

The Classical Filmmaking and the Advent of the Talking Film

LICA251: Film Cultures

Course-work Assignment 1

Author's Name

Institution

Date of Submission

Selected Question: Question 2

'[B]y 1938 or 1939 the talking film, particularly in France and in the United States, had reached a level of classical perfection' (André Bazin). Explain what you understand by this claim, outlining the key features of classical cinema with close reference to at least one relevant film example.

Rapid development of the film industry was witnessed in the twentieth century. The film industry was affected by a shift in culture, artistic advancement of film making, and improvement of filming technology. In the initial stages of development of film, culture influenced the process of filmmaking (Conley 1991, p.2). Thus, technology was modified to conform to the ideals of the existing culture, particularly in America and France, which were leaders in the development of film and cinema. Drama and theatre evolved into cinematography in the first half of the twentieth century. The silent film dominated the early stages of development of cinema (Celeste 2005, p. 46). The images were the major mode of transmission messages and effects to the audience. During the 1920s, filmmakers in America almost perfected the art of cinema using motion picture as the primary element in their films (Bazin & Gray 1967, p.33). Sound integration, which is an inherent characteristic of the talking films that dominate cinema today, was not important to cinema during the era of the silent film. In the 1930s, the sound film was developed by adapting the art of sound to the silent film (Davison A 2004, p.12). In *What Is Cinema*, Andre Bazin explores the art of filmmaking and the metamorphosis of the film culture. During the era of the silent film, the filmmakers added artistic character of cinema to reality to make the films popular and more engrossing for their audiences (Mank 1994, p.27). However, with the advent of the sound film, filmmakers were keen to shift from the art of appending an artistic twist to films, to the new trend of revealing the characteristics of reality. Through the sound, the filmmakers tried

to make cinema more realistic rather than adhere to the ideological tradition of the silent film (Danks 2002, p.5). This paper examines the technological and artistic developments that led to perfection between the classic silent film and the more modern talking film in the first half of the twentieth century.

With the advent of films, editing became a necessary feature to manipulate the effects of the motion picture. Therefore, filmmakers of the decade between 1930 and 1939 were able to perfect the art of talking filmmaking before the start of the Second World War (Bordwell et al. 1985, p.26). *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a good example of classical film perfection despite the fact that it was not until 1939 that the film industry reached the zenith of the classical era (Giddings 1999, p.115). *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a film adapted from a novel by Robert Louis Stevenson depicting doctor Jekyll, a doctor in London as a representation of the good nature of one man, and Mr. Hyde as the evil part of the same man. Dr Jekyll invents a drug that brings out the evil in him, effectively making Mr. Hyde a reality. Consequently, one man alternately changes nature between a good-natured Dr Jekyll and an evil Mr. Hyde. Unfortunately, this leads to a disturbing compulsive behaviour (Anobile, 1975, p.91). The film is based on a fictitious story, but clearly represents the typical classical film with dynamic picture and sound manipulations. Rouben Mamoulian, the director of *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, uses the flexibility of advanced filming to properly present themes in his work (Giddings 1999, p.90). The paranormal effects in the story of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are easily achieved using film techniques as adjustment of the angle of the camera (Anobile 1975, p.96). Such effects in the film are not created through editing, but using many different angles for filming the picture. The effect of this technique is the figure of Mr. Hyde emerges from the figure of Doctor Jekyll. The reverse transformation of Doctor Jekyll to Mr. Hyde uses the same techniques to present a believable fiction motion picture (Lerner 2010, p.76). Unusual scenes appear as real as other parts of the film. Moreover, such

advanced filming technique creates an impression of singular identity of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Danks 2002, p.3). On the other hand, dissolution of pictures to create the transformations would have presented an obviously fictitious film with two people with different identities as the main characters.

Movement of the cameras and the close up view of some of the characters allow the audience to perceive the nature and appearance of the main characters and capture the mood of the scene. In addition, such fused adjustments also allow the audience to see and integrate the background scenes with the characters. Through this technique, the audience can perceive the mood of the particular scene without compromising the almost realistic setting of the film (Bordwell et al., 1985). In contrast, early classical films presented motion pictures shot using fixed cameras with an integrated focus that tried to balance the background of the scene and the image of the film characters. Consequently, there was a lack of detail in the films, and reality was not well illustrated. These early films were a result of adoption of techniques used in early theatres where the audience was fixed and the angle of view was fixed. Furthermore, it was not possible to adjust the focus of the audience in the early films, and the plays appeared obviously dramatized (McElhaney 2006, p.29). The shifting of the camera focus with the change of the source of sound is also another feature of the film, depending on whether a sound is made by doctor Jekyll or Mr. Hyde, the focus shifts to the source to capture other effects of expression in the motion picture (Anobile 1975, p.104). Through such flexibility of equipment, the film becomes more complex, detailed and realistic since the audience does not easily decipher the presentation of paranormal actions.

