DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 512 IR 017 665

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TITLE From Aristotle to Disney World: Cinematic Paradigms and Perceptual Shifts.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 8p.; In: Eyes on the Future: Converging Images, Ideas, and Instruction. Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (27th, Chicago, IL, October 18-22, 1995); see IR 017 629.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attention; *Audience Response; Cognitive Processes; Comparative Analysis; Critical Thinking; *Films; Production Techniques; *Sensory Experience; *Visual Perception
IDENTIFIERS Classical Hollywood Films; MTV; *Paradigm Shifts; Reflective Thinking; Visual Imagery

ABSTRACT

This paper contrasts classical Aristotelian narrative, which encouraged intellectual reflection and came to dominate Hollywood film by the 1930s, with the pulsating images which began to appear in the 1980 as a result of MTV's influence on films. The discussion focuses on two major Hollywood films: "Grapes of Wrath" (1940) and "Top Gun" (1986). The classical Hollywood style film represented in "Grapes of Wrath" uses sequential narrative, shot framing and a natural editing pace; it demands sustained attention, intellectual reflection, and emotional empathy. The ultimate effect of "Top Gun," which uses minimal dialogue and sharp cuts between disconnected images that pulse on and off the screen in a rock and roll beat, is the reverse of the classic Hollywood style: devoid of complexity, almost non-existent in linear plot, one- or two-dimensional in character, and pleasurable without having any intellectually reflective opportunity. Sensual images are absorbed instantaneously, and the viewer has time only to feel their immediate and momentary impact. While the ability to process the visual image and absorb its meaning emotionally and tonally has increased, there is no comparable time for reflection. What is happening in film is part of a larger paradigmatic shift in perceptual process in which sensory stimulation alone has become the meaning. (Contains 11 references.) (AEF)

From Aristotle to Disney World: Cinematic Paradigms and Perceptual Shifts

by Ann Marie Barry

In Paris in 1895, Louis Lumière, together with his brother Auguste, was the first to screen film for a paying audience. His new invention–the Cinématographe–combined a camera and projector within one unit and delighted viewers with the novelty of scenes of the daily life around them, with what Kracauer called the motion picture camera's ability to "record and reveal physical reality," catching the transient stuff of life "on the wing."[1] His films were short, showing brief episodes: workers leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon, a train arriving at the station, Auguste helping to feed his baby, a gardener being tricked by a boy and splashed with a hose. His contemporary, Georges Méliès saw in film not the magic *of* everyday life, but the possibilities of incorporating magic *into* it.

An inveterate showman, Georges Méliès developed his own device for recording and displaying films and exploited the theatrical appeal of the new medium, quickly recognizing that the camera could be stopped and started again, making it the equivalent of the trap doors of the stage illusionist. By 1902 Méliès had produced what is today his best known film, "A Trip to the Moon," filled with disappearing imps, imaginative illusions and delightful humor. He was the first to use stop-motion special effects, artificial lighting, time-lapse photography, and even the first complex multiple exposure. But perhaps nothing makes the contrast between their approaches clearer than two coronation "newsreels": Lumière's film representatives in Russia filmed the real coronation of Czar Nicholas in order to awe distant audiences; Méliès simply "recreated" the coronation of England's Edward VII in his studio *before* the event actually took place.

Together, Lumière and Méliès represent what many film theorists see as the contrary direction of film aesthetics: on the one hand, film may be seen as a tool for realism and a medium where life may be revealed and discovered; on the other, film appears as a twilight place, what Hawthorne saw in the literary romance, as "a neutral territory somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other."[2]

Today these divergent film tendencies of reality and imagination are converging into the total sensual-surround experience of the virtual reality movie ride–the newest direction in visual entertainment. Accompanying this transformation is a significant perceptual paradigm shift which signals a change not only in the way in which we experience film itself, but which also in turn brings about a shift in the way we perceive the world around us. This paper contrasts classical Aristotelian narrative which encouraged intellectual reflection and came to dominate Hollywood film by the 1930s, with the pulsating images which began to appear in films as a result of the influence of television's MTV on film

editing and styles of viewing in the mid 1980s, and looks ahead to the future of film as total sensual immersion. Specifically it will focus on the contrast between two major Hollywood films: *Grapes of Wrath* (U.S.A., 1940) and *Top Gun* (U.S.A., 1986) which represent significant differences in the way we view film and life itself–beginning with the birth of film as art and evolving along a developmental time continuum spaced approximately four and a half decades apart.

