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Subliminality and Intentionality in Film

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| メタデータ | 言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2014-02-17 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: WOOD, David John, WOOD, David John メールアドレス: 所属: |
| URL | https://chikushi-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/209 |

Subliminality and Intentionality in Film

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Part 1.

Introduction

Even if we try watching a movie passively, its content may still be affecting us unconsciously. Movies are deliberate not incidental constructs. A movie's elements are often intended to create the effect that the director has in mind. At the surface of these elements is the story itself, but the impact and meaning of a movie's events may depend on a myriad of other factors. In addition, we may further react to a movie in line with our own moods, experiences and agendas. Watching a movie more than once may change the way in which we react again, denying or confirming our previous reactions, and stimulating new ones. There is always the possibility of seeing and feeling things that were either not intended, or are not even there. There is also a grey area where the director may not consciously even be intending to create factors, but still does so subliminally.

One way to research intention and unconscious effect is to go back to the source of a movie, for example, a novel, a shooting script (the pre-production version of the screen play) or both. The situation may be complex and confused as the transition from novel to shooting script can retain unintended features, and of course a shooting script often goes through more than one version before it becomes a movie. In addition directors, editors and producers chop and change adding features that complicate matters further. These may harmonize with pre-existing features, replace them altogether, or clash with them. The director alters elements to comply with his or her own vision, one which will differ from a novelist's or a shooting script writer's at least partially if not fundamentally. This may cause inconsistencies if the alterations are not extensive enough, and leave elements of the previous writer's intentions intact. The situation is further compounded by all the other influences that combine to produce the final cut.

Part 2.

Example 1: *Stand by Me*

Rob Reiner's movie *Stand by Me* was based on the pre-eminent American writer Stephen King's novella, *The Body*. He was the first living writer to be awarded the United States' highest domestic literary award, the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. The film version by Bruce Evans and Raynold Gideon was nominated for an academy award for Adapted Screenplay and one for the Writers' Guild of America for Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium, and only in these categories. The ultimate thrust of the movie was to change the balance of the original themes of the novella, and stress friendship over death, instead of the other way around, as in King's work. In addition to changing details of the time frame, the order of and details of the events, key imagery is also altered in a number of ways.

The story centers around the death of a missing young boy struck by a train, plus the fact that only two groups of boys, one of late teens and the other pre-teens, come to know the truth and whereabouts of the deceased, Ray. As a child, the author is said to have witnessed a friend being hit and killed by a train, though he may have had no recollection about it. After going out to play with the boy, when he came home King is said to have appeared shocked and speechless.

In the movie, the juxtaposition of the two gangs (culminating in their eventual confrontations at the climax of the story) creates an essential perspective. The older boys, led by Ace, have been through school and failed. They are locked into a life of disappointment and petty crime. Their greatest prospect may be incarceration. Chris' younger gang is a mirror image of Ace's, with the same lack of prospects because of their family problems and problematic environment. The exception is Gordie, the central character who, unlike the other three young boys, has both the intellect and where-with-all to go beyond his immediate circumstances. However, at the age of twelve, he is determined to stick with his friends, especially his best friend, Chris, even at the cost of his own future. Chris has equal if much less developed intellectual potential, but his problems at home are too much for any child of his age to come to terms with. Despite his own problems, he is also determined to do the best for his friends, even if it means sacrificing his association with Gordie to allow the latter to go into the right class at junior high school instead of the no-hope course that Chris and the others seem doomed to follow.

The same story as in King's novella forms the framework of the movie, but with vital changes in detail that make the results quite distinct. In converting an original story for the

screen, written imagery needs to be re-expressed as visual and aural imagery, as well as being incorporated into the dialogue. In addition, to express the new direction that the film *Stand by Me* takes, imagery that was not in the novel to begin with needed to be introduced. This created not only adapted and new imagery, but also some images that were part way between the two types. Naturally a movie is subject to different constraints, so it will usually tend towards economy of expression in terms of the content. However, with the extra dimensions of picture and sound, more is possible in less time. Also as a movie is a non-stop, straight-through experience and, in its original form, not so easy to break up and assimilate, some of the content may rush by viewers who tend to be more selective as a result out of necessity.

