Realism Across Eras Of Filmmaking: Jaws (1975), The Shining (1980) And Death Becomes Her (1992)

Realism, the Key to film's success

Q- Choose at least two decades of filmmaking from the 1950s onwards relevant to this course (eg. 1970s and 1950s, 1970s and 2000s) and with reference to the relevant readings, consider how innovations in technologies of cinematography (eg. cameras, film stock, lighting techniques) of that era serve an idea of "realism". To what extent is realism defined the same way across eras of filmmaking, or how and why does it change?

Within the history of modern cinema, perhaps 1970s is the most innovative decade of high experimentation made possible by faster film stock, new cameras and new sound mixing. New talents of cinematographers like Bill Butler came to prominence as the old generations are retired. The young generations are not fulfilled with the existing technology and film quality, but more willing to innovate fresh techniques to achieve a requesting of realism. Thus, Steadicam, dykstraflex, zoom, and Dolby sound system crowd into film market. (Christopher, 2016) So does 1990s, the CGI technology significantly developed during this decade. The following essay will compare the innovative techniques from 1970s and 1990s, and demonstrates how the new technologies of cinematography in two decades portray diverse or same realism in regards to the horrific theme. To demonstrate, this essay will examine Steven Spielberg's Jaws (1975), Stanley Kubrick's The Shining (1980) and Robert Zemecki's Death becomes her(1992). Practically, my choice of two comparing decades is somehow pretty close in historical timeline, in that some differences of two decades are obscure to clearly distinguish and even there are a few ill-defined cinematography techniques. For instance, the technology of CG is born at 1920s, seldom cinematographers do utilized CG during the 1970s. However here I put CGI as one of representative innovation of filming technology during 1990s as it's the decade that CGI has notably developed in film and there are several qualified CGI film released during that decade.

Firstly, it is essential to understand what is a sense of realism in film(not including documentary genre). In short, realism is simply a sense, an illusion. The nature of cinematographic images, the relation of plot to reality, the credibility of images, and understanding of the world effectively determine how much extent of reality that viewers could catch. Besides, cinematic realism has two individual, discrete approaches of filmmaking. One is refers the verisimilitude of a film to the real characters and story, which is reality reproduction. The second case usually based on cinematography techniques, and refers to create a sense of realism on the character or story which might not be real. While the qualified realistic film after 1950s proves a concern with verisimilitude and the reproduction of the surface appearances of reality, when confronting the dimmer aspects of reality, realism was considered to be far more closely related with the horrific theme.(Paul Frith, 2017) Hence, this essay will examine how different cinematography techniques create a sense of realism in horror film.

The Steadicam which Garrett Brown brought from 1970s can be seen to be embodied in the examples of The shining (Kubrick, 1980). In addition to the specific plot with the special style like dogma, the slightly shaking picture can bring the immersive, more exaggerated feeling. Generally speaking, audiences would prefer smooth and steady images during the viewing

process as it looks more natural. This is what Steadicam can do. As what I have mentioned, the nature of cinematography image effects how much realism it could offer the viewer. The images that Steadicam create is natural, smooth, as Jean-Pierre Geuens argues that Steadicam creates an image which feels synthetic once it removed. (Geuens B, 1993)Steadicam has been widely used in the film industry since the 1970s. The Shining is the second time that Steadicam has been used and was operated by the inventor of Steadicam, Garrett Brown. The Shining's cinematography is aesthetic and pioneering, or I can say its further promotes the freedom of other camera and smoothness of a dolly camera. For instance, by utilized the Steadicam with the long shot of the maze and a low angle long shot of Danny riding a bicycle in a hotel, Kubrick smoothly gliding the viewer through the endless treacherous hedge maze of the Overlook Hotel. Also offer the viewer a perspective of "Geography", which leads the viewers much more clear about the ins and outs of claustrophobic spaces. He guides the viewer subtly and subjectively discover the horror overall structure of the maze and hotel. The main settings are the hotel and the maze. It's essential that audience have a overview of the complex structure of the hotel and the maze first, in order to have the great sense of realism and immersive feeling. Further, the mise-en-scenes of that two scenes are claustrophobic and disorienting, offering the viewers the physical sense of unease about the uncertainty within this certain space. The film's realism, most concretely constructed by Steadicam's smooth depiction of the overall structure to both space and the setting that inhabit it, its depiction of and uncertainty to exit of the endless maze, and its depiction of the claustrophobic and disorienting situations. (Garrett B,1980)

