The Six Story Shapes of Popular Movies: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Abstract

For my final paper I will be discussing Theodore Adorno's ideas of standardization and pseudo-individualism in regard to its impact on current day movies. Adorno's theory basically states that all things are the same but masked to seem different, and I will prove that using the six arcs of storytelling. A study completed by researchers at the University of Vermont using datamining to trace the emotional arc of a story has proven that most, if not all, popular films fit into six categories of stories. I will use these six categories, rags to riches, riches to rags, man in a hole, Icarus, Cinderella, and Oedipus, to prove pseudo-individualization as film makers will create stories with the same skeleton and sell them as totally different films. As it relates to Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model, it shows that filmmakers are scared to take risks and would rather, through the relations of production, use one of the six story arcs that they know will be well received. Using examples of popular films that use these story arcs, I will prove that although they may be advertised as different, many popular films use the same skeleton.

The Six Story Shapes of Popular Movies

It seems like every time you turn on the television these days, there is a new movie being advertised as the next big thing with reviews calling it a must see. And all the time you hear about these new films doing great at the box office and receiving raved reviews. Especially in this modern era where streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu are starting to create their own films, we have never seen such a boom in content. While this might seem like a good thing for variety in movies, I would argue that it is all just more of the same. No matter how different a movie is made out to be, the film industry revolves around six different story arcs, and if you take a second to think about your favorite movie, or the movie you most recently watched, you would probably find that it fits into one of six categories.

In the 1990s, there was a writer named Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut had a theory, which he claimed to attempt to use for a thesis at the University of Chicago while still a student. The premise of his argument was that all popular storylines could be mapped out on a graph, with one axis representing the beginning and end of a story, and the other axis representing the fortune of the main character, good or bad. His ideas were not accepted as a thesis, as he said, "It was rejected because it was so simple and looked like too much fun." (LaFrance, 2018) Vonnegut took this idea and ran with it continuing to speak about it for years after, including once in a lecture that was filmed, and now can be found on YouTube.

Vonnegut's ideas were strong enough to catch the attention of a group of researchers at the University of Vermont and cause them to take action. Although Vonnegut was the original mastermind behind the idea, from what I could gather, it was not until the researchers got a hold of it, that it could be grouped off in six categories: rags to riches, riches to rags, man in a hole, Icarus, Cinderella, and Oedipus. Amazingly enough, this was all being backed by scientific data. One quote from Vonnegut says, "There is no reason why the simple shapes of stories can't be

fed into computers. They are beautiful shapes.” And so, the crew did just that. Using a datamining technique called sentiment analysis, the they were able to take nearly 2000 works and create a story arc for them. (arXiv, 2016)

The crew used a technique that is popular with marketers to determine the arcs of the story. The process consists of assigning every word something called a “sentiment score,” which is based on the connotation of the word. Using data, the workers would determine whether a word was a positive or negative word and created a scale to measure them on. Then, using this scale, they plotted every work in a multitude of stories, and it showed the arc of the stories based on the mood. Using those arcs, they overlaid all of the similar ones into six categories which culminated in the graph shown in the picture to the right, courtesy of TheCut.com.

Tying it all together, this relates to modern day popular movies because although it is based on storytelling in general, movies are a medium that falls under the umbrella of storytelling, and when you look at it, Vonnegut’s hypothesis perfectly describes the filmmaking process as it stands today. In what follows, I will show you examples of three separate story arcs using two movies each, that on the surface, would appear to be two polar opposite kinds of movies. Ultimately, this discussion will show interpret modern popular movies from a pseudo-individualization and standardization perspective, to prove that no matter how different a movie is branded to be, it is just the same as the thousands of other stories that came before it with the same story arc.

The Six Arcs

As previously discussed, the research of the team from the University of Vermont came to the conclusion that there are six arcs. The first of the arcs is riches to rags, which is a story of a great fall. In this kind of tale, we see the protagonist begin the story on the happy side of the y-axis, before suffering a steady decline throughout the story. Then, in contrast, there are the more popular rags to riches tales, which are pretty much just the opposite of the first one. The protagonist starts on the sad side of the y-axis and works their way up to happy ending. After this, we have the man in a hole arc, characterized by a fall and then a rise. The Icarus arc is the opposite of the man in a hole, and therefore features a rise followed by a fall. And the last two are also inverses, starting with the Cinderella. This was a favorite of Vonnegut’s and one that he actually describes in the video of his lecture. It is when there is a rise, followed by a fall, and it ends with another rise, just like the story of Cinderella. And last but not least, the Oedipus, named after the classic tale of Oedipus the King. This arc describes a fall, then a rise, with another fall at the end.