Grapes of Wrath, directed by John Ford, is a film made in what has come to be known as the classical Hollywood style. By the 1930's, as film developed into a glamorous and powerful industry, the big Hollywood studios were in place and working full time in almost assembly line fashion to produce films within a formulaic approach, which stressed verisimilitude, character identification and development, and a style of film making evolved from the early work of such monumental figures as D.W. Griffith, which anticipated perceptual process and conformed to classical Aristotelian plot structure in its narrative techniques.

Aristotelian narrative structure is what most of us tend to think of as natural story form–i.e., things seem to happen or unfold in an orderly progression from one event to the next in a sequence which has a beginning, middle and end, in that order. In the typical Aristotelian plot, action moves from a state of equilibrium into rising action by the intervention of an inciting incident which establishes a conflict. This conflict becomes more and more intense until it reaches the point where it must be resolved one way or another at a point of climax. Then the consequences of this are shown, the loose ends are wrapped up, and a new balance is achieved. Events from the beginning cause those in the middle and those in the middle cause those in the end. All action, however, ultimately stems from the characters themselves, and in the course of the action, we will come to realize some truth about the nature of humanity or the course of existence. We emerge wiser because as we identify with the protagonist, our own problems and emotions find a cathartic outlet and the vicarious experience, lived through the insight of the author, is structured to bring us to new awareness.

Although this experience is what we're used to expecting in film and in literature, it, of course, is not the way real life is. Real life is chaotic: we are continually bombarded with stimuli demanding our attention, and incidents seldom have true beginnings, middles, and ends. Although life in film and in literature seems coherent and logical, the real life were are immersed in seldom makes such perfect sense, and rarely do incidents occur with their immediate meaning and long-term significance so apparent or simple. One of the functions of art as it is classically defined is to help us do this–to see the deeper meaning and larger pattern of events within our own lives as well.

In classical Hollywood cinema, which came into its own in the 1930s and 40s, the camera aids us in this. The editing is seamless and the camera acts like a pointing finger to guide us through events by directing our attention to what is important. Narrative is always developed linearly in a clear cause and effect line, and character becomes the cause of events, moving the action forward as a result of internal motivation and turmoil. Anticipating the way we observe life around us, the camera moves in as we come to understand the context for the action and become interested in the characters themselves. As the action moves forward, we have time to reflect upon it and the themes which it reveals, and in the process the "invisible" editing of the Hollywood style always moves us seamlessly from outside appearances to inward revelations of the internal struggle within the characters. As we move into the mind and heart of the protagonist we come to identify with him or her, and once this identification is established,

we then begin to view the world through his or her perspective, coming to understand how that character relates to the world and is impacted by it.

In *Grapes of Wrath*, based on John Steinbeck's novel, we are introduced to the Joad family which, because of drought and foreclosure by the banks, is dispossessed of its land. Its subsequent journey to California and the brutal economic exploitation which it finds there not only mirrored the experience of many Oklahoma farmers in the 1930s "dust bowl" migration, but also spurred an awareness of social injustice with which many more people could and did identify. Many sociologists believe, in fact, that were it not for the onset of World War II–so powerful was narrative impact and so dire was the widespread human plight which it revealed–the novel and the film might together have caused massive social upheaval and even political revolution.

The script, the camera and editing conspire in creating this impact. In the first six minutes of Ford's film, we move inexorably forward and inward, from the extreme long shot which establishes the dust bowl environment, to a long shot of the cafe where an unseen truck driver and waitress exchange repartees, to a medium shot of Tom Joad convincing the truck driver to give him a lift, to a medium close-up two shot of their conversation inside the truck cab, to a close-up of each of them in turn, ending with Tom Joad's revelation he is a murderer and ex-convict. The procedure is then repeated with Joad meeting the preacher "Reverend" Casey, who introduces the theme of loss of spirit, both in himself and in the people who have had to move off the land they have worked for generations.

