MOVIE TRICKS AND CRAFT IN *OZ, THE GREAT AND POWERFUL (2013)*

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Abstract: The object of my study is the 2013 Disney production Oz, the Great and Powerful, directed by Sam Raimi, a prequel to Frank Baum's classic stories and MGM's 1939 production The Wizard of Oz. The 2-hour narrative takes viewers on a visually spectacular journey following the main character on his metamorphosis from a con artist into a great wizard. The aim of my analysis is to identify filmic techniques employed at the levels of narrative development, sound design, cinematography and editing in order to manipulate viewers' emotions and encourage levels of sympathy with characters who unravel moral and physical duality.

Keywords: cognitive film theory, sympathy, diegesis, film language

Watching movies is an activity most of us undertake in order to relax or feel entertained by a visual two-hour construct which transposes us to a fictional world, framed in a narrative whose characters look for answers to every-day issues. Students who follow film studies classes enter the course I teach as film spectators and finish it having developed a new language that assists them in keeping a sharp critical eye on the study of films. The starting point is a group activity targeting the question of the most appealing element of a movie: 'why do you like a movie?' The most common answers suggest that a good story, talented actors or an interesting subject make viewers choose to watch a certain movie, while few answers shift towards the key role of technical aspects, such as *sound* or *pacing*.

The entertaining value of movies cannot be disregarded when it comes to spectators' choice of movie genres, yet their commercial value and the profits they return to their cast and crew rely heavily on the way spectators connect to the story on screen, on the degree of character-spectator engagement. We are drawn into the narrative world of a movie thanks to the director's craft in combining technical elements to make the story shine.

The sequences under scrutiny in the following pages belong to the 2013 Hollywood production *Oz, the Great and Powerful*, directed by Sam Raimi, and illustrate the skilful cinematic combination of narrative and technical elements, such as soundtrack, cinematography and editing, employed in tightly connecting the viewers to the characters in the movie. The theoretical concepts I employed in my endeavour stem from the field of cognitive film theory, which mainly explores the narrative processes involved in building character-spectator engagement. My claim is that the study of narrative techniques cannot account for deep levels of identification unless the technical cinematic elements are considered.

The movie is a tribute to both Frank Baum's series of fourteen novels having the wizard of Oz as lead character and MGM's 1939 famous adaptation *The Wizard of Oz*, as the director admits:

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"Well, we all love *The Wizard of Oz* movie and we were very careful not to tread on it. We were careful to respect it. But ours is really a different story. It's a story that leads up to *The Wizard of Oz*. It's a story of how the wizard came from Kansas to the Land of Oz, and how a slightly selfish man became a slightly more selfless man, and it's the story of how he became the wizard. It's a fantastic story that answers that question, in case any of you had that question. But, it's not re-making *The Wizard of Oz*, so it wasn't a problem that we had to deal with. We just nodded lovingly toward it, and went ahead with telling our own story." (Sciretta interview with Raimi, 2013)

Although the movie is a family movie, adults definitely find it more enjoyable and understand its visually and verbally encoded intertextual messages. In terms of narrative space-time connection, the movie is a prequel to the famous classical predecessor, as it presents an ordinary con-artist's journey in a hot-air balloon to the magical land of Oz, along with the obstacles and challenges he has to overcome before becoming the great wizard of Oz.

Meir Sternberg (1992:59) identifies three 'drivers of narrativity' as a quality story must-haves, *curiosity, suspense* and *surprise*. Are we curious to learn how the main character becomes the greatest wizard? Are there several scenes of suspense that keep us alert and entertained? Are there surprise answers to gaps left in the source literary texts? The answer to these three questions is affirmative for various reasons: Frank Baum's narrator tells of an ordinary man from Omaha, a clue of use to Sam Raimi, who introduces Oscar Diggs as a trickster in a Kansas fun-fair, stirring our curiosity in relation to the character's magical abilities; the director of the movie is famous for horror and action blockbusters, such as the *Spiderman* series and *The Evil Dead* series, a master of building suspense and thrill in his productions; although there is no surprise as to the ending of the movie, quite a few twists in the plot will satisfy the viewers.

Humour and *romance* further complete the movie's recipe for success, top ingredients which guarantee spectator involvement and character identification. In order to better split the mechanisms of emotional participation, it is worth looking back at Aristotle's classic forms of identification with characters in dramas, *pity* and *fear* (1961), feeling for characters or feeling with them. If we place ourselves outside the diegesis we respond from outside, while an inside perspective brings us closer to the characters' feelings and actions. As spectators we pity the characters, as participants we fear for them as much as they do. Undoubtedly, both means of viewer-character identification entail our participation, which I choose to term *sympathy*, a combination of a variety of emotions underscored by concern.

Alessandro Giovannelli (2009) signals three forms of sympathy in his minute analysis of the overlapping between sympathy and empathy, yet only two present interest to my analysis: anticipatory sympathy, which refers to the spectator's emotions stemming from knowing more than the characters or rightly anticipating the narrative development. The source of the spectators' emotions is a character's future and certain experience. Conditional sympathy, on the other hand, is related to the character's possible experience, one that would change the narrative course, yet not available to characters. They will not be provided we the information spectators have from sources unavailable to the characters under discussion.