Man in the Hole (Fall followed by rise)

The first arc that I will give an example for is the Man in the Hole arc, or the fall followed by a rise. For this example, I will use one older movie, Taxi Driver, directed by the legendary Martin Scorsese. Taxi Driver hit the box office as a rated R movie and ended up being nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe, and some people (enough for it to be written on the Wikipedia page for the film) believe it is one of the greatest films of all time. On the other side of this comparison is the modern popular movie in this example, another movie that was pretty well received, Wreck-It Ralph. Like I said Wreck-It Ralph was a pretty well received movie, but it is a rated PG cartoon for children. At their very surface, the two movies might seem like they have

nothing in common, but let’s take a look at the stories.

Taxi Driver is the story of a depressed man named Travis Bickle who lives in New York City and drives taxis for a living. Travis develops an interest for a girl named Betsy, who works on the campaign of a presidential candidate. Travis takes Betsy on a date and then quickly sets off the fall as he offends her by showing her a pornographic film, she cuts him off, and he basically loses it. It is worth noting at around this time in the story he meets a prostitute named Iris whom he helps out a little bit. And so, looking for some guidance in life, he turns to violence and buys some guns, trains himself, and prepares a plan to assassinate the presidential candidate, while all along, he has been in touch with Iris, trying to get her to stop prostituting. Then the day comes, and he goes to pull off his assassination attempt, almost gets caught but does not, and ends up fleeing the scene. He ends up at Iris’ pimp’s bar, where the rise begins again, as he shoots the pimp and causes a gunfight. He wakes up after passing out from blood loss, and instead of being prosecuted or suspected of any crimes, he is being called a hero. Then, he goes back to his normal life, where ironically enough, he ends up picking up Betsy as a fare. He drives her home, and does not let her pay, and then drives off with a smile.

Now, look at Wreck-It Ralph. Ralph is the so-called villain in a game called Fix-It Felix, where his only job is to break things for Felix to fix, and Felix gets all the love. Ralph decides he wants to become a good guy and goes to the party where all the other characters from his game meet up, and the fall starts when he causes a commotion at the party and ends up leaving his game. Like Travis, he is lost, and turns to violence, going into a war game to try and defeat the opposition so he can finally get the recognition he deserves. This plan ultimately does not work reminiscent of Travis’ assassination attempt, and he is led into a different cartoon racing game. Inside this game, he finds another ostracized character named Vanellope, who acts as his Iris. To make a long story short, Ralph helps Vanellope win a race that if she had not won, would have jeopardized her future as a character in the game. As a result, he is hailed as a hero for saving Vanellope’s life, while the damages he caused while jumping from game to game are basically ignored. Then, to close out the movie it shows Ralph, back at work in the same role he started in at the beginning of the movie, almost like a certain taxi driver. As you can see, these two movies, while markedly different on the surface, have nearly identical story arcs. This is a clear and obvious example of pseudo individualization, as the creators of Wreck-It Ralph took a popular film storyline, changed it to be suitable for children, made it a cartoon and voila. That is how the industry has used the relations of productions to create films recently. Rather than to push the envelope and try something new, they go with something unoriginal if they know it will draw success.

Cinderella (Rise fall rise) and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

The next story arc to explore is the Cinderella story, also known as the rise fall rise. These two films are both fairly modern, starting off with the 2004 movie, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. It was rated R at the box and ended up winning an Academy Award for best writing and being nominated for a Golden Globe. The movie it will compare to is the 2016 animated children’s movie Zootopia, which was rated PG at the box. This is another case where you might look at me crazy if I mentioned these two stories in the same category, and while I admit, the similarities will not be as clear and obvious as the last example, think about the story arc more than the exact details and you will see it.

In Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, we are basically introduced to two main characters off the bat, Joel and Clementine. We get the first rise early on as they hit it off and end up agreeing to go on a date. What they do not know is that they already know each other, and in fact were already once lovers. This is where I would say the fall starts to begin, as we begin to learn about their past. As it turns out, just a few weeks earlier, the two of them had broken up after two years together, on bad terms. It was so bad, in fact, that Clementine decided to go see a doctor who could erase her memories of the relationship, at Lacuna Inc. When Joel hears about this, he is so upset he decides to get the procedure done to himself. So, we then get to see all of his memories with Clementine, and he regrets his choice and wants to stop the process, but it is too late now. Then, the doctor's wife catches the doctor having an affair in the office, and in her rage, she steals files from the company and sends them to the clients. This brings the story back to the rise towards the end as they now recall their past and are willing to give it another shot.

