Creating Empathy for the ‘Other’: Analytical Essay

Introduction

Science fiction is a genre of film that combines scientific facts with fictional narratives (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012). The genre enables filmmakers to explore the potential “societal and technological trajectory” of humanity (Bonnor, Buis, Garica, Sharma, Tatham-Maye, 2009). A reoccurring character in science-fiction films are humanoid creatures, otherwise referred to as the ‘alien’ character. The definition of the ‘alien character’ in this research is not restricted to extra-terrestrials, rather a creature that embodies “difference and otherness”, highlighting what “is not human” (Geraghty, 2003). Through this representation of the alien character, science-fiction directors establish the sociological concept of the ‘other’, the subject of this research. Nevertheless, a select few films create empathy for the plight of the alien character.

The guiding research question of this study is: How do directors create empathy with alien ‘other’ characters in Science-Fiction films? The selected films for analysis are District 9 (Blomkamp, 2009) and The Shape of Water (Del Toro, 2017). Although these films come from contrasting cultural contexts, they are similar in that their respective directors make the audience empathise with the alien character as part of delivering the story to the audience.

The research methodology includes the examination of a range of science-fiction alien films from a number of cultural contexts. These films have an alien character as the protagonist, such as ET (Spielberg, 1982), Avatar (Cameron, 2009) and Bright (Ayer, 2017), to name a few. Aliens that were solely depicted as the antagonist were excluded from the study as there was no basis for audience empathy, the focus of this research. This research has focused on District 9 and The Shape of Water to explore the research question in detail.

The research into science-fiction alien films suggested that there is a ‘format’ for creating empathy for the ‘other’. The audience are initially positioned to see the aliens as “anarchic and debased” (Stobie 2012, 141). Nevertheless, the viewer is “required to make shifts over the course of the ?lm”, allowing the audience to see the alien’s perspective (Stobie 2012, 141). The developing relationship between the human and alien character position the audience to feel empathy (Robinson and Canavan 2014, para 151). Subsequently, the alien undergoes a transformation from the ‘other’, to a perceived equal to humanity. From this research, an original approach was proposed for creating alien empathy. The following is proposed as the four phases used to structure, sequence and control an audience relationship with an alien ‘other’ character:

1. The alien character is introduced in stark contrast to human familiarity, creating an audience reference point in terms of misunderstanding and judgement. (This is presented below as “introducing the alien”).
2. Context for the alien character is provided for audience comprehension and subsequent perspective. (Presented below as “An alternative perspective of the alien”).
3. A comparison such as a significant event is presented to the audience to compare alien and human characters on the same basis, prompting alien empathy. (Presented below as “A significant event”).

4. Audience acceptance of the alien character is enhanced with exposure to deeper character thinking and reflection. (Presented below as “Audience understanding of the other”).

The ‘narrative’ based structure of this research best demonstrates how the filmic elements support the audience’s changing relationship with the alien ‘other’. This approach is able to provide greater insights to address the research question by first reviewing the narrative and then the filmic elements as they relate specifically to each film.

The research consists of a variety of sources, such as books, journals, academic reviews, online articles, as well as individual analysis of the film. The use of primary sources such as quotes from interviews with the director was obtained from less academically inclined sources such as online articles. Nevertheless, reliable sources were also chosen from reputable platforms such as Research Gate and JSTOR, lending this research credibility.