The third theoretical division I considered for my approach is Murray Smith's three stage approach of sympathy (1995), set according to the intensity of spectator-character engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. We instantly connect to the lead

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characters on screen, as we recognize their chief role in the narrative development of the story, from the opening scenes in a movie. The recognition stage relies on our knowledge of the genre's conventions and our expectations are easily met or upset if the main character is suddenly removed from the movie before the climatic confrontation. Alignment with a character is firstly spatial-temporal and refers to our physical focus on the character. The critic draws attention that, as we are glued to the character's actions, we are also provided with access to his/her thoughts, memories, we learn what his/her motivations are, a level he names subjective access, 'the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions and to what they know and feel,' (1994:41). Allegiance, the third and most intense stage of sympathy, means approval, taking sides with the character in a moral sense. Smith claims that allegiance 'pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator' (1994:41), what we understand by character identification. There is seldom perfect similarity between the feelings of a character and those we experience as witnesses, but this does not exclude identification from the least intense to the highest emotional involvement.

The first sequence I focus on presents the meeting of Annie & Oscar Diggs in Oscar's circus van, after a failed magic show (00:11:50- 00:14:23) and prompts our recognition of a thread of **romance.** The movie begins establishing Oscar's negative traits, seemingly keeping spectators at a safe emotional distance. However, we should never forget that the choice of introducing him as too human to make a great wizard paves the way to subsequent curiosity and surprise on the spectators' part. We have already recognized Oscar, shortened to Oz, as main character, as he bears the appropriate name, does a job involving playing with people's emotions and perceptions, which brings us a step closer to the deeper levels of sympathy, even if there is nothing in his behaviour that is appealing. He is a womanizer, tired of playing the same tricks in his dusty coat, before an audience whose reactions he knows too well. His faithful assistant, Frank, puts up with Oscar's stingy nature and ungrateful behaviour, ready to defend him under any circumstances. As Annie appears, the chemistry between her and Oscar is obvious. She knows him better than he knows himself, and he mentions his noble goals and desires to her on learning that she has accepted farmer John Gale's marriage proposal. Spectators' alignment results from his honesty, as we are provided with subjective access to Oz's goals, which set the proactive motivation of the narrative.

The movie script is seldom strong enough to stir emotions, bringing to foreground the role of technical elements in encouraging emotional contagion. Our perception of the character's dual nature, his complex personality is driven due to the side-lighting cinematographic effect, when we see Oz in close-up, with half of his face lit better than the rest. The close-up shots, another cinematographic element, keep the viewers physically closer to Oz, reinforcing the feeling of secrecy as he speaks his mind, and spectators hear him think out loud. To complete the sense-related persuasive description, non-diegetic music, with symbolic function, tells us what to feel.

The discussion the two lovers have drives us to understand that leaving Kansas means leaving Annie, rising a tinge of regret in us, viewers, while Oz takes leave of her "I'll see you in my dreams" (*Oz,* script, 00:14:55). Let us anticipate a clever narrative twist and note that Annie appears later in the movie as Glinda the Good, an element of surprise and joy for both

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Oz and spectators, a trick which prompts our allegiance to the main character, because we share his excitement.

A second scene of interest analysed from the perspective of building **suspense** is the main character's dangerous travel in a hot-air balloon, following his narrow escape from a jealous Russian circus wrestler (00:16:55- 00:22:56). After asking God to save his life in exchange for a sworn transformation into a better person, Oscar Diggs is swept off to the land of Oz in a long sequence rendering Oz's confrontation with a tornado and his arrival to his future kingdom. The spectators are already aware he will get to the Emerald City safely, but we witness the dangerous flight, and display anticipatory sympathy. On closer inspection, the sequence is built to preserve moments of suspense on both narrative and technical dimensions. The journey is a fall from the black-and-white Kansas landscape through a foggy funnel-like passage. There is an alternation between point-of-view shots, which present the threats awaiting Oscar as he deals with them, and reaction shots framing Oz's face in close-up. The most important element in creating the rhythm of the sequence is camera movement. There is an alternation of camera movements, such as pans, tilts and zooms, with the first two included to help us breathe along with the main character while the last type keeps us tense. The transition from the drab black/white Kansas fun-fair setting to the beauty of Oz elicits spectators' sympathy, as we are overwhelmed with the wonders before our eyes, the same way Oz is. Non-diegetic sound symbolically heightens the tension of the sequence, whereas diegetic sounds have mostly a descriptive function, completing the visual wonders of the land of Oz.

