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Honors Project

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The Language of Filmmaking and the Troubles of Modern Illiteracy

One hundred and twenty years ago, the modern conception of storytelling through moving images was barely a spark in any artist's imagination. Within decades it would completely capture the world's consciousness and become an extraordinarily complex web of interdependent ideas and traditions. Now, it is a language unlike any other with the power to move and transform the individual and entire societies. What follows is an examination of this cinematic language and a discussion of the likely results of growing cinematic illiteracy. Ultimately, this paper argues that the modern entertainment landscape risks losing audiences to cinematic illiteracy and must be corrected.

It is critical to establish cinema as more than just a complex art form, but rather a continuously evolving language of techniques. Like any art, cinema has developed a specific set of motifs, icons, and stylistic idiosyncrasies that act as the medium by which creators pass their stories onto receptive audiences. There is no shortage of examples; there is the world of *Mise-en-scene*, in which various aspects of lighting, color, and performance emphasize an emotion or idea. Cinematography does the same, a camera angle, camera movement, depth of field, everything visual is coded with specific meanings and expectations. This doesn't even begin to cover music, sound design, or editing (the way two shots are related to one another.) These techniques create a cinematic vocabulary with which a well-versed filmmaker will paint sentences, paragraphs, and entire stories. Indeed, if a group of letters form a word in a written

language that directs the reader to think of a more complex idea, it is the combination of these techniques that results in the same effect in cinema.

For example, the angle of a shot can give the audience a very particular feeling about a character. A low angle makes a hero feel strong, and a high angle makes them feel weak. Lighting does the same, with high contrast lighting feeling more dramatic than a flatly lit scene. Even the angle of light can produce an intense response, like when a villain is lit with harsh shadows obscuring their eyes. Together, these techniques and many others may result in a single shot that represents an idea greater than the sum of its parts.

Like any language, cinema did not develop in a day. Instead, it results from a century of experimentation and natural evolution as filmmakers watched and reproduced films with the most effective techniques. Audiences have been trained to understand these techniques not because they have intrinsic meaning, but because their continued exposure to a technique has developed an association between that technique and the meaning behind its historical usage. This becomes important when we recognize that contemporary filmmakers and critics spend decades studying film and the intricacies of cinematic language to create movies for audiences that do not have the same background, education, time, or desire, to study film history.

Here is a practical example of the above theory: Without prior exposure to old-English, Shakespeare's multitude of timeless stories lose accessibility. In the same way, without prior exposure to black and white photography, or the way contrasting exposure is used to telegraph a character's internal dialogue, black and white films likewise lose accessibility. 2020's *Mank*, directed by David Fincher, is a film that decides to rely on these conventions. Netflix was genuinely surprised when mass audiences almost unanimously said, "I don't get it," but this could have been expected. In both examples, Shakespeare and *Mank*, it is not that an audience will be

unable to understand the story at all, but instead that the language (either old-English or black-and-white photography) goes misunderstood, and therefore, the nuance of the story goes unseen. Indeed, the most sophisticated modern filmmaking is akin to handing a seven-year-old Shakespeare and getting frustrated when they don't pick up on the nuances of the story.

A primary concern of the languages of filmmaking is that they are fundamentally inexplicit and under-the-radar. Sticking with contemporary examples, watching a film like Darius Marder's *The Sound of Metal* (2020) without knowledge of sound design and forced perspective in filmmaking would be like watching a foreign film without subtitles. The issue at stake is that the audience may never know they are missing an interpretive framework to understand *Sound of Metal*, while they will be immediately aware something is amiss when a foreign film begins playing in a language they do not speak. Simply put, cinematic language is one you do not know you are missing.

This begins to explain the often discussed but rarely understood divide between "audiences" and "critics." Any viewer's ability to interpret film becomes a critical point governing their access to more "sophisticated" works. More specifically, why the former group gets excited by "low-brow" cinema and finds "high-brow" cinema pretentious and meaningless; meanwhile, the latter group is bored to tears by "low-brow" and finds "high-brow" to be transcendent. An essential component to the answer - which is multi-variable - relates to the previous viewing experiences of an audience member and what types of films they have previously interacted with and grown accustomed to. If the metaphor is film as language, then different genres and styles of filmmaking use varying degrees of sublinguistic techniques, and continuous exposure and study results in fluency.

Ultimately, the question of whether audiences can interpret a work is unimportant unless we first explore why this matters in the first place. What problems might this divide between influential filmmakers and general audiences lead to? Broadly, there are two, the critical function of stories on an individual level and the equally important function on a societal level.

This begins to interact with the role of stories more generally in the newly minted, "disenchanted" reality. Storytelling, in general, plays an integral part in keeping the imminent frame open for society at large. Charles Taylor indicates that one of the modern world's dangers is its losing touch with the fantastical: "...action, heroism, the warrior virtues, a higher sensibility..." (Taylor, pg. 545). Modern "progress" has largely irradiated these aspects of pre-modern civilizations and have led to a loss of what Taylor coins the "enchanted world" in contemporary society.

Film, in my view, has become the most potent and broadly accessible avenue modern society has to "re-enchanted" the disillusioned modern society. The evidence here is simply undeniable – look at the *millions* of people actively taking part in the modern mythologies surrounding Star Wars, The Marvel Cinematic Universe, and a plethora of other intellectual properties. The point here is not whether or not this is inherently good, but simply that society has attempted to outsource the enchanted world instead of letting it go. We no longer believe in the presence of wizards and gods in our reality, so we have literally created new realities with space wizards and hammer-wielding Norsk gods.

