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Structural completeness in *The War Is Over*

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Nina Mimica's The War Is Over achieves structural completeness on the basis of a number of choices regarding its visual style: shot scale, shot length, editing style and camera movement.

Richard Raskin's *The Art of the Short Fiction Film* (2002) is the key work on storytelling in the short fiction film in general and on Nina Mimica's *La guerra è finita/The War Is Over* (1997) in particular. The book contains an interview with Mimica as well as an analysis of the film's *narrative* design. Raskin concludes his article by describing the film as 'one of the finest landmarks for the short fiction film in the late 20th Century' (Raskin 2002: 164).

I have no major disagreement with Raskin's high regard for the qualities of the film nor with the points made in his analysis of it. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention to some aspects of the film's *stylistic* design, which deserve to be brought to the fore more than they are in Raskin's book.

Raskin suggests that having a non-verbal prologue and an extended non-verbal shot at the end of *The War Is Over* gives the film a triptych-like structure. This non-verbal framing device, he argues, enhances the film's structural completeness 'setting the central dialogue in relief' (Raskin 2002: 164). Raskin also defends the ending and the beginning on the grounds of counterpoint. The dance at the beginning (how the reaction to 'the end of war' *should* be) marks a poignant contrast to the final shot with Marco limping away on

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crutches after he has learned that the sight of a leg amputee would have a bad effect on his mother's nerves.

On the whole, I subscribe to Raskin's analysis but have a major point and a minor point to add. The minor point is that aside from the prologue and final shot, Shot 5 should also be seen as having a privileged space within the film. The major point is that we should consider the structural completeness of the film in the light of other stylistic parameters. Non-verbal versus verbal does indeed set the prologue and final shot apart from the remainder of the film but is hardly the only stylistic parameter to do so.

The following will show how the structural completeness of *The War Is Over* is subtended by various stylistic choices. In doing so I will also highlight how these stylistic choices set the beginning and the end apart from the remainder of the film thus giving 'the beginning' and 'the end' a privileged place within the story.

SHOT LENGTH AND RHYTHM

With an average shot length of 4.1 seconds (excluding titles), the film is edited quite briskly. Running at 15 and 29 seconds the first and final shots of the film obviously stand out. True, the prologue also consists of three shorter shots (2, 9 and 4 seconds) but the tribal-like drumbeat on the soundtrack and the use of slow motion impress these images with a particular rhythm that is markedly different from the mid-section of the film.

CAMERA MOVEMENT AND SHOT SCALE

Camera movement and shot scale also set the prologue and final shot apart from the rest of the film. As illustrated by the shot-by-shot overview accompanying this issue, Shots 6 through to 79 are consistently in close-up and close-shot/medium-shot range whereas the prologue and the final shot are predominantly in full-shot and long-shot range.

Coupled with the absence of dialogue, the longer shot length and – in the case of the prologue – the use of slow motion, these shots are not merely 'gappy' in a compositional sense but also leave 'more room' for the viewer to form hypotheses and pose questions. In that respect, they appeal to a more introspective type of viewer engagement. In terms of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory (1974) there are more *Leerstellen*/empty spaces for the viewer to fill out.

Aside from the fast cutting, and the predominance of closer shots, the central part of the story is characterized by an extensive use of jump cuts and restless handheld camera movement. The use of jump cuts is particularly pronounced in the first two-thirds of the film. For instance, Shots 6 through to 12 are all joined by jump cuts and amongst the 51 first transitions in the film I counted (at least) 18 jump cuts. Even many of the transitions that – on the printed page – seem to adhere to the rules of continuity editing, are in fact jarring and abrupt. Add to this the extensive use of handheld camera movement. The restlessness of the camera varies throughout Shots 6 to 79 but the movement of the camera is often hectic. It is also imperfect in the sense that the camera is 'seeking out its motive', sometimes failing to locate it (as in the whip pan at the end of Shot 48) or to reframe properly (as in Shots 15, 19 and 35).

The overall style of the main part of the story (Shots 6 through to 79) can be characterized as *intensified discontinuity*. 'Intensified continuity is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis,' argues

David Bordwell who then singles out four central tactics of visual intensification: faster cutting, closer shot scales, greater span between applied focal lengths and free-ranging camera movement (Bordwell 2002: 16–28; Bordwell 2006: 117–89). Intensified *discontinuity* was first coined by Nielsen (2006) and refers to the same intensification devices with the important addition that the intensification is coupled with an editing pattern and camera-movement strategy that flaunt *discontinuity*.

Mimica herself explains the choice of rapid cutting and handheld camera movement on the basis that she wanted to be ‘inside the actors, to express their emotions’ (Raskin 2002: 161). In the same passage, Mimica argues that ‘the camera does not represent the point of view of an external observer’ but that the position of the camera is ‘inside the characters’. More on that argument later.

