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Programme of Study: BA Film & TV

Module: Research in Practice

Module Code: ADAD5004

Assignment Title: Research as
Practice Essay

Lecturer: Kylie Boon

Word Count: 2,733

How do auteurs use cinematography to enhance their visual storytelling?

Practice-Based examples:

- The Big Lebowski (1998), Directed by Joel Coen.
- Her (2013), Directed by Spike Jonze.
- The Lighthouse (2019), Directed by Robert Eggers.
- Joker (2019), Directed by Todd Phillips.

My primary specialism has been writing with my secondary specialism being directing. At my current level, I feel I have explored a variety of interests concerning writing and I'm happy with my understanding of screenplay creation. However, in the interest of developing my creative voice, I want to use this essay to focus on directing with a focus on cinematography. With regards to my secondary specialism of directing, I feel less confident in my knowledge of visual design and using the camera as a tool for storytelling. The practice-based examples I have chosen to look at for this module share the connection of being directed by their writers. I feel films made by auteurs create an amazing aesthetic that is otherwise lost in comparison to major studio franchises, such as *Marvel*.

This of course is by no means a criticism of *Marvel* as I am a fan of the franchise. I agree to an extent with Martin Scorsese's comments on this topic where he said, "a *Marvel* type picture, where theatres become amusement parks, that's a different experience. It's not 'cinema', it's something else" (HeyUGuys, 2019). This is a great acknowledgment that while *Marvel* is not a bad thing, it is, however, a different form of film. Due to its large-scale cohesion with each film, there is a small amount of room for an individual style as a filmmaker. Filmmakers outside of this have more room to create films that serve the narrative and not the product as such, in doing so, this creates a rawness to them, or hand-made quality that is hard to describe, but they feel more authentic, and this is something that I am drawn to. By looking at my chosen examples, I am hoping to learn cinematography knowledge through the eyes of the director. I hope that by the end, I will have a better understanding of visual language in films, an understanding that I can then carry with me to future projects.

How do the Coen Brothers use cinematography to create a style?

The Coen Brothers Ethan and Joel are among a class of filmmakers where you instantly recognise their work. Ronald Bergan has commented on how they achieve this in his book, he says, “The Coens claim to take responsibility for everything in their movies as true auteurs do” (Bergan, 2001, p. 25). The consequence of this is a showcase of stylistic choices that bleed across their films, regardless of genre or plot. A large part of this recognisability is the Coens cinematography choices, which are made possible via their go-to cinematographer, Roger Deakins. Both Deakins and the Coens have expressed their shared preference for using Prime Lenses with a wide-angle, usually between 24mm and 35mm. Their proclivity is the Prime Lens, over a Zoom Lens. In William Preston Robertson's book that explores the making of the Coen Brothers' 1998 film, *The Big Lebowski*, William documents interviews he conducted with Joel, Ethan, and Roger. In one instance, this lens preference was discussed, and Roger Deakins was asked about his lack of interest in the use of Zoom Lenses, Deakins responds:

It means you're locked into shooting at 50mm or 32mm or whatever the lens's focal length is, whereas with a zoom lens you can change the focal length during the shot. Which I think is a little bit of a sloppy way of shooting – pulling back on the lens as opposed to moving the camera. Using fixed lenses creates a sort of precision to your work. It forces you to think.

(Robertson, 1998, p. 73)

The idea of practically moving the camera to create a zoom, pan, or tracking shot could be a contributing factor to that hand-made quality of a film. Doing things practically. The effect of this can give your film a form of stylisation through its imperfect movement. This is demonstrated throughout the entire opening of *The Big Lebowski* (1998) through tracking shots of a tumbleweed rolling through Los Angeles, eventually landing us in a supermarket where the camera moves to a push-in toward the protagonist, *The Dude*. This helps illustrate the character as breezing through life, carefree, which is a great example of visual storytelling to establish character and location:



When considering my work when exploring the Coens, I am drawn to the fact that I get weighed down by trying to get everything perfect. What I have discovered from these filmmakers is to stick with something that feels comfortable and experiment with the various ways in which you can use it. From here I want to begin experimenting as much as possible with different pieces of camera equipment, hopefully finding something that I like the look of and then building a portfolio of experiments exploring the various ways in which I can use the equipment to capture my film or story in the pursuit of potentially creating a style that is recognised as mine.

