2014

It's Better to Have Loved and Lost: Exploring the Creation of Emotional Connections Between Inanimate Film Characters and the Spectator in "The Window Display"

Kamyn Asher
Scripps College

It's Better to Have Loved and Lost: Exploring the Creation of Emotional Connections Between Inanimate Film Characters and the Spectator in "The Window Display"

Media Studies Production Thesis Fall 2013

Scripps College

December 9th, 2013

Kamyn Asher

Film is a visual experience. Even though the script tells the story, images are equally responsible for creating meaning. In many ways the visual language adds elements to the story that dialogue alone could not deliver. In his book The Act of Seeing, Wim Wenders, a German filmmaker remarks, "how can 'images' or 'seeing' be the subject for a film?" (19). This question seemed rather odd, in that, film requires the spectator to see images on screen. Stories are transmitted through shots, edited in particular ways to convey meaning. Ultimately, for me, every film is about seeing, and through this sight, an individual interpretation of the images. Wender echoes this sentiment: "There are not opinions in seeing; in seeing you can come to a view of another person, an object, the world, that doesn't imply an opinion, where you just confront the thing or person, take it on board, perceive it" (46). This does not mean that each image is purely objective, merely it tries to acknowledge that the subjectivity of the image comes from within the characters and events onscreen not the external perceptions of the audience. Noting this particular way of seeing the image sparked questions regarding the relationship between the spectator and fictional characters, namely in reference to the ways in which films create an emotional connection with the audience. As many filmmakers would attest, the story in a film is fundamental to forming a connection with the audience. However, in my project "The Window Display," the focus I wanted to take was based on the images themselves, exploring the ways in which cinematic tropes conveyed through cinematography can convey the emotional well being of its characters to an audience, and how that respective audience can be effected by these emotions.

Before identifying the ways in which the filmmaker develops the emotional connection between the onscreen characters and audience, one must understand the ways

in which people come to identify with fictionalized characters. According to Murray

Smith in <u>Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and Cinema</u>, there is a set of

characteristics that define the human; this is called the human schema:

> 1) a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space;
> 2) perceptual activity, including self awareness;
> 3) intentional states, such as beliefs and desires;
> 4) emotions;
> 5) the ability to use and understand a natural language;
> 6) the capacity of self-impelled actions and self-interpretation;
> 7) the potential for traits, or persisting attributes (21).

Fictional and cinematic characters are constructed based on this schema as well as

particular cultural models, which "makes them salient and endows them with certain

basic capacities" (Smith, 31). The individuality of the character remains important in

rooting the subject in a place of universal identification as a discrete human body. While

every human is capable of these seven functions, they can also serve as "a model for

understanding non-human forces and entities – a phenomena recognized in the concepts

of 'animism' and 'personification'" (Smith 24). In this way, the framework for human

identification gives a sense of agency to non-human beings and a point of human

connection. Thus, there remains a basic structure upon which characters are constructed

allowing the audience to connect with characters on screen.

Emotional connections are created through the audience's ability to indentify with

the characters through the construction of sympathy and empathy. Typically the

narration is used to structure and relay the sympathy to the audience. In film, the

narration comprises the cinematic language. For example, Laura Mulvey's concept of the

male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema suggests that the audience identify with the

male point of view throughout the narrative (Mulvey 12). While theorists and scholars

use the general term of "identification" to illustrate the connection between the viewer

and on-screen character, in actuality this is a much more complex series of engagements

between the two respective parties. Sympathy is constructed by three concepts:

recognition, alignment and allegiance (Smith, 82). Recognition is simply the

acknowledgement of the fictional character; alignment identifies the placement of

spectator in relation to the character; and allegiance deals with the examination of the

character's morals by the viewer (Smith, 82-84). In addition, emotional stimulation,

responding to another person's pain for instance, and affective mimicry, mirroring

another's state of being, furthers the connection between character and viewer (Smith

96). Therefore, the spectator can "identify" with the character on screen through these

different modes of emotional identification.

