

How do the techniques used in cabaret give us an insight into the characters of t...

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In the 1970s hit *Cabaret*, the director, Bob Fosse, successfully uses a variety of filmmaking techniques to draw attention to different aspects of the multifaceted characters. Our understanding of the characters is shaped through the use of techniques ranging from changes in costume to mise-en-scene.

Costuming is one of the most revealing aspects, and we can learn a lot about the characters by looking at the clothes they wear. Sally is a prime example of this. On stage Sally sports sexy, suggestive, revealing attire. She feels that she is divinely decadent and really is an international sensation as the emcee claims. This is reflected by the raunchy, glitzy clothes she wears. Sally tries to carry her femme fatale act on into her everyday life. Her clothing is different from the mainstream and this is Sally's attempt to be shocking. It shows a certain flamboyance, and self-confidence to wear these distinctive clothes.

However, bit by bit we start to see that the glamorous, decadent Sally is nothing more than a facade behind which a much more troubled, insecure person hides. At crisis points in Sally's life, she is exposed physically and emotionally as the femme fatale mask is stripped away. After she has had an abortion we see Sally in ordinary clothes. On a visit to her father, the little girl Sally emerges and she dresses normally to please her dad. Sally wears glamorous, revealing clothes when she is in a position where she feels she is glamorous, decadent and so on. In times of reality however, she adopts plain clothes. It is as though her clothing reflects not only her mood and feelings, but also her grasp on reality and submission to illusion.

Brian's costume is also very reflective of his personality. His well pressed, drab jacket and bland shirt immediately present him as a prim and proper, conventional Briton. As we come to meet Brian we find that this is indeed true. He is reluctant to change, and it takes a while before he accepts Sally's sexual advances. Brian undergoes one of the biggest changes when he begins to accept Max. Before he fully accepts Max, Brian changes his drab shirt and jacket for a blue sweater, showing that he is undergoing change. Until this point Brian has worn almost exactly the same clothes, highlighting his reluctance to change. By the time Brian is wanting to marry a pregnant Sally, he is a different man from the traditional Englishman we met at the beginning. He parades around wearing only a tie, pants and a hat. At the end when he decides to return to England, to his more reserved lifestyle he has also reverted back to his original plain clothes. The changes in his clothes are symbolic of the changes within him.

The emcee captivates his audience while wearing a smart suit. This consolidates his status as a powerful figure in Cabaret. He knows what will happen in the film, and his god-like position is reinforced by his smart attire. Max's wealth is evident from his clothing, as are Fritz's money woes from his frayed cuffs. In Cabaret, the clothing closely reflects the nature of the characters.

The characters' hair and make-up is also of relevance, and often it too changes with their costumes. The emcee wears a large amount of make-up to accentuate his facial features. His eyebrows are coated in mascara, his face is painted white, he wears vibrant red lipstick and has overly rosy

cheeks. He resembles a clown to some extent, or to take it a step further, almost a Shakespearian fool. The emcee plays a role like that of the fool as he dispenses his witty social commentary. Sally's attempts to dazzle and shock continue on into her hair and makeup. Her unusual fringe and hairstyle are truly unique, her eyes are accentuated and her green nails are almost unmistakable. Sally wants to attract attention and to appear, as she describes herself, as an "International Woman of Mystery." Especially in the club, and also in normal life, Sally believes she is this shocking, fantastic person she so desperately wishes to be. Once again, after she returns from her abortion, she is void of her extravagant makeup and the physical exterior behind which she masquerades is gone. The real Sally is exposed. This occurs too when she goes to visit her father. Sally's makeup is another device she uses to propagate her facade.

Fosse uses mise-en-scene to shape our perceptions of the characters. Music and dancing is key to Sally's life and her record player is visible in many shots to emphasize this. Sally is a promiscuous girl, and we are reminded of the centrality of her sexual relationships by the central location of her large bed in her room. There is a component of Sally that is truly flamboyant, and this is shown in her room by the presence of living plants. Fosse places barriers in the shots between Sally and Brian right from the beginning, and these barriers allude to the ultimate break-up of their relationship.

Fosse uses editing to great effect to communicate parallels and connections between the characters and between events. One example is when Sally

performs *Maybe This Time*. This song drops Sally's promiscuous attitude and shows that Sally really does yearn for love. She is not just singing this song, but she really does hope that maybe this time her relationships will work out. This is shown by the intercutting of scenes showing the development of Sally and Brian's new intimacy. We understand that this is how Sally feels about Brian. This song is also important in terms of the choreography. In the other numbers Sally feels sexy and important as she performs her vivacious, suggestive routine to a large audience. In this song, there are no raunchy moves, nor is there much of an audience. We see that Sally is not trying to impress anyone with her apparent decadence. There is no need for her suggestive moves, because this is a song in which she is being herself - someone who longs for love.

When Brian first appears he is immediately connected to the cabaret world through intercutting with scenes of the emcee. The emcee's god-like role is reinforced by crosscutting, as shots of him smiling sinisterly are shown after noteworthy events have occurred, as if he is saying "I knew that would happen". The political nature of the emcee's song, *If You Could See Her*, and his sympathy to the Jews, is highlighted by the continuation of the song's music into the next shot, which shows Fritz having made his decision.

Camera angles are key in showing people as being strong and in control, or weak and powerless. After her abortion, Sally is shown from a number of high angles, and as we look down on her we get the impression of her powerlessness. In contrast, the emcee is shown from low angles, and he appears at an elevated position on the stage. This reaffirms the power the

emcee possesses, that is the knowledge of what is to come. In Sally's final song, lighting is used to show her changing emotions. She sings that life is a cabaret but is she ready to have moved on from Brian? A close up of her is shown in which as she sings, the spotlight on her progressively increases in warmth. This change in lighting alerts us to the fact that Sally has indeed committed herself to the cabaret, and is in fact ready to resume her search for stardom.

The techniques used in Cabaret really do give us an insight into the characters of the film. People are presented not only as who they are, but also as who they attempt to be. These techniques allow us to better understand each character, and tell us a lot about how they're feeling, their desires and emotions. Whether it is through the subtle changes in mise-en-scene or through the blatant differences in choreography or costume, Fosse's host of film techniques shapes the characters and our understanding of them.