Since late 1960s and early 1970s, horror film's soundtrack began to focus on the combination of traditional symphonic music, ambient sound and emotional guidance. One of the most famous examples is Jaws. Jaws is Spielberg's representative, visceral and realistic horror-disaster film. In Jaws, music utilized innovative sound modeling to represent a specific events, like shark is coming and some people are going to die. To a certain extent, music replaces some of the film sound effects that are now more important. What's more, Jaws was made with a Dolby sound version. Dolby's system was designed to privilege audible dialogue and soundtrack music. Since the arrival of Dolby technologies in the early 1970s, the changes that have taken place in mainstream cinema are so pervasive as to suggest that we are indeed in a new period of cinema, The new Hollywood. Also comes with a new era, the Dolby era. (Sergi, 2002) While the viewers watch Jaws with Dolby sound, they'll feel like they're inside the action as the sounds of people's dialogue, water tapping sound, swimmer's screaming, sobbing, shark's moving sound and music come alive with breathtaking realism and move all around them in three-dimensional space, as if they are at the same situation and confronting the murderous shark. Obviously, the Dolby sound system increased film's horror and realism.

The mail film was shot on the real location like the sea and beach, as the studio facilities is expensive and artificial. It is no doubt that the real location brings more realism and natural sense to the audience. The image of endless sea, old and shabby boat, suggesting that Steven Spielberg would present the shark catching journey in the way the characters do experienced it rather than in the way previous Hollywood filmmakers had imagined it, or make it in a studio. Further, it also situates the viewer within "the physical experience of tension and fear about staying at an old boat in an endless sea, facing an killer white shark." Therefore, the use of Dolby sound system create an overwhelming sense of realism which taps into the most primal of human fears. The realism and fear that director offered to the viewers had kept a lot of shark-hysterical ocean-swimmers and 1975 summer beachgoers wary.

Some high-end technology such as Dolby sound system and 3D had begun to appear with the

movie screening after the 1950s. Meanwhile, the audience had become more concerned about the CGI field when discussing a movie. Computer generated imagery (CGI) is used to digitally create animation and special effects in film and television. Although all of them started with traditional animation, the later technology has seen artists drop their pens and turn to their screens. Computer animation in film began in the 1970s as visual effects and short animations were crafted using the layering of 2D images. And later significantly developed during 1990s, several remarkable works had released. In general, more people are beginning to realize the effect of technology in the film itself and the viewing process and quality.

One of the most popular genres of film is horror, the implementation of CGI has crept its way into the production of horror films. Though different in plot and filming style, the only purpose that all of these horror films aim to achieve is to command a physiological reaction from its audience. The famous film Death becomes her which released in 1992 is an unforgettable horror-comedy with its unique CGI technique. It established the depiction of realistic human skin using CGI which used to great effect in twisting Meryl Streep's head around on its neck and punching a hole through Goldie Hawn. The significant innovation in digital visual effects had made this film goes on to win the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects. But most importantly, through the use of qualified CGI technology, film successfully make the creepy character image looks real. The more perceptually convincing these imaginary worlds can be made to seem, the more virtual, realistic and immersive the image can become. This digital tools enhance the perceptual realism of effects sequences. It’s notably that the digital tools that enable filmmakers to composite real and synthetic characters, objects, and spaces in unnoticeable ways.

Although the three films discussed in this essay by no means represent all the technologies of cinematography innovated during 1970s and 1990s, the Steadicam, Dolby sound system and CGI do regard as cogent example of a trend toward the increasingly use of new visual technologies to produce realistic cinematography effects that served an idea of realism during that two decades. However, even though the 1970s and 1990s both innovates new technology of cinematography that served for realism, they two portrays a slightly diverse realism. For 1970s, the utilizations of the Steadicam, Dolby sound system create the natural, aesthetic sensation. Which means this sort of image is associated with people’s daily life. For 1990s, rather to say it’s “realism”, I feel like it’s more close to “photorealism”. The image created by CGI are tend to be supernatural and artificial. Death becomes her is exactly the example. Not only during 1990s, due to CGI’s technologies, film more often use it to create the image that can hardly seen or even cannot seen in our daily life. For instance, later the Chinese magical love film The mermaid (Stephen chow, 2016) used CGI to present mermaid’s tail. Thus, different technologies are innovated during1970s and 1990s, which made the films from those two decades portrays similar but also distinct realism. Nevertheless, The new technique and the realism make the film successful and never tired to seeing, and push the film industry develop further and further.

Work cited

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