The methods that produce emotional connection primarily apply to human

subjects as they pertain to the way in which the camera captures the image of the person

and relates it to the audience. The filmmaker uses a camera to present "stereotypes and

other aesthetic devices in order to create particular effects," which are designed to gain a

"response from an appropriately knowledgeable spectator" (Smith 64). These cinematic

elements prove quite important in developing the emotional narrative. The photographic

nature of film lends itself to the creation of emotional connections. Visual language is

interpretable to most cultures, despite the difference of spoken language, and these

images are specific in that it even if the character has no name, they are specified by their

visual appearance (Gaut 284). The close-ups on the faces of characters allow the

audience to see their emotional facial expressions in detail. This intimacy enables the

viewer to experience alignment with the character, as well as emotional stimulation. The

technique of point of view shots aids in creating the emotional connection through audience alignment as well. It gives the viewer a chance to partake in the character own experiences, opening a door into the mind of fictional beings. Adding in the movement of the camera "can focus attention by moving towards something, add to the dynamic impact of a scene and ground a sense of quasi-personality, which draws the viewer emotionally into the film" (Gaut 249). In relation to the presentation of the image, the editing of the film also provides opportunities to exhibit emotional engagement of the film. Essentially, the editor is responsible for the construction of the story, determining rhythm through the way the cuts are compiled together, which ultimately generates the story's meaning. The editing can also create emotional tension if the film cuts between shots quickly or drags out the long shot. Parallel editing, cutting between scenes while increasing in pace, builds suspense. In addition, the musical elements further the emotional relationship between film and spectator. Berys Gaut remarks that music, "through its association with the particular events represented, gains greater expressive power and thereby imparts that power to the film as a whole" (251). Thus, while the images impart lots of emotional information, the music signals the mood of the piece, emphasizing and aiding the spectator's emotional journey.

Historically, many of these techniques were in place during the time of silent cinema because the filmmaker was dependent on visual language to tell their story. Techniques such as shot/reverse shot, eye line matches, and cutting between multiple spaces were already in use around 1912 (Thompson, 254). Directors began to expand upon these basic cinematic methods in attempts to deeper the audience's emotional connections (Ibid). These techniques spanned from new acting methods to selective and

stylized lighting to a more complex editing style. This led to the transition from the previous "theatrical" quality of film to the more "cinematic" quality of classical Hollywood cinema that remains today.

In positioning my own project within the theoretical framework of emotional connectivity through the narrative of images, in particular the ways in which a silent film can construct meaning, I looked at some examples of classic silent cinema and an untraditional film that uses inanimate object as substitutes for live action characters. F.W. Murnau, a leading German filmmaker during the silent film era remarked that, "screen art ought, through its unique properties, to tell a complete story by means of images alone; the ideal film does not need titles" (Eisner 85). Coupled with Wender's ideas of seeing, Murnau's thoughts on the image pushed me to look at the way silent films use visual language.

Charlie Chaplin's "City Lights" (1931) and "The Tramp" (1915) served as a jumping off point for the silent film segment of "The Window Display." Significant elements that immediately mark a silent film are: 1) the different frame rate that makes the image appear like it is moving in a halting fashion, 2) the black and white film, 3) the action narrated by the images as well as intertitle cards that explain the scene, location, or character's dialogue and 4) music floods the background, changing frequently to mirror the events on screen, often played by a live orchestra.

Also serving as inspiration were silent films by the Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu. One of the most canonical Japanese film directors, he never conformed to the Hollywood traditions, especially when it came to the structure of his film. He used "pillow shots" which were static shots of objects serving as transitions throughout the

film. I was drawn to these shots because of the use of objects as the subject of my film. While I do not utilize the idea of a "pillow shot" in the same way, this was an alternative way of seeing how directors use inanimate objects in cinema.

The silent film sequence in "The Window Display," echoes some of the filmic aspects that would be found in a Charlie Chaplin's work. Since most of Chaplin's work emphasizes slapstick humor as a central component, it was important that the stool and pants share some similarly funny moments. Most of the scene's humor plays on the unexpectedness of seeing the pants and stool perform human acts. Both "City Lights" and "The Tramp" showcase run-down and beaten up protagonist much like the stool in "The Window Display." For the orchestral effect, it was important to have two different musical elements within the silent film portion. The sequence begins and ends with vaudeville-esque love music. It transitions in the middle to a romantic song played during their dance. While this song may not come directly from the era, it was important to position this piece within a present day context as well as create it as homage to the silent films. The use of intertitles was extremely important. While I wanted to give the stool humanistic qualities, I did not want to give it a voice. It was crucial that the audience members be able to create their own voice for the stool. Not only would a voice over take away from the silent cinema aspect but it would also force a pre-imagined character on the audience. Moreover, the emphasis would have been taken away from the visual imagery on screen and placed on the story the stool was orally telling. It was important that the audience be able to fill in some of the stool's character, akin to reading a character from a book. In this case, the audience catches glimpses into the mind of the stool, supplementing the emotional soundtrack and imagery with a few lines of internal

dialogue. Lastly the sped up shots try and mimic the different frame-rate present in the old Hollywood cinema.