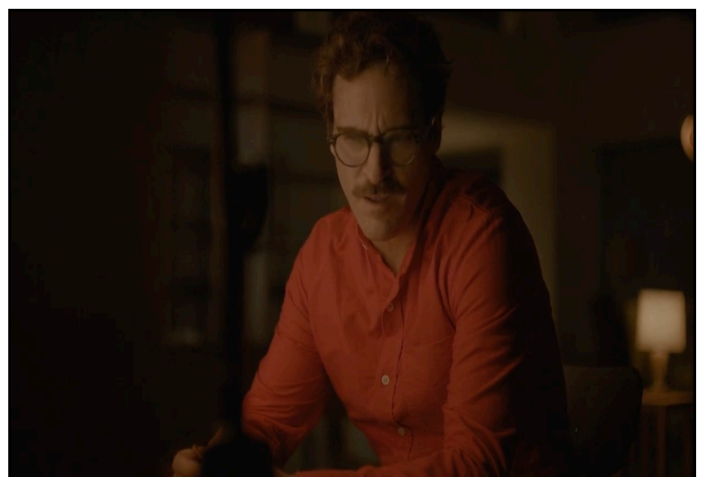
How does Spike Jonze use the theme of his film to influence the cinematography?

While the Coen Brothers make decisions based on preferences, some filmmakers take a different approach. Spike Jonze bares little recognisability for style across his films as each one is vastly different. Part of this I feel is to do with how the theme of his films is what influences his cinematography direction. For example, Spikes' 2013 film, *her*, is about loneliness. In an interview, Spike describes it as, “this world that felt like a utopic world where everything’s nice and comfortable, yet even in this world where you’re seemingly getting everything you need and having this nice life there’s still loneliness and longing and isolation and disconnection” (Oscars, 2014). Understanding how Spike Jonze was approaching this film provides context behind his visual design choices regarding the framing, lighting, and colour. The film at its core is a romantic film revolving around a character who is grappling with the heartache of his divorce, and I believe the cinematography in this film utilises colour and focus to create a beautiful, dream-like world which is contrasted by the composition of the lonely protagonist that we follow. Had Spike and cinematographer Hoyte Van Hoytema not considered these thematic story points, the film could have looked quite different. The romantic interest is an operating system depicted through an off-screen voice,

which influences the composition of certain scenes. The film's protagonist, *Theodore*, is framed in either a close-up, medium shot, or full shot. I interpret the close-ups as a means of creating intimacy with *Theodore*, usually, in these frames, he is engaging with personal feelings such as love, pain, or vulnerability:



Whereas, the medium shots of *Theodore*, give a feeling of comfortability and are usually how the conversations between him, and *Samantha* (operating system), are represented. Mimicking a common POV for people having a conversation, I believe helps to give presence to an otherwise physically absent character:



Then finally, the full shots of *Theodore*, often have a lot of negative space around him. This to me is highlighting his loneliness in his environment. The frame singles him out, and the tone changes depending on the context of the scene. When *Samantha* is not present, it creates a feeling of isolation, whereas, when *Samantha* is present, the feeling becomes that of infatuation:



Accompanied by these shot sizes are a series of varying blurs. The meanings of which can change depending on the context of the scene. However, as Spikes' film, *her* (2013), centres around loneliness, I decided to explore why lens blur is an important aspect to get right. In Gustavo Mercados' book, when discussing capturing loneliness he explains, "Selective focus can help visualize a character's emotional or psychological connection to a physical space, by varying the degree of blurriness used to show it during key moments of a story" (Mercado, 2019, p. 125). As a director, I need to ensure that I understand the emotional language of my story. Learning how to use small details such as a lens

blur, to the big designs choices of colour scheme, all play a significant role in creating emotion in a film. Understanding how to use these aspects of filmmaking will help guide my decision-making as a director. I also feel, coming back to the idea of what makes a film have that raw quality to it, I think Spike Jonze achieved something special with *her* (2013). Spike has created a beautifully designed piece of art that takes you on an intimate journey through various filmmaking techniques. Maybe there is something that attracts people to exploring themes through a filter that creates art and instead of the film looking like a picture-perfect representation of reality, it simply looks like artwork, a film.

How does Robert Eggers create atmosphere through cinematography?

A filmmaker whose work I have recently been drawn to is Robert Eggers. His second feature film, *The Lighthouse* (2019) is where my focus has been pulled to. Specifically, looking at the aspect ratio and colour grading. Robert has discussed in several interviews that his approach to filmmaking begins with the atmosphere of the film. When giving a screenwriters lecture, Robert explains how this process took effect in the early stages of *The Lighthouse*, when Roberts' brother put it forward that he was writing a ghost story in a lighthouse, and how for Robert that, "conjured up the images of the movie, the visual atmosphere. The crusty, musty, dusty, rusty, Black, and white, square aspect ratio. Then I needed to find a story that accompanied that" (BAFTA Guru, 2020). I think this is something I bare a similarity to in the sense that I think visually regarding my films or ideas. For my current idea, a large part of my thinking for it is revolving around a store that may appear at the beginning, and my thinking for it centres on the various ways in which it can be visualised. With each visualisation, I also consider how it will potentially influence the tone of the film. The store currently is not a major feature of the story, but for me, because it is where the story begins, this is where the tone for the film will be established, which is why I am putting so much thought into it.