In this Hollywood classic, the first six minutes introduce the central character, his inner conflict and the themes which will be developed throughout the rest of the film. The editing is seamless, always moving shots in the same direction, and the camera always anticipating the next level of interest. There are an average of approximately three cuts per minute, but the length of time varies between shots according to the amount of significant information introduced visually and the amount of time necessary to reflect on the meaning of the words, actions, and visual figures and contextual fields. Everything in this film leads us into a particular thought pattern, focusing on visual and verbal cause and effect and allowing time for absorption of emotions and ideas.

A major difference between the thoughtful adult and the restless child is attention span. Hopefully as we grow older, we begin to see the complexity of the world we live in and begin to put it all together in our minds so that it makes sense and we can discern the true causes and effects of things. The young child, however, is at a stage where meaning comes from association, and it is barraged by a continuous stream of sounds and images that it attends to only momentarily. Meaning comes through association by simple sequence of what follows what and by patterns repeated so often they become expected. Adults spend a lot of time trying to amuse babies with interesting new sights and sounds, shaking rattles, demonstrating toys that move, whir, pop, jump and whistle, calling attention to bright colors and shapes. The world of the child in this sense is one where the child is either amused or unamused. a world of attentive immersion in immediate experience, a world unburdened by the pursuit of causes and effects or the profound existential questions of adulthood.

The classical Hollywood style film which comes to its full fruition in *Grapes of Wrath* clearly speaks to the adult world. It demands sustained attention, intellectual reflection, emotional empathy. Its themes related to personal and social conflict represent microcosmic and macrocosmic tensions which can only be resolved in complexly nuanced ways, and the adult who understands the social and psychological causes and effects

embedded within the film comes away with a deep appreciation of the both the dark side of the American Dream and a transcendent faith in human dignity. Filled with cultural and archetypal symbols, the film–like the novel on which it is based–speaks to profound levels of awareness in the human odyssey. For such reasons, films from their first beginnings have been very important in our lives because they provide us with personally relevant cultural stories which help us to see beyond the chaos and confusion of everyday life to find the archetypal patterns which ultimately make life meaningful.

Just as life goes by us in a torrent and it is only in moments of deliberate reflection that we can begin to comprehend its meaning, so also does film provide us with the appearance and the fluidity of life itself. But because film is an art dependent on artistic manipulation at every turn, it too requires the same kind of deliberate reflection in order to recognize the meaning of its messages and the impact they have on us. The best Hollywood films give us opportunity for both; content and editing are deliberately constructed to direct our attention and timed to give us opportunity to absorb significant mise-en-scène information, and thematic unity provides food for thought long after we have left the theater. When film is perfectly in "sync" with our thoughts, it can be a profound mass influence–as history has shown us in films like Eisenstein's *October* and *Potemkin*, Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad*, and, of course, Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*.

When Eisenstein's *Potemkin* premiered in Moscow, for example, crowds encircling city blocks several times lined up to see it. When the tinted red flag was run up the mast at the film's climax, people in all the theaters in which it played responded uproariously, standing on chairs, cheering, singing the "International." Lenin himself said that "the cinema is the most important of all the arts."[3] Béla Bálàzs, who taught with Eisenstein in the Moscow Film School and appreciated the power of film to manipulate emotion and thought commented:

> We must be better connoisseurs of the film it we are not to be as much at the mercy of perhaps the greatest intellectual and spiritual influence of our age as to some blind and irresistible elemental force. And unless we study its laws and possibilities very carefully, we shall not be able to control and direct this potentially greatest instrument of mass influence ever devised in the whole course of human history.... the mentality of the people, and particularly of the urban population, is to a great extent the product of this art, an art that is at the same time a vast industry. Thus the question of educating the public to a better, more critical appreciation of ... films is the question ... of the mental health of ... nations. Nevertheless, too few of us have yet realized how dangerously and irresponsibly we have failed to promote such a better understanding of film art.[4]

Bálàzs wrote this in the 1940s in what was still the hay-day of the Hollywood style. Although television was then years away from becoming the powerful perceptual influence which McLuhan later explored, today television now shares this power, with both film and television acting as reciprocal influences on each other.

