

EMBODIED VISIONS: EVOLUTION, EMOTION, CULTURE AND FILM, TORBEN GRODAL (2009)

New York: Oxford University Press, £19.99 (paperback), 299 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-537132-1

Reviewed by Jule Selbo, California State University, Fullerton.

‘... to show how inspiration from the natural sciences is able to fertilize the study of culture and film studies’

(Grodal 2009: 271)

Those interested in the analysis of the screenwriting process have an opportunity in reading Torben Grodal’s *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture and Film* to examine the craft of screenwriting in an accessible and innovative fashion – through a science-based examination of the audience’s response to story, genre and thematic choices.

Grodal’s area is film analysis and although the book is not specifically aimed at the screenwriter (his target, in fact, seems very wide – film-makers, creators of video games, film and video-game analysts; as well as cognitive theorists and perhaps even anthropologists), his approach is applicable to those in the screenwriting field as a support to more traditional examinations of film story. This latest work expands on Grodal’s *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (1997), a book that explores developments in neuroscience and cognitive science in relation to narrative theory and film theory. The breakdown of his PECMA model (perception, emotion, cognition and motor action; experienced in the processing of information through the phenomenon of film) strives to explore the audience’s preferences in genre and story by keeping in mind accepted theories of evolution – not just physical but mental. Grodal’s view is that audience responses may be predicted by understanding predilections that have been bio-culturally embedded over a multitude of generations (pp. 5–6). Using research in a variety of sciences, Grodal makes his case; each person is not self-created, there is a DNA heritage specific to the evolution of physicality as well as to emotions and even a deeply embedded heritage of thought. This theory, though seemingly out of the normal purview of the screenwriter, may serve as fertile territory because of its focus on the understanding of the audience – which, in most cases, is of supreme importance to the screenwriter and/or film-maker (be it the producer deciding whether or not to slate the screenplay for production, the director constructing a visual interpretation of the screenplay for the audience, or other film practitioners desirous of affecting the audience).

Grodal’s references are diverse and include cognitive scientists, philosophers, zoologists, biologists, film-makers as well as film academics. The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, ‘Film, Culture and Evolution’, Grodal presents the theory that genres and themes, when

in line with story elements based on deeply rooted human conditions, hold a special resonance with the audience and that 'emotional dispositions to which they appeal are [cross-culturally] innate' (p. 27). For example, Grodal asserts that the popularity of the hunter-versus-hunted scenario in action, crime and horror genres can be traced to early man's need to battle beastly predators as well as human enemies for survival. He supports the theory that the 'fight or flight' impulse is not being learned in the *real* time of one human lifetime, but it is an impulse embedded in human nature due to oft-repeated experiences of previous generations. Thus, he points out, stories utilizing plots in this domain quickly create empathetic understanding with an audience. Grodal uses research in brain chemistry to examine why film stories exploring physical and emotional security appeal to children, pointing out that attachment 'is linked to two estrogen derivatives: oxytocin, which influences the bonding of mothers and babies, and vasopressin, which influences male parenting behavior...' (p. 27).

Chapter 3, 'Love and Desire in the Cinema', examines the evolutionary reasons for emotions such as love (a dominant or supporting element in many screenplays) and the human need for it – whether it be for survival, for procreation, for status, or for self-esteem – and how this desire forces action and conflict. Grodal pits the female's desire for bonding – and her use of negotiation to achieve that end – against the male's acceptance of anonymous (or at least non-bonding) sexual relations, thus pointing out the immediate discord that fuels much of the romance genre. Grodal cites Linda Williams's work on pornography through an assessment of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), focusing on the conflict caused by the male character's attraction to 'non-closed' relations and the female's desire for relations offering closure. Grodal also considers the make up of the femme fatale, the aberrant female comfortable with the predominantly male desire of 'non-closed' relationships – a woman who 'uses sexuality to achieve non-sexual ends' (p. 73). Grodal's sources, some pointing to research in human biology and others to anthropological insights, have relevance to the screenwriter's task of constructing strong and relatable characters that resonate with an audience.