The other media influence that sparked some of the ideas in my film was Todd Haynes MFA student film "Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story" (1987). While using documentary elements to re-create the life and death of singer Karen Carpenter, Haynes takes his film to an extremely ironic level creating all his characters out of Barbie and Ken dolls while keeping the film live-action. This creates a fascinating relationship between the film subject Karen and the real Karen because she died from complications that arose from anorexia. Thus, the Barbie dolls add an ironic layer, commenting on societies detrimental effects of self and body image. However, what was striking about the film was the way in which Haynes attempted make the audience feel emotionally connected to Karen the Barbie. Haynes built scale models of all the sets and interspersed the Barbie scenes with text and voice over, both which commented on anorexia. Haynes did not focus specifically on the cinematic technique to create this effect but there were elements of music and camera movement that aided the emotional connection. Much of the music that was not Karen's own songs had qualities of horror film orchestration, which added suspense throughout the film and engaged the viewer. There were multiple point of view shots from both Karen and Karen's mom's perspective. Thus, the audience is allowed to "identify" with both characters even though they take on the form of inanimate dolls. Unlike my project, the use of voice-over in "Superstar" was one of the most pivotal factors in giving Karen a way to connect with the human viewers.

My project "The Window Display" attempts to use these ways of emotionally identifying with a human character and translate that identification to an inanimate

object. Creating a story about objects is not foreign in the film industry, for example Pixar has movies such as "Cars" and "WALL-E" in its archives. However, anthropomorphism comes a lot easier within the context of animation. The objects can have human faces, talk, and have their own agency, encompassing much of the human schema. Live action animation differentiates my film from the Pixar films. Part of the project was developing a relationship between the stool and pants without altering their physicality; for example, giving them a human face. This was accomplished in a few ways, drawing on some of the constructs of sympathy outlined previously. Clearly, the stool, not being human and being immobile, possesses no agency of its own. The stool's immobility was important to the story because it made the camera do the work for the "actor." It also added a complexity to the story, illustrating the stool's helplessness and "otherness" from the beginning of the film. Moreover, it made the human characters vehicles for the plot, treating them as supporting characters. Within these physical constructs I used the camera to create movement, drawing the viewer's attention to important components. In much the same way as an audience member would be placed beside a human character through alignment, the viewer can identify with the predicament of the stool through the use of point of view shots. Therefore, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the stool's perception of the world. On top of this, music provided an enormous aid in helping to stimulate emotions from the audience.

The most successful part of the film in terms of creating this emotional connection would be the fantasy silent film sequence. This is for a few reasons. First, all the scenes are comprised of activities a person would do (such as cleaning a cut, dancing with a significant other, or having sexual relations). Even though the objects are the

participants, the audience recognizes that these are universally human actions and thus can relate to the three different scenes. Second, the stool and pants both have agency. The audience must suspend their disbelief and begin to see the characters as type of discrete "human" body. This comes to fruition through the cinematic techniques employed in this sequence. Third, the combination of music yet again and the intertitles provide the stool with depth of character. The absence of dialogue places the pressure upon the image to create an object that the audience can "identify" with, thus in using vignettes of familiar pastimes the audience can visually identify, instead of needing voices to create the effect of personification.

There are a few ways in which "The Window Display" strays away from traditional cinematic tropes. Customarily, a film such as this will open with an exterior establishing shot of the location. I decided to exclude this and start from within the restaurant. From the perspective of the stool, the whole world is the restaurant. Since I wanted the audience to start to feel a part of the stool's universe from the beginning of the film, I did not want to introduce the position of the spectator outside the restaurant; rather they experience the journey from the interior restaurant to external world with the stool. Secondly, the stool and pants are not framed like human protagonists of a love story but like objects. Their inanimate presence is a central theme so I wanted to emphasize this through the shots.

Originally, the story was written as prose for a screenwriting class. In prose, it was much easier to convey the internal dialogue that composed the thoughts and feelings of a dilapidated stool in a classic Americana diner. In order for the reader to relate to the stool, I relied on what could be considered classical predicaments of a stool (such as gum

being stuck underneath) to create a type of recognition and alignment for the reader. Similar to the film one of the major conflicts of the story is the stool's lack of agency, as the stool cannot reach the object of his love. In the original edition, a beautiful new chaise lounge chair resides in the window display of a fancy furniture store across the street from the stool's diner. For the stool, it is love at first sight. However, he cannot physically move to her, nor can he catch her attention. In the end, a couple who come into the store, see the chaise lounge and buy it for themselves, leaving the stool to stare longingly at the empty window.