More than any other single influence, in fact, television's MTV–begun in the 1980s–bears the responsibility for the change from classical Hollywood use of sequential narrative, shot framing, and more natural editing pace and seamlessness to an intensive rapid bombardment of sensual images which rush by so quickly that we do not have time to reflect upon them, but only to feel their immediate and momentary impact. While sequential narrative demands time for critical reflection, sensual images are absorbed almost instantaneously, reaching us on an emotional and attitudinal level rather than on an intellectual one.

MTV style is truly exciting: fast, colorful, and combined with Dolby sound or George Lucas's THX system, it is a riveting, sensual and primordial experience. In effect, it turns back the clock for us and we are in the same situation perceptually as the young child, responding only to what is attention-getting in the environment. In comparison, the Hollywood style movie looks boring, slow, and plodding. Instead of an easy-to-follow storyline, MTV supplies continuous sensual titillation–the stuff of raw, primordial experience distilled and speeded up until it is more like a drug rush than like real life itself.

The film most pivotal in showing this influence is the 1986 film *Top Gun*. Where *Grapes of Wrath* used seamless cuts on an average of three per minute to draw us into character as a precipitator of the action, *Top Gun* cuts sharply from one image to the next, approximately every two-and-a-half seconds. As a result, instead of being pulled into character, we stay on the surface, which–MTV-style–is glossy, sexy, and slick. Dialogue is kept to a minimum and roves over into subsequent shots creating an artificial linkage between disconnected images which pulse on and off the screen in a rock and roll beat, and images of thrust and power dominate the film. Color works on a subliminal level, as it does in Mario Puzo's *Superman* (U.S.A./G.B, 1978), where the colors which dominate the screen are red, white, blue and gold. Action is paced and structured like a videogame; the longest takes in the entire film run about four or five seconds, and these occur only when the protagonist's friend is killed and an attempt is made at some reaction shots and exchange of dialogue. Throughout the rest of the film, only brief phrases can be synchronized with the images because of the brevity of the shots, and most conversation takes the form of repartee. The ultimate effect is the reverse of the classic Hollywood style: devoid of complexity, almost non-existent in linear plot, one- or two-dimensional in character, and pleasurable without having any intellectually reflective opportunity or impetus.

Overall, the film was in its own way as impactful as *Grapes of Wrath*. In its imagery, pace and Dolby sound, *Top Gun* swept audiences worldwide up into a truly exciting and sensuous world. By association which is the basis of perceptual logic, Navy pilots who were lionized in the film began to see their own image in a more sensually exciting way–as "maverick flyboys living on the edge by day and partying by night."[5] Others also started to see Navy pilots that way too, and the Navy was highly successful in its use of clips of the film to recruit members of the MTV generation into its ranks. The film grossed over $100 million within six months of its release, and sales of the Aviator sunglasses sported by "Maverick," played by Tom Cruise in the film, went from 4 percent to 40 percent of market sales.[6]

For the Navy pilots who got caught up in the image, the nature of their annual gatherings at "Tailhook" conventions (so named for the plane hook which the pilot must lower to grab a deck wire on board aircraft carriers) began to change, until finally behavior became so extreme that a Navy scandal occurred in 1991. The Pentagon's 300–page report specifically cited the film's release as the point at which the gantlet was started–a ritual where women were accosted as they got off the elevator, physically groped and their clothes torn away. By the 1991 Tailhook convention, prostitutes were openly entertained, pornographic films were run continuously in the hospitality suites, and men walked the corridors with exposed genitals.[7] Among the immediate consequences which the scandal initiated were the resignation of one admiral and the investigation of 140 other officers in one or more incidents of sexual assault, indecent exposure and conduct unbecoming an officer. In the end, however, the Navy closed ranks around its men, and the only person who suffered substantially was the first woman Naval officer to report the

outrageous conduct. Harassed and stigmatized beyond endurance, she resigned her commission the following year.