Again, the visual style of the prologue (Shots 1 to 4) and of the final shot (Shot 80) stands out in comparison to the remainder of the film. In terms of editing, the transitions from Shots 1 to 2 and from Shots 3 to 4 are indeed jump cuts but combined with slow motion and underscore music they do not come across as jarring or abrupt. Camera movement is either absent or very deliberate. The most significant contrast to the restless camera movement during the phone conversation is the camera movement in Shot 80 which – along with Marco’s movement away from the camera – *reveal* to us that it is in fact he who has lost a leg in the war.

Again, it is worth pointing out that in the prologue Shots 3 and 4 take us *closer* to the character – allowing us to identify him as a specific character and not an abstract Giacometti-like figure – whereas in Shot 80 the character moves away from the camera. These are conventional ways of leading the viewer *into* and *out* of the story space but they nonetheless strengthen the structural completeness of the film.

In terms of camera movement, Shot 5 leads the viewer’s eye from left to right along a telephone cable. The motive suggests a thematic preoccupation with communication, whereas the movement of the camera not only leads us into the main setting but almost seems to be *carried on* in the final shot as the camera again moves slowly from left to right. Shot 5 marks a *transition* in the film from the non-verbal prologue to the telephone conversation. Shot 5 is also the image on which the title is superimposed.

TRUST THE TALE, NOT THE TELLER?

The camera movements of the film differ not only with respect to tempo or smoothness but also in terms of function. In the final shot the camera acts not as an ‘eye’ but as a ‘pointer’ – pointing out relevant story information for us to consider. This, in fact, is one of the reasons why Mimica – remarkably – dislikes the ending of the film. To her way of thinking the camera returns to an ‘observer position’, the narrative twist seems imposed on the action by a narrative agent (has a ‘conceptual’ feel to it) and it fails to let the viewer in on a development within Marco. According to Mimica, the final shot should have suggested that Marco is ‘moving toward reality’, i.e. accepting the reality of his situation (Raskin 2002: 162).

Mimica regrets not having inserted items into the final shot that would have conveyed the impression that Marco has accepted the reality of his new situation – an oncoming Red Cross truck, children playing at the roadside, perhaps singing a song heard at the beginning of the film (Raskin 2002: 162).

Would this have made a better ending? Perhaps. It could certainly have been staged without disrupting the structural completeness of the film.

However, I submit that it would *not* have been a better ending by bringing us 'inside the actors' as opposed to taking an external view of the action. We are never literally 'inside' the characters in *The War Is Over*. At one point in the film the camera follows the father's gaze (Shot 45) but there are no traditional POV shots in the film. This brings us to an inconsistency in Mimica's line of argument. The handheld camera movements are in fact *describing* – by means of a visual metaphor – the inner experience of the main characters, as opposed to representing it directly through mobile POV shots (Nielsen 2007: 241–42). Consequently, the 'inner experiential perspective' that Mimica heralds depends on precisely those *conceptual* powers of the camera that she distances herself from.

The real difference between the final shot and the shots preceding it is not one of assuming an 'observer position' or being 'inside' the characters but of tapping into the many functional resources of camera movements that are external to the action: for instance, using camera movement to expand our understanding of the scene by expanding the visual field, to substantiate or add a descriptive dimension to a character's traits or behaviour, to suggest psychological or emotional activity or to inflect the mood or atmosphere of a situation (Nielsen 2007: 262–63).

FINAL REMARKS

It is worth pointing out that the stylistic differences which set the beginning and the ending apart from the remainder of the film do not merely enhance its narrative design or aesthetic unity but also emphasize its thematic and moral preoccupation with beginnings and endings as such. The film is, after all, titled *The War Is Over* and encourages a series of questions concerning 'beginnings' and 'endings'. When is a war really *over*? And if the war is indeed over, what happens next? In a way, the film begins with an end (the war) and ends with a beginning (the return to society/family?). By staging the beginning (Shots 1 to 4) and the end (Shot 80) in ways that differ markedly from the rest of the film, Mimica implicitly invites the viewer to single these out for closer contemplation.

The points made in this article are meant to supplement Raskin's and Mimica's analyses of the film, but are by no means exhaustive. More could be said about the acoustic design of the film, for instance. Nevertheless, I hope to have contributed to a more comprehensive and rich understanding of the stylistic and narrative design of a classic – and structurally complete – short fiction film.

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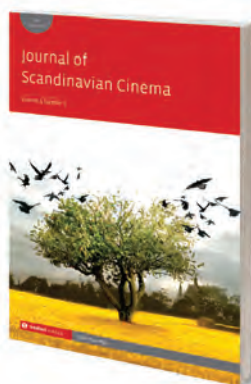
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