Now, taking a look at Zootopia, it is definitely a different film. It begins with Judy Hobbs, a rabbit who had dreamt of becoming a police officer, and we get the first rise as we see her promoted to the Zootopia Police Department. We see her take care of a few minor things while stumbling upon a potential big case, but before anything can happen, she meets Nick Wilde, who is a fox, and he ends up running a small con on her, which could realistically start the downfall of action, early just like in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. A very important event is when Judy, who is assigned to be a meter maid, ends up chasing a weasel all through town, causing damage and putting people in danger all across the city. She is almost forced to quit her job by her boss, but after she explains her hunch on her big case, he agrees to give her 48 hours to solve it. She ends up convincing Nick Wilde to help her, and to make a long story much shorter, she goes through many trials and tribulations, at one point returning home to her parents' house, doubting she will ever be a cop again, and thanks to Nick's help, she solves this deep elaborate case, and the movie ends on a high as she is now a cop again and Nick is now her partner. I find it so intriguing that even though stories and can be written to seem so different, the way they are meant to make you feel is the same. Movies, as shown in the graphs created by the University of Vermont researchers, are like rollercoasters. They have different dips and high points, and even though these two hypothetical rollercoasters seem so different, the ride feels pretty much the same.

Rags to Riches (Rise)

My last example that I would like to reference will be using the classic story arc, the rags to riches story. I am going to start this example with one of my favorite movies, the 2006 classic, The Pursuit of Happyness. This movie was loved by many and nominated for just about every award show you could imagine. On the other side, another classic movie, Aladdin. I will keep this summary relatively brief as they are both pretty well-known movies, but starting with The Pursuit of Happyness, it is actually based on the true story (though modified from the real story) of Chris Gardner. Gardner is a hardworking man who it seems like just cannot catch a break. He starts the film selling bone density scanners which he has a hard time doing because nobody wants them, and his lack of income causes a rift between him and his wife. He barely has enough to make ends meet, and he is in a bad place. While trying to sell the bone density scanners he meets a man name Jay Twistle, who is a higher up at a large finance company. He impresses Twistle with a Rubik's cube, and lands himself a job interview, which despite showing up late and disheveled for, he impresses and gets the internship position. To make a

long story short, he faces a number of difficult challenges such as having his bank account garnished by the IRS and getting evicted. However, thanks to his work ethic and great personality, he ends up performing so well that he gets the job at the financial company, and that is how it ends.

Aladdin is the story of a homeless boy who falls in love with a princess named Jasmine. By some stroke of luck, they have an encounter one night on the town, and Jasmine shares that feeling. However, as she is a princess, Aladdin is taken and thrown in jail, until he escapes to go retrieve the magic lamp from a cave. The lamp contains a genie that will grant him three wishes, and he plans on using these to win over Jasmine. However, the whole movie he must deal with her father, Sultan, and the other guy who wants her, Jafar, who throw roadblocks in his way and ultimately try to banish him forever. However, Aladdin will stop at no cost, he makes his way back into the palace, and in the end, he ends up with Jasmine. Just as it was in the last two examples, two vastly different kinds of movies, but both show a very similar plot line, with Aladdin and Chris Gardner being mirrors of each other.

Conclusion

I only wish that Kurt Vonnegut could still be around today so he could see what has become of his once rejected thesis. It is absolutely amazing that in the early 1990s he made a claim about being able to put stories into a computer and getting results back and no one batted an eye. In fact, many laughed. However, he inspired the work of those researchers at the University of Vermont. And had it not been for him, I would have no leg to stand on with my claims of pseudo individualization.

Overall, it might not seem like it on the surface level, but when you take a deeper look at any of the films that have come out lately, or any of your favorite films, and you consider how they made you feel when you watched them, and what the emotional rollercoaster felt like, a lot of the time you will find similarities. Luckily, thanks to the researchers at the University of Vermont, we have scientific reasoning to back up why that is. What it comes down to is pseudo individualization and standardization. For so long, these six story arcs have been the backbone of most if not all of the greatest films of all time. Therefore, I understand why it is so easy for writers to use the relations of production to just churn out the same stories over and over again. Because as long as they put a different bow on it every time, people will go and watch. And that, is how pseudo individualization works, and will continue to work in the modern film industry.

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