Apart from speech, sound was used in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in the form of music to create a connection between the characters in the film and the audience. When the film begins, the first scene shows Doctor Jekyll playing music. The music plays as a motion picture of the scene outside is displayed, and finally, a theatre appears. Even when Doctor

Jekyll is playing music, he cannot be directly seen, but a reflection on a mirror can be seen. Visual perception is suppressed while music dominates the start of the film (Anobile 1975, p.108). Without any coherent words being spoken, the social status of Doctor Jekyll is presented through music. Everybody who knows him in the city treats him with utmost respect. Presentation of Doctor Jekyll at the start of the film helps the audience relate their own situation to that of the doctor, and subsequently to that of Mr. Hyde (Isenberg 2009, p.90). Furthermore, the characters in the film seem to address the audience directly. At one point, the ivy a character who tries to seduce doctor Jekyll, talks directly to the camera capturing the film. She seems to be talking to the audience without expressly indicating it. During this time, the members of the audience are likely to feel a part of the film and may feel like secondary characters. Such flexible use of music, sound, and capture angles connect the audience to the characters and the theme of the film.

Filming techniques, which included adjustment of picture capturing angles and use of sound, were used to present themes in classical cinema. This is clearly perceived in a film such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* when Ivy talks to the camera while undressing (Anobile 1975, p.109). A theme of sexuality is communicated to the audience through sound and the new picture filming technique. The mannerism of Ivy brings out the inherent evil of sexually explicit tendencies when she directly talks to the audience. The audience, Ivy, Doctor Jekyll, and inevitably, Mr. Hyde, share this nature. Therefore, the decade between 1930 and 1940 witnessed involvement of the audience in films such that it participated in the plot of the films as well as act as spectators.

In the classical films developed after 1930, motion pictures could be used to communicate themes independently just as sound could be used for effective communication. The independent use of pictures of thematic presentation is a filmmaking style borrowed from the silent films of the preceding decade and the theatre dramatizations that had

dominated entertainment before the advent of films (Celeste 2005, p.42). Motion picture editing is another feature of films that had been perfected by 1939. In *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* film of 1931, the image of Ivy is superimposed on the figure of Mr. Hyde in presence of Doctor Jekyll to create contrast between morality and immorality. This scene can also be interpreted as a conflict between good and bad. Motion picture superimposition and variety of capture angles successfully communicates the themes to the audience even without the use of any sound.

Before the 1930s editing of films and transformations for special effects were done using simple techniques that were obviously unconvincing to the viewer. However, with the development and employment of montage in the films of the 1930s such special effects could be achieved in any film with careful application of the new technique (Danks 2002, p.4). In earlier films, dissolution of motion pictures could illustrate such special effect as the transformation of Doctor Jekyll to Mr. Hyde in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by showing a scene of the doctor taking a potion, dissolving the picture, and then showing a fully transformed Mr. Hyde. On the other hand, montage could be used for a believable scene with the slow transformation of the doctor to Mr. Hyde. The effects of the potion on the doctor and the slow metamorphosis of the man's brain and physical form to an animalistic nature is shown using montage (Powell 2005, p.33). During the classical film era, montage was an important invention that was a common feature of films then. Although the art of applying montage to film making was not yet perfected, *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* film shows a significant improvement compared to the films made earlier (Anobile 1975, p.83).

During classical era, filmmakers started employing the art of varying depth and audible thoughts, a technique originating from France. French filmmakers such as Jean Renoir had perfected some stylistic devices that were used to improve videos of the time (McElhaney 2006, p.31). In addition, the sound was perfectly integrated into the films to

create a realistic scene. Through this technique, filmmakers were able to introduce situations that would have otherwise seemed unrealistic in a real life story (Bordwell et al. 1985, p.27). One of the distinct features of classical films was the use of voice-over to communicate the thoughts of the characters in the films. In earlier films, adjustment of the scene and plot of the film was used to insinuate the thoughts in the characters' minds. However, it was not possible to know the real thoughts of the characters the silent classical films. When thoughts were communicated aloud to the audience of the classical talking films of the 1930s, it was easier for the audience to follow the plot of the film (Vasey 1997, p.102). In *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Doctor Jekyll's thoughts are audible. Rouben Manoulian used this technique to keep the audience engaged (Danks 2002, p.2). Anybody watching the film would understand all scenes due to the guiding audible thoughts of the characters and the changing depth of the picture.