The plot of the film diverged from the original short story for a few reasons. I was constrained by locations and transportation. Within Claremont there are only a few restaurants that I found that would be desirable for the location. None of these restaurants had a furniture store across the street. Therefore, as pre-production developed, I found that I was constantly altering the original idea. In this vein, the chaise lounge changed to a pair of pants. While this seems random, the stool falls in love with pants because, from the stools point of view, he is constantly in contact with customer's pants; developing an affinity for them through this continuous proximity.

There were three major challenges that I came across in the project, one in pre-production, production, and post-production. While camera movement was not an issue, creating a dynamic scene with an object proved to be quite difficult. I had been thinking very narrowly about primarily the visual representation and not of the filmic elements as a whole. After storyboarding the beginning of the film, it was clear that the emphasis was on the human subjects instead of focusing on the objects. Regrouping and rethinking

of the story led to the creation of the fantasy sequence, and with it a whole new set of hurdles.

It was very important to have the stool and pants interact with each other within the fantasy, sharply juxtaposing the distancing of the two objects in "reality." Stop motion was brought up as a viable option for animating the objects, but I thought it would take away from the traditional silent cinema feel I was attempting to emulate. After much deliberation, the outcome was to "animate" the objects in real time. Here, framing of the image proved to be of the upmost importance. While having crewmembers manipulate the objects, the camera captured just the parts of the image without the puppeteers allowing the stool and pants to take on a life of their own.

In post-production, the editing process proved to be my biggest obstacle. Especially for this project, editing had to get creative. Shots were not necessarily what I had storyboarded, due to difficulties on location. It required that I piece together parts of the narrative from different takes. Moreover, the editing program Premiere was a new to me and there was quite a learning curve editing with new software. The film came together in the editing room because it was about each image as a part coming together to form a whole. As I have mentioned a few times earlier, music and sound played an essential role in the film, coming to realization only in post-production. The film starts with a melancholy tone, emphasized by the mournful music. In the following sequence, the music dies down to emphasize the diegetic sound of the environment, particularly the sounds associated with objects (trash bag, rag, stool). This, in effect, roots the viewer in the "reality" of the restaurant as the sounds are linked with the actions taking place. The

music returns when the stool notices the pants, creating a fantastical feeling, illustrating the stools interior emotions.

Looking at the final product, my project deals with other problematic media ideologies separate from the issues I was addressing. The most prominent issue I see in my film is the emphasis on the "male gaze." Not only is my film from the perspective of the "male" gendered "entity," but it also focuses on the "male" stool looking in what could be interpreted as an objectifying gaze at the "female" pants. The whole story is in fact about voyeurism. In a similar vein, I constructed gender binaries from objects that are inherently genderless. This made me question the ways in which visual language communicates with the spectator. While, they are not gendered in extreme ways, the fantasy sequence clearly illustrates the more feminine pants taking care of the masculine stool. Perhaps the unconscious gendering stems from the fear of leaving identities ambiguous especially when dealing with the difficult task of making objects more accessible to human identification.

As this project has explored lots of historical connections to cinematography, emotions, and characters, it also resides in a critical position within the current state of media and future media projects. In particular I am referencing the use of objects in the commercial industry. Commercials use inanimate objects ranging from the Swiffer advertisements to Reynolds Wrap tin foil men to a singing M&M. At first it might seem strange to personify objects that a company wants to sell to consumers, however, through this project it is clear the positive implications for such an advertising strategy. If the audience can identify with an object, they could potentially want it more than if they have no emotional connection to it at all. The anthropomorphic quality of these objects

coupled with techniques that promote audience engagement with the item generates a desire to have the product. In conclusion, not only does my thesis illustrate that emotional connections can be fostered between on-screen inanimate protagonists and the audience through cinematic language but that this ability lends itself to other areas of visual representation illustrating ways in which the tropes of cinematic language bleed into the greater culture, though the market of production and consumption.

Works Cited

Eisner, Lotte H. *Murnau,* Berkeley: University of California, 1973. Print.

Gaut, Berys Nigel. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.
    Print.

Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford:
    Clarendon, 1995. Print.

Thompson, Kristin. "The International Exploration of Cinema Expressivity." *The Silent
    Cinema Reader*. By Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer. London: Routledge, 2004.
    245-69. Print.

Wenders, Wim. *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*. London: Faber, 1997.
    Print.

Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16: 3 (Autumn 1975), 12

Filmography

City Lights. Dir. Charlie Chaplin. Perf. Charlie Chaplin. S.n., 1931.

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story. Dir. Todd Haynes. Perf. Merrill Gruver and
    Michael Edwards. 1988.

The Tramp. Dir. Charlie Chaplin. Perf. Charlie Chaplin. Released by Blackhawk
    Films/Eastin-Phelan, 1915.