulate their imagination to derive pleasure and enjoyment from the film. Hailed as a genius by critics and moviegoers alike, Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* presents a political epic of the Yugoslav state with a tearful humor and a melancholic wildness. Rounded up by the Nazis, Predrag and his fellow revolutionaries have to hide in the below-ground shelter of their friend Marko’s house. Marko, a black-marketeer who smuggles the weapons to partisans, tricks the underground workers into believing that the war is still going on. They keep producing the weapons. An accident brings Predrag and the gang to the ground. They mistake a movie location for an enemy position and go on a killing spree. When war breaks out again in the Balkans, Marco becomes an international arms dealer, while Predrag and others return underground. The ending is that the dead and the living get together in Predrag’s dream. The narrative of the movie is extremely subtle in the setting up of the plot and suspense. The whole film is clearly divided into three chapters, war, cold war, and war, respectively. The movie presents a kind of roundabout style, but there is a substantial progression in the roundabout; banter and mockery are incorporated into the original scene that corresponds to the historical picture; and the endless clamor and mockery are dissected into a deeper meaning. An epic film is showcasing the national history of Yugoslavia, with its miraculous narrative techniques leading people to examine the human nature of World War II: strong in endurance and anticipation, optimistic in banter and singing, and involuntarily and oblivious to morality in troubled times. A good story is hard to come by. Whether it is told tastefully or eloquently requires more effort at the narrative part of film spectacle.

The showcase of the spectacle aesthetics in the movie world cannot be immune from the audio-visual effects created by the director with the help of different modern technological means in terms of exquisite

pictures and sound. There must also entail the construction of a complicate and eccentric storyline, as well as the subtle application of narrative techniques on the basis of theme expression. The only way to provide the audience with feasts of grand spectacle aesthetics is to keep innovating and properly coordinating in audio-visual, storytelling, and narrative.

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