In subsequent chapters, Grodal touches on other genres such as melodrama, supernatural/fantasy and horror, citing the biological and psychological predispositions of the audience that contribute to each genre's popularity with particular filmgoers. A screenwriter may ask for a deeper exploration into each film genre from Grodal, but as most creative souls crave inspiration rather than instruction, the depth certainly provokes stimulation and challenge.

In Part II, 'Narrative, Visual Aestheticism, Brain and the PECMA Flow', Grodal provides a chart and explanation of his PECMA model, a flow system which is '... important for understanding the relation between the innate and the culturally acquired aspects' of the film experience (p. 152). He makes the distinctions between audience responses in the experiencing of literature, film and drama as well as

video games; for Grodal, the latter 'represent a new form of storytelling that integrates high-order goals with low-level muscle-and-attention-training stories in a medium that allows for the mass production of such experiences' (p. 172). Grodal differentiates between realist fiction (films with a beginning, middle and end that embrace final and emotional consequences for its characters) and the 'playful' cognition of video games – playful because of their sense of never-ending and often repetitive narratives. Grodal cites a few experiments of open-ended storytelling in feature films but sees that the 'options' remain the various visions of the film-maker, not the spectator or – as in video games – the player.

Chapter 7, 'Stories for Eyes, Ears and Muscles' advises on the basic need for the writer/film-maker to identify and focus on the character's 'high-order' goals due to the audience's innate desire to navigate through a story in a mostly logical and understandable way; a desire that holds true in film narrative as well as in storytelling in video games (p. 160). Grodal references films such as *Paris, Texas* (1984, adapted by Sam Shepard and directed by Wim Wenders), *Mulholland Drive* (2001, written and directed by David Lynch), and films written by Andrei Tarkovsky and others whose screenplays do not follow the logical 'high-order goals' template and create a 'cognitive dissonance', thus appealing to a unique (and smaller) segment of the film-going audience.

In Chapter 9, 'Art Film, The Transient Body and the Permanent Soul', Grodal examines differences in films aimed at the high-art audience and films aimed at the mass audience; high-art films being more comfortable in transient storytelling, while mass-audience films (in most cases) featuring subjective storytelling and a permanent conclusion (p. 205). Grodal is not making a value judgment here – he simply makes the distinction (one that seems fairly obvious but may instigate creative sparks in the screenwriter tackling a story dilemma) between an audience willing and wired to 'connect the dots' and an audience more comfortable in a passive role.

There seems to be a plethora of thoughts, theories and possibilities in Grodal's dense work – however, the screenwriter scrolling through its pages may find inspiration (or a sense of confirmation or even interesting points of argument) within his evolutionary theory of film story. Those creatives open to the study of the human condition as well as human conditioning will find much to peruse regarding the appeal of certain genres and stories to an audience interested in film and related media.

REFERENCES

- Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), Wrs: Frederic Raphael, Stanley Kubrick, Dir: Stanley Kubrick, USA/UK, 159 mins.
- Grodal, Torben (1997), *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

—— (2009), *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture and Film*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Mulholland Drive (2001), Wr/Dir: David Lynch, France/USA, 146 mins.

Paris, Texas (1984), Wrs: Wim Wenders, Sam Shepard, Dir: Wim Wenders, West Germany/France/UK, 148 mins.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jule Selbo is Associate Professor of Screenwriting in the Radio-TV-Film Department at California State University, Fullerton. Her recent books include *Screenplay: Idea to Successful Script* (2007) and the companion volume *The Rewrite: First Draft to Marketplace* (2008). Professional writing credits include feature films and television series.

Contact:

E-mail: jsselbo@fullerton.edu

JOSC NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS 2010

GENERAL

Articles submitted to JOSC should be original and not under consideration by any other publication. Articles should be sent by email as Word documents.

LANGUAGE

The journal uses standard British English. The editors reserve the right to alter usage to these ends. Please note there is a preference for 'ize' endings rather than 'ise'.

LENGTH OF ARTICLES

Articles should be 4000–8000 words long and must not exceed 8000 words (including notes and references, but excluding the author biography, keywords and abstract).