Although I do not mean to suggest a direct causal connection between MTV and specific convention behavior, I do believe that the perceptual pattern characteristic of MTV viewing substantially contributes to immersion in the moment without regard to long-term consequence. an emphasis on sexuality, a lack of cause-effect logical thinking, and the inability to emotionally empathize with others; and that this immersion in sensual experience in effect hinders the development of a mature and responsible way of perceiving and being in the world. A study done by doctors at the Whiting Institute, a resident mental health facility in Middletown, Connecticut, for example, found that prolonged periods of MTV viewing resulted in increased hallucination, belligerence, and hostility toward the staff, especially female staff, and that the elimination of MTV reduced the number of aggressive incidents against objects and other people by 37 percent.[8]

What this means, I believe, is that what is happening in film is part of a larger paradigmatic shift in perceptual process–predicted by Marshall McLuhan when he observed that "the message of the movie medium is that of transition from linear connections to configurations"[9]–and that the way we watch television and experience film is changing the way we perceive in the world and the way we think about it. In the silent film, for example, intertitle time was calculated as 3 seconds for the first word, and 1 second for every subsequent two words, with some intertitles lasting as long as half a minute. Today, as we have become more adept at reading the image the maximum acceptable time for modern subtitles of foreign films to remain on the screen as *part of* the overall image has shrunk to about 6 seconds in total.[10]

But while our ability to process the visual image and absorb its meaning emotionally and tonally has increased, there is no comparable time for reflection built into the visual presentation of television or film, nor is there any motivation in the visual format to later reflect on the immediate experience. In short, sensory stimulation alone has become the meaning–as McLuhan's now-famous dictum "The medium is the message" predicted–just as it has always been for the infant who is amused or not amused. Just as athletes train by repeating motions over and over again until the body memorizes the action, thereby making it automatic, the process of perceptual training can be just as effective.

This is particularly clear in the process of visualization. In one study by Richardson, for example, three randomly selected groups were used to test the effect of training on the accuracy of free-throws in basketball. The first group practiced only on the first and last day; the second group practiced free throws for 20 minutes each day; and the third group physically practiced only on the first and last day, and in between visualized themselves practicing free throws for 20 mirutes each day. At the end of twenty days, the first group didn't improve at all, the second group improved by 24 percent, and the third group improved by 23 percent.[11] This was in the late 1960s. Since then, mental visualization has become a basic part of all effective athletic training.

When we realize that watching television constitutes visual training from the earliest childhood through adulthood, and that by the time adolescents graduate from high school they have spent approximately 18,000 hours in this visual training, we begin to see why the perceptual patterns or "mental maps" which older adults have differ so greatly from those of the MTV generation. While the experience of films like *Grapes of Wrath* can be seen as the antithesis of the child's world of limited attention and momentary sensual stimulation, the action films which have followed in the

wake of *Top Gun*, such as *Under Siege* and *Under Siege II* continue the pattern of MTV pulsation stimulation without reflection, and this pattern is reinforced by video games which require total absorption in the image, fast action, and decision making without reflection. Feedback and gratification is immediate and sensory in terms of color, sound and movement.

In view of this trend, it is hardly surprising that many theorists predict that the fate of film in the near future will be inseparable from the development of Virtual Reality. Disney's *Aladdin* ride, derived from the film, for example, combines individual Virtual Reality head gear with interactive video technology to fully involve the participant in the experience by giving him or her not only the feeling of flying but also individual control over visual and physical orientation. As films become faster paced and more sensually specific, they too will ultimately come to envelop the spectator within the experience, and already some theaters have introduced moveable platforms which mimic theme park movie rides like those found in Universal Studios' "Back to the Future" ride and Disney World's "Aladdin."

Now involving millions of dollars to produce, such "film" rides bring us back full circle to the once seemingly divergent ideals of Lumière's recording of actual experience or Méliès' imagination come to life. In the process, the linear narrative and intellectual reflection which was characteristic of the Hollywood style at its best in the 1930s and 1940s has given way to raw, momentary artificial experience and titillation.

If film as art can be characterized by its ability to manipulate time and space and to direct thought and attitude in particular ways, then it is clear that film is evolving from the simple two-dimensional visual medium which fascinated viewers by the sheer novelty of its movement a century ago, to a totally immersive, multi-sensory experience which negates the probability of critical reflection and which celebrates immediate gratification over intellectual process.

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