If we look at some of the imagery clusters in the novella and compare their respective use in the movie, we can see how difficult it may be to capture the original intent or spirit. King's story starts with the confession of the narrator, the grown-up Gordie, that the fear of not being able to convey successfully a pivotal experience in one's life in words has kept some mystery "buried" inside him like a "secret treasure" for fear that others could snatch it away, never appreciating how important it was. This metaphor recurs and transforms into related imagery throughout the course of the book. At a later stage he writes: "And now I sit here, trying to look through an IBM keyboard and see that time, trying to remember the best and worst of that green and brown summer, and I can almost feel the skinny boy still buried in this advancing body and hear those sounds" (*The Body*, 338-339). The idea of being buried of course relates directly to the title, *The Body*, as something to be interred, as well as to his psychological state of mixed repression and fear. On the one hand, he has dreaded revealing where his "secret heart is buried" like a "landmark to a secret treasure your enemies would love to steal away" (*The Body*, 289). On the other hand, until he releases it in prose, he cannot come to terms with the experience that he has kept buried inside for so long.

The image of being buried in the ground later extends to a related image chain, namely, that of being drowned, or buried in water as it were. This first occurs when Chris tries to warn Gordie to split up with him and the others as their almost assured future failure could drown Gordie's own chances of a better future, as it were. This may also be related to other watery images of tears and rain which permeate the novella. Crying was central to Gordie's experience of his brother Denny's recent death, although their relationship was far from close. In the climactic chapter, where they find the body of the dead boy, Chris, whom Gordie almost never sees crying, breaks down in angry sobbing. This is back-grounded by the end of a record-breaking hot dry spell, as the skies finally open on the point of discovering the body. The emotional parallels are clear, and all along the drought has created its own atmosphere of death, as nothing could grow under such conditions. As well as Gordie's nightmare of

drowning, stimulated by the way Chris had explained the dangers of continuing their association, another instance of this image occurs when Gordie experiences simulated death on the railroad bridge. Stuck in the middle of a long high bridge with nowhere to escape, a train approaches menacingly. In his psychological petrification, Gordie describes his eventual standing from a shocked and frozen kneeling position as a boy on a deep seabed, rising in slow motion.

These images translate in varying ways into the movie. However, as the change of title indicates, death is de-stressed in favor of emphasizing the theme of friendship instead. The closest that the movie comes to employing the idea of being buried like a secret treasure is Vern, the youngest and most childish of Chris' gang, who is shown digging in vain as he searches for a jar of saved pennies that he had hidden under his house. And the secret then becomes the location of Ray's body, as unseen, Vern overhears his older brother tell another friend from Chris' gang about it, before rushing to tell Chris and the others his big news. As for drowning, this thread virtually vanishes in the film save for when Gordie is shown standing in slow motion shock on the bridge. But without the same connections as the novel, this becomes a one-off, isolated event for dramatic effect only. Similarly, the novel's extremes of weather are all but absent from the movie. Tears and crying, however, are important, but assume a new role. Gordie has persecuted himself for not crying at his brother's funeral, and in the movie, their relationship becomes very close, setting up the comparison with Chris as a new brother, if not a substitute father, because Gordie's own father is too preoccupied with Denny's loss to be able to give Gordie such sound advice as Chris manages. After finally becoming able to confide his secret to Chris, when they discover the body of Ray, Gordie is at last able to express his grief in tears, marking a radical shift from the novella.