METADATA

Any article submitted should include the following metadata on a separate page:

- An abstract of 150–200 words, providing a summary of the key points in the article.
- Up to six keywords, one per line, in lower case (for indexing and abstract purposes).
- A short biography to be included in the journal issue.
- Your name, institution or affiliation, and contact details. Please include phone number, and e-mail address, but indicate if you do not want this to be published.

NOTES

Notes should be kept to a minimum and be as brief and to the point as possible. Use Word's note-making facility, ensuring your notes are endnotes, not footnotes. The note call must be in superscripted Arabic (1, 2, 3).

PERMISSIONS

It is the responsibility of the author to obtain written permission for a quotation from unpublished material, or for all quotations of more than 250 words in one extract or more than 500 words in total from any work still in copyright, and for the reprinting of illustrations or tables from unpublished or copyright material.

PHOTOS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The journal welcomes illustrations and images. It is the author's responsibility to supply images and ensure they are copyright cleared. Images should be supplied independently of the article and be scanned at minimum of 300 dpi resolution. Images sent as e-mail attachments should be in greyscale. Images should be accompanied by a suitable caption. The following is the agreed style for captions: Figure 1: Caption here.

PRESENTATION

- The title of your article should be in bold.
- Please submit the article double-spaced in Times New Roman 12 point, the same for references and endnotes.
- The text should have at least 2.5cm margins for annotation by the editorial team.

QUOTATIONS

- Quotations should be within single inverted commas. Material quoted within a cited text should be in double inverted commas.
- If quotations are of more than forty words they should be separated from the main body of the text and indented.

REFEREES

The *Journal of Screenwriting* is a refereed journal. Strict anonymity is accorded to both authors and referees. Referees are

chosen for their expertise within the subject area, are asked to comment on specialist content, comprehensibility and relevant contexts. A summary of the referees comments will be provided, whether or not the article is accepted for publication.

REFERENCES

- The Harvard system is used for bibliographical references. All quotations should be followed by the name of the author, the date of publication and page number, e.g. (Price 2009: 2)
- References refer the reader to the bibliography at the end of the article, this should be headed 'References' and listed alphabetically. Examples of the most usual cases are given below:
 - Books –
Seger, L. (2003), *Advanced Screenwriting*, Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press.
Spicer, A. (2007), 'The author as author: restoring the screenwriter to British film history', in J. Chapman, M. Glancy and S. Harper (eds), *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, pp. 89–103.
 - Journals –
Fawell, J. (1989), 'The musicality of the film script', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 20: 1, pp. 48–54.

REFERENCING FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS

In JOSC, there is a significant political difficulty for us in privileging the director (or indeed anyone) as a single author of a film or television production, so these listing have to be by title, to be fair. We suggest the writer and director should be named (or the creator of a TV series, if appropriate), in that order.

For clarity, we are adopting the following style for film and TV productions:

In the text:

- Film title:
Original title/translation (year of 1st release)
e.g. *Angst essen Seele auf/Fear Eats the Soul* (1973)
- TV series title:
Original title/translation (originating broadcaster, year of 1st transmission to last tx. if known)
e.g. *Spooks* (BBC, 2002–); *The Wednesday Play* (BBC 1964–70)
- TV title episode:
Original title/translation (originating broadcaster, year of 1st transmission)
e.g. *Middlemarch #1* (BBC, 1994)
- TV single drama:
Original title/translation (originating broadcaster, year of 1st transmission)
e.g. *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966)

In the References:

- Film title:
Original title/translation (year of 1st release), Wr., Dir., Country, duration.
e.g. *Soft Top, Hard Shoulder* (1992), Wr: Peter Capaldi, Dir: Stefan Schwartz, UK, 93 mins.
- TV series title:
Original title/translation (year of 1st tx. to year of last tx.) Cr. (or lead Wr.); Country, production company for originating broadcaster; tx. information (where known and appropriate to the reference in the text), duration of ep. X number of episodes (if known).
e.g. *Spooks* (2002–), Cr: David Wolstencroft; UK, Kudos for