

How do any of the
films shown differ
from Bordwell's
understanding of
classical narra...



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The Basic concepts of narrative structure in pre 1960's Hollywood followed quite strict codes and conventions, in terms of what the audience expected and also in what the film studios imposed. Telling the story to an audience was the basic concern of the film and filmmaker. The narrative had to be neatly presented in small chunks the audience could digest. Only relevant information (diegetic material) should be present, in order to move the story onwards. For example if the image of a gun was shown it would be safe to assume that it would be used or serve some purpose in the film's storytelling.

If the gun had little or no relevance in plot terms, the film had no business misleading the audience with a false sense of anticipation. It also had to offer a sense of closure for the audience with no character or subplot "loose ends", which could leave the viewer wondering or unsatisfied. The film should also be realistic in the world it is set. The narrative structure in the film should be entirely acceptable in that universe. The idea of the "classical Hollywood narrative model" was to encourage the audience to suspend disbelief and almost join the protagonist in his/her journey.

The characters were never complex "A character is made up of a consistent bundle of few traits, which usually depend on the character's narrative function"- Bordwell, D. It seemed a very safe way of filmmaking, but these rules left no room for experimentation. Some younger film makers in France (who later formed French New Wave Cinema) argued that this conventional method of story telling took the art away from the artist and made filmmakers into nothing but industry craftsmen.

Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Goddard and Eric Rohmer were once all film critics for the French magazine *Cashiers du Cinema*, they then went on to make low budget films of their own and eventually form what is known today as “ The New Wave movement”. Other Young French filmmakers soon followed suit. They all wanted to be auteurs of their films and stamp their own signature on their work. To do this they created new and inventive ways of filmmaking and story telling. Goddard for instance is famous for using jump cuts and lengthy rambling dialogue in his films (often improvised) some of it meaningless to the plot.

Truffauts “ Shoot the pianist”-1960 was classical new wave cinema. The low key lighting and sombre mood of the piece paid homage to the early American Gangster movies. Truffaut shot the film on location with the use of “ i?? clairs” hand held cameras usually used for documentaries or news coverage. Truffaut also used faster film stocks which required less light and more often used the available light on location rather than expensive studio lighting. This arguably gave the filmmaker more artistic freedom with their work. This method of production in itself went against the working ethics of the studios of the times.

Rather than big elaborate sets, Traffaut decided to shoot on black and white film in humble bars and cafes. “ New wave took cinema out of the studio and onto the streets celebrating its new found possibilities”. -Cook, P Shoot the pianist was not only produced in an unconventional style, the narrative and characters were also different from expectations. The opening to the film is shot at night, with a car chasing a man down the road. The man falls and is

helped to his feet by a passer by. The passer by divulges detailed information about his marriage.

As a conventional audience we would expect that information and the character of the Passer by to lead us into the next scene, or at least have some plot relevance. He doesn't the passer by simply walks out of frame and out of the cinematic world we are presented with. We as an audience are left with no explanation of its relevance, or offered a conclusion to his marital problem.. It could be argued that the passer-by was simply present to enforce the manipulative personality of the character of the man, a trait shown later in the film.

But I personally feel that the scene was too fleshed out and random to treat the passer by as nothing more than a throw away character. Also a more central figure, Lars Shmeel, is not properly " dealt" with. Even given the fact that he slept with Edouard's wife, which was then, indirectly related to her suicide. The narrative offers no conclusion for his character. There is not even a suggestion of some sort of revenge by Edouard or at least some kind of natural comeuppance which would give the character (and the audience) what they deserved.

Another convention of the classical narrative, is the quick introduction of the protagonist, present him/her with an obstacle then follow the protagonists motivation to reach a goal and bring about resolution to the fictional world. The " Problem" with the " Pianist" is that it takes a along time for the audience to realise that Charlie is the hero. First we are presented with his brother being chased (the man mentioned earlier). Then the passer-by both

of whom seems to be “red hearings” for the audience. The obstacle that Charlie must overcome to restore equilibrium to his world is never really made clear.

For the first half of the film he seems swept along with other characters problems with no clear motivation or goal for himself. Charlie as a character is very complex, almost having to conflicting personalities. Dealing with his ongoing timidness is a prominent subplot throughout the film, yet in an early scene while in bed with the prostitute Clarisse, the character of Charlie is full of confidence, initializing sex and talking very randomly about nothing in particular. It certainly doesn't have anything to do with driving the plot forward, other than introducing Clarisse as a character.