Most classical films are based on narrative methods. This is primarily because most film scripts were adaptations of stories from authors of literary material, or storylines of true real life events (Bazin & Gray, 1967). Conformity to the norms in the society was another prominent feature of classical films. This can be seen in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where the doctor is portrayed as the good person while Mr. Hyde is the evil person. Their appearances are modified to suit their roles in the film, and the modifications are done according to the expectations of the audience. Thus, the plot for the films seem to be driven by a certain motivation towards a certain desired direction (Anobile 1975, p.64). A narrative features an opening introduction, which may contain the main theme of the film. In addition, the main characters in the film are introduced and their nature may be expounded. A series of events then follows the introduction of the film. During the series of events that feature in the middle of the film, the occurrences and the behavior of characters may not point at any obvious direction. Finally, the last part reveals the truth in the film, and may pose an

unspoken rhetorical question for the audience. In the classical film era, most films had their setting in the society of the time. For this reason, all the scripts for films would be crafted to reflect the nature of the society or individuals in the society (Rhodes 2001, p.123). For example, *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is based on a story set in the city of London. The landscape of the city, its culture, and social structure are reflected in the narrative of the film. The film begins with the introduction of the main characters, their mannerisms, and status in the society. Several themes are explored during this time. The duality of human nature is illustrated by introduction of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as different characters of one individual. Through Ivy, the theme of sexuality is introduced. However, the middle part of the film evokes sympathy for doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Anobile 1975, p.61). Events in this section do not indicate victory for any side, whether good or bad. At the end of the film, Mr. Hyde dies and his dead self turns into Doctor Jekyll. In this instance, it is clear that the good side has claimed the victory over the bad side (Lerner 2010, p.52). This is a typical structure of a classical film here the feature of narrative method is prominent.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the classical film era featured perfection of filming technology for the classical films. Artistic development and technological advancement transformed films from imaginative dramatization, which bordered fantasy, to believable presentations affecting the core values of the society. The talking film then overtook the silent film. Films could not use motion picture editing and sound effects to communicate with the audience (Bluestone 1968, p.2). With the maturity of the art of filmmaking, the classical films used adjustable picture capturing techniques to create a motion picture that would present more reality rather than add mystery to the events in the film. Even paranormal events in classical films could be made to appear realistic using montage, sound and music. As the events on films became more realistic, the classical filmmaking industry neared perfection. It is during the classical filmmaking era that multiple

themes such as the duality of human personality and explicit sexuality could be explored using different capture angles and dynamic point of view for the capturing of the motion picture for the film. Furthermore, music and other sound effects were used to communicate thematic messages to the audience. Many of these characteristics of filmmaking were perfected by the year 1939. Therefore, the decade between 1930 and 1940 was the peak period for the classical filmmaking industry. It is during this period that the silent film was replaced by a more complex and realistic talking film in the United States and France, effectively leading to the perfection of the classic film.

References

- Anobile, R. J 1975, *Rouben Mamoulian's Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, starring Fredric March*, Universe Books, New York.
- Bazin, A., & Gray, H 1967, *What is cinema?*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Bluestone, G 1968, *Novels into film: the metamorphosis of fiction into cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Bordwell, D., Staiger, J., & Thompson, K 1985, *The classical Hollywood cinema: film style & mode of production to 1960*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Celeste, R 2005, The Sound of Silence: Film Music and Lament. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, no.2, pp.113-123.
- Conley, T 1991, *Film hieroglyphs: ruptures in classical cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Danks, A 2002, May 21, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde | Senses of Cinema. *Senses of Cinema*. Retrieved January 9, 2013, from <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/cteq/jekyll>
- Davison, A 2004, *Hollywood theory, non-Hollywood practice: cinema soundtracks in the 1980s and 1990s*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Hants, England.
- Giddings, R 1999, *From page to screen: adaptations of the classic novel*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Isenberg, N. W 2009, *Weimar cinema: an essential guide to classic films of the era*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Lerner, N. W 2010, *Music in the horror film listening to fear*, Routledge, New York.
- Mank, G. W 1994, *Hollywood cauldron: thirteen horror films from the genre's golden age*, McFarland, Jefferson, N.C.
- McElhaney, J 2006, *The death of classical cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli*, State University of New York Press, Albany.

Powell, A 2005, *Deleuze and horror film*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Rhodes, G. D 2001 *White zombie: anatomy of a horror film*, McFarland & Co., Jefferson, N.C.

Vasey, R 1997, *The world according to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wis.