While the movie dispenses with these images because they do not concur with the new balance between the themes of death and friendship, in their place come several new and effective images that are not in the novella. The hat, symbol of love between brothers which Denny had given to Gordie before the former's untimely death, is stolen by Ace. It was one of the few concrete memories that Gordie had left of Denny, and its loss sets up the climactic confrontation with Ace when the two gangs vie for Ray's body. Denny was transformed from the novella in various ways. There he was seen not only as a stranger, but even a monster, threatening Gordie and angry that it was he not Gordie who had died so young: "I would imagine him pallid and bloody in the darkness, the side of his head walloped in, a gray-veined cake of blood and brains drying on his shirt. I would imagine his arms coming up, his bloody hands hooking into claws, and he would have been croaking: 'It should have been you, Gordon. It should have been you'" (*The Body*, 309). In the movie this line is ascribed to

Gordie's father instead in Gordie's recurring nightmare of his brother's funeral, highlighting his feeling of being unloved at home, and in line with the thematic emphasis shift as it makes Chris more of a substitute father figure, and thus an even greater friend.

The comb is another new image effectively introduced into the movie. It symbolizes the younger boys' immature dream of becoming heroes by finding the body and looking smart for the new image that they crave in their dream of their pictures being taken for the newspapers. The deeper sense is that they would like to escape the inevitability of their lives, lacking caring parents and teachers, as well as any prospect of escape from the prison-like confines of their tiny hometown. During the drama of crossing the railroad bridge, the comb falls in a kind of metaphorical mini-death as Vern nervously crawls on all fours. Their dream falls with it. Another image of note is the knife that Ace pulls on Chris during their argument about who is entitled to claiming to have found Ray first. While its significance as an instrument of death may be quite obvious, it ties in perfectly with the beginning and ending of the movie, where we learn and are later reminded how Chris eventually dies in a stabbing incident. While the event is shocking, the fact that Chris had made something of his life by becoming a lawyer signals the success of his and Gordie's relationship. In the novel, the premonition of Chris' eventual death is expressed less effectively when he falls and lands in exactly the same shape as the body when they had found it shortly before.

The ending of the movie is positively happier than that of the novella. There is a final reference to the opening when King has the grown Gordie see Ace and say: ". . . he'd gotten fat. The sharp, handsome features I remembered were buried in an avalanche of flesh" (*The Body*, 433). Finally, the reader is left with the impending sense of mortality as Gordie complains of ill health and his own temporariness: "I looked to the left, and beyond the mill I could see the Castle River not so wide now but a little cleaner, still flowing The trestle upstream is gone, but the river is still. So am I" (*The Body*, 433) suggesting his own temporariness, as he can never outlast the life of the river. The movie both begins and ends with the grown up narrator watching two young boys, those cycling at the open, and his own son and his friend at the end. This also underlines the new emphasis on friendship by framing the movie in these terms.

On the other hand, the novella emphasizes death over friendship. This is done by muddling animate and inanimate things to reflect the young Gordie's confusion over the meaning of death. For example, when crossing the bridge and coming face to face with death, the rails seem like "metallic snakes" reflecting the shaking terror in his clutching grip and the vibration caused by an approaching train. Fir trees lining the river seem to look down at their own reflections miserably. At the moment of imminent death as the train approaches, Gordie

imagines Ray as a ripped open laundry bag, and his own body transforms as he cannot seem to scream. His jaw becomes a dumb trap door because he is frozen in fear. This is a consistent imagistic pattern throughout the novella. For example, as they finally approach Ray's body, the clouds appear as a huge monster and the forest trees appear to whisper to each other the encroachment of the boys. Even the ground seems to come to life, described as sucking up moisture greedily.

Part 3.