In *The Lighthouse* (2019), the aspect ratio is 1.19:1 which gives a compact image with regard to film. The films' two characters spend the majority of the film in a cramped living space, completely isolated on a remote island. The aspect ratio enhances the translation of the claustrophobic tension of the two characters directly to the audience, creating within them that same feeling of entrapment:



This is something touched upon on *StudioBinder* when discussing aspect ratios. The host of the episode discusses a short film he has made where his character spends a lot of time in his small apartment and to convey the feeling of claustrophobia, the host used a similar aspect ratio to create a compact frame (StudioBinder, 2018). Paired with this is a Black and White colour grade which according to Robert was achieved through using Kodak Double X film stock (Landmark Theatres, 2019), which means the colour grading was not done in post-production. This colour choice certainly adds to the atmosphere that Robert was referring to, the lack of colour creates a further delve into a very bleak, oppressive world that

these characters inhabit. There are plenty of theories regarding colour but a key point I have taken on from Gillian McIver is that, "Color can be part of storytelling. Artists and filmmakers are influenced by existing ideas about color that are culturally accepted, but they also sometimes modify these to create their own, personal color systems" (McIver, 2016, p. 32). I think this is a great perspective to carry when making decisions regarding colour within my future films. Considering how to use the rules of colour to shape them to best fit what works best for my narrative, style, and film. Film is a total artwork of different mediums coming together and as such, by looking at examples like *The Lighthouse* (2019), I can understand how emotion, narrative, psychology and so much more can be expressed through a wider variety of means other than dialogue and physical performances. For me, Robert has created a great example of utilising different cinema tools, not for style sake, but for narrative sake to create an experience. This could possibly be another factor that contributes to the idea of 'hand-made' films, understanding that you are not limited in how you can tell a story and not be afraid to make artistic decisions in the pursuit of enhancing my film or story.

How did Todd Phillips light his film to represent the psychology of his character?

A major aspect of cinematography that I know very little about is lighting. A film that I believe has interesting lighting is Todd Phillips' 2019 film, *Joker*. Another example of the writer also directing and according to Todd, he believes that a director, "is a purveyor of tone" (Vanity Fair, 7 Oct 2019). Tone is something this film accomplishes extremely well, a slow decline into complete insanity. As a general viewer, I have not considered how the lighting of the film contributes to the tone or even the theme of the story. In another online video by *Vanity Fair*, Todd Phillips' cinematographer for *Joker* (2019), Lawrence Sher, explains lighting, focusing on how he used lighting techniques to create the look of the film. Lawrence explains that while the technical side of lighting is important to know in terms of colour theory and how certain colours complement one another, what is more, important is understanding the emotion of the scene you're lighting. Lawrence allows the emotion of the scene to motivate the lighting to which he gives an example of this through a scene in *Joker* (2019), when discussing the tonal range of two different colours, Lawrence says, "it's a movie about opposite ends of the spectrum, two sides of yourself, a shadow in the light. Those contrasting colours is a lot like what's going on internally with Arthur" (Vanity Fair, 5 Nov 2019):



The idea of emotion motivating the lighting is supported in Bowen and Thompson's book, *Grammar of the Shot* (2013),

Values of light and dark can generate a sense of depth in the 2D frame; create feelings of sadness, happiness, fear, and so on; underscore themes about characters; and highlight or obscure the more important subjects in a scene.

(Bowen & Thompson, 2013, p. 110)

For me going forward, I believe spending some time delving deeper into lighting equipment and the connections between colours and emotions, will be extremely useful in enhancing my directing portfolio. This point of research has been a learning curve for me as a visual storyteller, as I had not previously considered how the aspects of lighting can create a visual language that complements the tone, emotion, and psychology of my film, or how it can direct where the eyes of the audience are drawn to. I have already undertaken a workshop that focussed on shaping light and using different pieces of lighting equipment in an attempt to create emulation stills from a film. The session was a great insight into this aspect of cinematography and with time I am sure my knowledge and

understanding of lighting will grow and as result, I will be capable of making better decisions with regards to light, or at the very least, understand how my decisions will impact the story.

Conclusion

To conclude this exploration into auteurs and cinematography, I am left feeling significantly more informed and optimistic regarding my knowledge of this chosen focus. In relation to exploring what makes the films I am drawn to appear to have the hand-made and raw quality to them, I believe is mostly a result of understanding your story and executing it with a vast wealth of cinematic language skills to bring it all together. There is individual style within the examples I have explored, a craft that understands how to bring the elements of film together to tell stories, simultaneously creating experiences for people to escape to. Going forward for me is a continuous journey of learning, reflecting, and application. I understand that while I have explored aspects throughout my research, I still have much more to delve into to continue my creative development in the pursuit of finding my own voice and filmmaking style.

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