

Week 6 notes: Subjectivity and Spectatorship

Powerpoint on Spectatorship: alignment strategies

Spatial
Temporal
Perceptual
Subjective

Subjective alignment = the most extreme alignment strategy → direct access to a character's subjectivity (i.e., psychological state). While not uncommon, subjective alignment is generally reserved for films where the protagonist is problematic in some way. Someone unlikeable or dangerous, for example.

Common techniques in subjective alignment are **perceptual alignment** (visual and/or aural POV) and **voiceover narration** [when used as more than just in a frame tale].

examples of "normal" POV:

the "royal road" to spectator attachment (according to psychoanalytic critics).

examples of POV: *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; *Notorious* (Sebastian's view of Alicia and Devlin); *Chinatown*; *Halloween*

examples of "normal" voiceover:

scene setting: *Devil in a Blue Dress*

Voiceover narration is often taken as a transparent narrative device used to introduce flashbacks, as in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, but it is rarely just that, particularly since the era of 1940s film noirs. The use of voiceover narration in film noir was mandated by the studios because they wanted the audience to know from the beginning of the film that the protagonist had failed and that crime, once again, did not pay.

CLIPS: *A Clockwork Orange*; *The Usual Suspects*; *Apocalypse Now*; *Taxi Driver*; *Memento*

Voiceover narration is always self-serving. It is usually temporally dislocated, so the film's action can be seen as presented with the retrospective knowledge of how the story unfolds. Also, it is designed to persuade the audience to accept the narrator's presentation of their story. As a result, the sound/image relationships (what we hear from the narrator versus what we see) becomes a fruitful object of analysis.

CLIPS: *Badlands*; *Election*; *Singin' in the Rain*

In postclassical films, VO segues from commentary on the action to criticism of the film itself. "Meta-VO":

E.g., *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang*: Robert Downey Jr announces his function at the start of this riotous comic thriller ("I'll be your narrator"), instantly pulls rank ("I don't see another goddam narrator, so pipe down"), chastises himself ("Damn, I forgot something, this is bad narrating"), orders extras out of the way of the camera ("Scat!") and even criticizes the film itself ("That was a terrible scene").

Annie Hall: Alvy in school

All of these are presently fairly straightforwardly. The following are examples of more extreme techniques used to create subjective alignment between the spectator and the character.

Types of subjectivity

1. mental/emotional responses to an event

Saving Private Ryan, Omaha Beach; the full clip includes actual newsreel footage of the landing → contrast between objective realism and subjective experience.

Blackmail: walking home after the murder; the “knife” scene

Adaptation McKee seminar

Cf. Hitchcock’s description of what he called realism, in the difference between a horizontal long shot of a train arriving and a diagonal Z-axis shot of a train arriving:

“If you stand close to a train as it’s speeding through a station, you feel it; it almost knocks you down. But if you look at the same train from a distance of some two miles, you don’t feel anything at all. In the same way, if you’re going to show two men fighting with each other, you’re not going to get very much by simply photographing that fight. More often than not, the photographic reality is not realistic. The only way to do it is to get into the fight and make the public feel it. In that way you achieve **true realism.**”

What does Hitchcock seem to mean by “true realism”?

2. hallucination

e.g., *Fight Club*, *Birdman*, ***Videodrome***, *Mulholland Drive*

3. mental illness

A Beautiful Mind, *The Tenant*, ***Spider***, *Black Swan*

4. intoxication

Mean Streets, *Chopper*, *Apocalypse Now* opening, *North by Northwest* drunk scene or ***Notorious*** drunk scene

5. fantasy (seamless integration between fantasy and real life)

8 1/2, *Last Temptation of Christ*, ***The Limey: Wilson killing Terry***

6. the dream sequence

Inception, *Vertigo*, *Spellbound*, ***The Conversation***, *Blade Runner*

7. nightmares

Trainspotting, *Rosemary’s Baby*, ***The Fly*** birth scene

8. distorted flashback/memory

Citizen Kane, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Rashomon*, *Blade Runner*, *Memento*, *The Tree of Life*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, ***The Manchurian Candidate***, *Mulholland Drive*

9. flashforward/premonition? (v. rare)

LOTR, *Donnie Darko*, *Minority Report*, *The Dead Zone*