One might argue, in response, that millions flocking to a theater for mass entertainment is not evidence of transcendence but is simply that, entertainment, after all, nobody is under the impression the events depicted on screen are in any way real. It is unclear, however, whether an intellectual belief is a prerequisite for experiencing the enchanted world or if a *felt reality* can

serve the same purpose. For example, John Frow points out that the image *does* become "...in some sense infused with the being of the god or the saint or the person it pictures" (Frow, pg. 125). Why else do we have genuine biological responses towards what we see on the screen if there is not some degree of reality present? In the end, although not *real* the contents of a film are *real enough* to disenchant reality.

When film is seen as transcendent, the need to consider who gets to access its interpretation becomes all the more critical. Whether or not it is good that franchises with mass appeal like Star Wars and Marvel have become quasi-religious for many is out of scope for this discussion. However, the fact that much of the most transcendent, powerful, life-affecting work is gated behind variations of cinematic language inaccessible to many is precisely the point. When discussing transcendence in film I can rely only on my own experiences: The closest I have ever felt to divine truth through this medium are films from auteurs like Wim Wenders, Terrence Mallick, and Andrei Tarkovsky. The fact that I would never suggest these films to mass audiences due to most fundamentally lacking the interpretive framework to enjoy them is an absolute tragedy.

A second component to the importance of cinematic literacy is societal. To understand the potential impact of cinema, one must look no further than the powerful stories created by filmmakers of color during the civil rights movement and beyond. In some instances, they had the effect of persuading bigoted white audiences to view the world through a more progressive lens – this is undoubtedly true of the work of Sidney Poitier, the first African American man to win the Best Actor Oscar in 1964 and whose following films, including 1967's *In The Heat of the Night* were the first major successes, with critics and general audiences, that highlighted a dynamic African American lead. However, it is more common that these stories had the effect of

becoming rallying cries for the racial justice movements themselves. Specifically, look to filmmakers like Spike Lee, the man who directed and produced the most poignant films, from an African American perspective, in the wake of racial conflicts in the 1980s. The point here isn't that white audiences loved his films, but instead that they gave Spike's targeted audience the motivation and representation to unite, and it pushed their movement forward.

It is correct to point out that these cinematic techniques exist to, in part, emotionally effect and "manipulate" an audience. Often, this is the desired outcome as we wish to be swept up in, and hopefully *changed* by, a well-crafted story. Sometimes, however, understanding these techniques is critical so a viewer can avoid manipulation. For example, a discussion of the power of film is incomplete without recognizing the existence of film as a tool for dangerous propaganda. Society must never forget the use of state-controlled cinema to glorify the fascist agenda in Nazi Germany or to instill their bigoted hate deeper in the social consciousness. Many Nazi filmmakers, like Joseph Goebbels, expertly used documentary-like techniques to dehumanize targeted minority groups and justify horrendous abuses to the public. An audience that is unaware of these techniques is far more vulnerable to manipulation from external forces.

In light of the changing cinematic landscape and the growing divide between influential filmmakers and typical audiences, it is critical to establish a new approach to cinema and the teaching of cinematic language. The first thing to note is that the responsibility does not fall on filmmakers or audiences alone, but rather both groups must work to create a more egalitarian understanding of cinema.

To begin, filmmakers must stop taking interpretive frameworks and the language of cinema for granted. They must realize that audiences do not have the privilege of time to study the medium and become fully fluent in the art form. Thus, filmmakers need to make their

themes, motifs, and language clear when it matters. This certainly does not imply that all cinema should be constructed for all audiences or that there is no room for a film made for the most devoted disciples of the artform. It does, however, mean that films created with the intent of societal impact take special care to increase accessibility while not sacrificing effectiveness.

On the other hand, creators operating in New Media and cinema alike need to be careful about making content entirely removed from cinematic language that exists in a space of meaninglessness. What we have today, that those of the early twentieth century did not, is both a more sophisticated cinematic language and tons of free, easy to access, online content that does not take part in this deep cinematic tradition. The millions of hours of content on Tik Tok, youtube, and reality TV is becoming the shared cultural myth of the new generation. Most of it entirely lacks the meaning and progressive capabilities of early cinema. If today's youth is entertained exclusively by this content, the shared cultural language of cinema could be entirely lost to general audiences in the near future.

Finally, audiences need to prioritize learning this cinematic language. Our education systems prioritize literature and the reading of classic novels for much the same reason, but the unfortunate truth is that most adults don't read after college. Adults *do* watch films. An instilled understanding of cinematic tradition might prepare the average person to access more sophisticated films into adulthood.

There is no understating the importance of interpretation and language as it relates to the field of filmmaking. Cinema itself has become its own language, requiring a plethora of knowledge surrounding its motifs and icons to be interpreted appropriately. With film becoming a necessary means of human discourse and sensemaking, it has become all the more critical for audiences to be adequately equipped to understand the medium. Maximizing the benefits of

cinema for society requires filmmakers and audiences alike to take steps to create and understand this critical art form and to conquer cinematic illiteracy.

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