There is no plot reason that Charlie should be sleeping with her. Charlie is mostly presented as a morally correct, shy character, so if anything this scene goes “against the grain”, again setting the audience up with another narrative structure which never follows through. The only goal he is individually motivated to achieve is the rescue of his younger brother Fido from his kidnappers (which he is only indirectly responsible, as Fido escapes of his own accord) and to protect Lena from any danger during the climax of the film, which he fails to do.

I wouldn't regard the character of Charlie Kohler as a traditional hero that classical narrative film usually presents. He seems to be a loner and is constantly unlucky throughout the film. “New Wave films often lack goal orientated protagonists. The heroes may drift aimlessly, engage in actions on the spur of the moment”- Boardwell, D. The “cause and effect” theory is

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present within Truffaut's piece, although it has been "tipped on its head" and played with by Truffaut, as all of Charlie's actions suffer disastrous consequences.

Such as the suicide of his wife when he decides to leave her alone in the room and himself nearly getting killed when he intervenes in a fight between his boss "Plyne" and Lena. An argument which just before it begins, Charlie, with the use of voice over tells us that he has no interest or concern with. We hear his inner most thoughts then a second later the character contradicts them with his actions. As a whole Charlie doesn't seem to possess consistent character traits. Bordwell's understanding of narrative also includes the style of how the film is presented to us.

In terms of continuity editing, the shot/reverse shot and matching eye lines between subjects were very much the convention in 1940 & 50's filmmaking. Truffaut again plays with the rules in the "Pianist". Much of the film is shown in shot/reverse shot order, but in one scene in particular (when Edouard is confronting his wife) Truffaut favours to use a long take, rather than cutting, the characters move around the frame in conversation while Truffaut uses mirrors on the wall to catch the expressions of the characters, rather than cutting to their faces.

It can therefore be argued that not only are the characters inconsistent, but also in the style the film is presented to us in. Other examples of this, are when Fido is in the car with the two gangsters. There is a silent insert shot of Momo's mother dying, when Momo jokes that his mother should drop dead if he is not telling the truth. Funny as this gag is, it is out of place in this

particular film and also era. The shot is more remanisant of the silent film genre, where the films had to rely on cruder methods of visual story telling.

Also when Fido drops milk on the gangsters car, it is the only scene which is not shown in real time. Truffaut tells his critics, that “ Shoot the pianist” is in no way a parody of Early American Cinema, but homage, to a mix of films, filmmakers and genres. In my opinion this is a huge reason as to why the piece doesn't fit in with Bordwell's narrative theory. Classical narrative films were presented to us in a “ tight package” they all fitted into a certain categories or genres, depending on their style and content, whether it be a musical, a thriller and so on. The Pianist” makes homage's to so many styles and genre, it becomes genre-less in itself.

There are homage's to, American detective thrillers, musicals, silent comedy, Hitchcock and even the Cowboy Western genre. The films title could be taken as one reference, and there is a direct reference at the end of the film when just before Earnest shoots Lena he spins his pistol on his finger in cowboy fashion. The end of the movie is shown in a full blown shoot out style, rather than the gangsters quietly sneaking around, lurking in the shadows (Like I would have expected).

Because so many genres are represented in Truffauts work, it is hard for the audience to build up any anticipation of what is coming next. When Charlie and Lena are thrown into the car by Earnest and Momo, Classical narrative codes would tell us we as an audience were in for a tension filled confrontation, Instead the characters indulge in a very random, comical

discussion about sex. For a moment it even seems as if Charlie and Lena are enjoying the company of their kidnappers.

The third act of the film shows Charlie returning to work as usual, the film comes full circle. He is in the bar playing piano at the beginning and in the same place at the end. The journey of the film hasn't changed him, if anything the minor goals he set out to achieve, conquer his timid ness, and to find love have worked in reverse, they have made him worse. It could be argued that because of this not only the character of Charlie but the film itself has no real closure or resolution.

The French New wave movement films were not really made to be exported; they were low budget films made for a French audience. Ironically many were not an immediate success and received far more critical acclaim from American audiences, and were regarded as hugely influential films, leading the way for more experimental film making which we still see today and are now regarded as mainstream movies, all with a brand new set of codes and conventions.

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