Humour is the strongest point of the movie, present in the overall light tone of the movie and in the relaxed acting style of James Franco who plays Oz, as well as in amusing dialogue exchanges or funny situations. The following sequence starts as a dangerous endeavour, the cliché journey through dark territories animated by invisible threats (00:55:03-00:56:25). We are in alignment with Oz and his friends, China girl whom he has just helped gain back her broken legs, and the Flying monkey, his sworn faithful assistant who carries both his heavy bag of tricks and his secrets. The three feel helpless, Oz is a little afraid but also afraid to admit it, whereas we have fun watching them. The chief role in conferring the sequence amusing functions is assigned to the cinematographic mise-en-scene, the arrangement of simultaneous actions on screen in foreground, background and middle-ground. Spectators are no longer physically glued to the characters, we can see what takes place in the background, which the characters cannot see, so the effect is our anticipatory sympathy and laughter. Low-key lighting and sounds, both diegetic and non-diegetic, have descriptive and foreshadowing functions, appropriate for suspense building scenes. However, the dialogue flaunts our expectations of a suspense sequence with several instances of the literalization technique, typical of comedy or parody genres. While the characters express their innermost fears verbally in the scene's foreground, we see their fears come to life visually in the background; China Girl and Monkey tremble with fear when asking "D'you think there are evil spirits here?" "ghosts?" "the undead?" and Oz tries to calm them down, and himself at the same time, with cold answers such as "Of course not!" or "Stop that!" (*Oz* script, 00:55:10), while we see the glittering eyes of evil coming closer to them. The scene's climax is built with close-ups of their faces, diegetic sound stingers, high-key lighting and fast editing cuts, placing us from the position of amused observers into that of scared

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participants. The technique of linguistic repetition confers a humorous resolution to the characters' journey through the dark forest, with Oz snatching his hat from teeth of the dangerous plants, winding up the sequence in visual slapstick and linguistic humour.

Another humour inducing technique is the repetition of a narrative situation, this time in relation to a secondary character. As Oz is introduced to the people of Oz by Theodora "the Good" he meets Knuck, a grumpy, yet amusing servant whose sole royal task seems to be that of blowing the fanfare to symbolically mark key moments. He will be one of Oz's main helpers in the movie because he is in fact Glinda's inside man, the only one who may facilitate access into the palace of the wicked witches Theodora and Evanora. The situation is funny because nobody likes to hear play the instrument, but most often it is impossible to stop him. There are two instances in the movie when he is discouraged from making noise and a third which compensates for his frustration. Our sympathy with him is strengthened with each amusing situation or witty snatch of dialogue involving Knuck, as our feelings for him range from rejection to understanding and finally triumphant appreciation. First, Theodora stops him from blowing a fanfare with comforting words "Not now, Knuck" (00:36:43-00:36:50), the second time Master Tinker intervenes in the course of Oz's special moment of giving gifts, with the same words "Not now, Knuck" (01:59:14), just to thirdly have Master Tinker encourage him to blow as loud as possible as compensation, while Oz and Glinda kiss behind the courtain: "Now, Knuck!" (02:02:16).

In the last two sequences under discussion, repetition at the level of diegesis fulfils a **self-reflexive** role, calling attention to the unfolding narrative as cinematic construct. The first element in the movie which initially prompted me to draw the parallel between the tricks of the wizard and the director's craft is 'the music box', an object used throughout the movie to emphasize Oz's exploitation of women's feelings (00:02:52- 00:03:30, 00:29:51-00:30:30). It is a gift Oz makes to all the women whose favours he wants to win, just a trick, since the gift-making process includes a moving story about Oz's grandma, meant to elicit women's sympathy and stir their emotions. It should be mentioned that he does not give such an empty gift to Annie/Glinda, for whom he has feelings. Apart from the good story behind the music-box gift making, there is also emotional diegetic music with the dancer spinning, a tune having descriptive and symbolical functions. The parallel between Oz's manipulation of women's levels of sympathy and the film director's craft is hopefully apparent in my claim that a good story in a movie needs appropriate sounds and special effects to stir the spectators.

The second element of interest to the process of looking behind the movie making curtain is Oz's trick to make people believe in his powers (00:06:50- 00:09:04, 01:48:42-01:51:20). He uses nothing more than projected illusion through moving images to reinforce belief at the beginning of the movie and to chase the wicked witches from the Emerald city and restore peace later on. His greatest magic trick is an assembly of constructed settings, appropriate mood-inducing sounds, a projector which keeps his face in extreme close-up whenever his magic is needed and we are in allegiance to him as we witness the mechanisms behind his greatest trick. His friends make up a reliable crew, ready to operate the appropriate machines to create the wizard's persona and improvise solutions to unexpected technical problems. The reaction shots alternate with point of view shots from the people's perspective, as they witness Oz's magic show, transforming the scene into a mirror for us, spectators, a reflection of the various reactions we have towards the magic of movies.

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In the emotional landscape of 21st century entertainment, movies occupy a top position, and the crew and cast involved in carefully packaging a story for us, viewers, rely on the medium's dependability on eliciting emotions. As our knowledge of the technicalities of movie-making grows, we may not only enjoy the products of film directors' mastery but also appreciate the details which support our favourite movie genre's appeal.

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