Example 2: *Rain Man*

Rain Man's genesis is complex as it went through many shooting script versions over the course of several years, which in turn ran through nearly as many directors (including Steven Spielberg and Sydney Pollack) until Barry Levinson finally saw the project through, and won an Oscar in the process for Best Director, as well as several acclaimed actors including the likes of Robert De Niro and Jack Nicholson. As it does not derive from a famous book, unlike *Stand by Me*, the approach to appraisal must also differ. The original story belonged to Barry Morrow, one of the co-authors of the shooting script, which won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. In addition, Dustin Hoffman won the Oscar for Best Actor, and *Rain Man* itself won the Oscar for Best Movie in 1989. It similarly won three Golden Globes for Best Film, Director and Producer. While gaining only limited general critical acknowledgement however, it made the most money of any movie in 1988, a great feat considering its unusual background, subject matter and length (133 minutes).

An immediate case in point about intentionality versus subliminality was that Morrow handed over his final version of the script just hours before filming began due to problems caused by a national writers' strike, and he never attended the actual production, so the final director must have had to intuit much of the writer's intention, and most of its detailed mis-en-scène. Another interesting detail is that the script originally intended the title role of the *Rain Man* to be happy and friendly, but Hoffman reworked his part into an emotionally cut-off outsider.

The imagery of *Rain Man* creates exceptional depth of meaning. There are some unmistakably intentional images, as well as some much more subtle ones bordering on subliminality, because their effect insinuates itself on viewers almost unconsciously throughout the unfolding of the movie. While the degree to which the director's initial and overall intentions were substantiated is arguable regarding the development of the film's imagery, the existence of key imagistic chains and their contribution to the overall artistic integrity of the

movie are undeniable. We can feel them instinctively, even if we cannot readily identify them.

The opening scene of the movie highlights the colorful Italian sports cars on which Charlie has pinned his hopes for a better future. Their importance to him is immediately expressed in the way that they descend from the skies, like some unassailable vision of beauty. He looks up almost in worship at what the viewer must at first struggle to make out, as the camera angle does not immediately reveal the identity of the mysterious objects suspended high above on the unloading crane at the dock. They are as shiny as they are colorful, reflecting their dealer's dream against an otherwise indistinct and hazy skyline. A sudden burst of sunlight only makes their impact stronger and the contrast with his reality – the dull converted warehouse that is his office – all the more stark. Two of the movie's main images are thus introduced simultaneously, the car and the background, but the ongoing transformation of their true significance has still only been vaguely hinted at.

The cause of Charlie's obsession with cars comes to light when he takes his girlfriend to his family home following the funeral of his father. En route, Charlie makes a u-turn, which kicks up a cloud of sand against a backdrop of threshing wind turbines cleaving the air above them, developing a sense of barren menace. On arrival, the first thing he does is to show her his father's vintage car, but without any further explanation other than its special features, which once made it as sought-after as the foreign sports cars he is now hoping to sell for a huge profit to fulfill his dream of success. Susanna (who was shocked at Charlie's lack of reaction on hearing the news of his father's passing while they were driving on their way to a weekend getaway) is struck by an old photograph of his father with what she believes to be his only son, Charlie, because she believes that she can see a loving bond between them. But Charlie angrily tells her to put the photo down, and then explains the incident that caused his lifelong bitterness towards his father.

The true scale of the car's significance becomes clearer when Charlie tells Susanna that it seemed to him to have been his father's "baby". He was never allowed to use it, and became intensely jealous that his father's affections for it appeared to exceed any that he may have had for his own flesh and blood child. When he could stand it no more, and finally decided to take it to celebrate his best grades at school with friends, his father reported the car's disappearance to the police as a crime committed by an anonymous stranger. As a result, Charlie (who was only sixteen at the time) had to spend a scary two nights in jail, and on his release, he left home, subsequently severing his links with his father forever. Charlie's communicative reticence and deep compulsion to succeed by dealing in top-of-the-line luxury cars seem somehow perversely rooted in this childhood nightmare.

However, there is one new twist to the tragic sequence of events that followed his only

ever forbidden spin. Now that the car's worth is only intrinsic, and of no obvious value or use to Charlie, he is cynically bequeathed the cause of his family break-up by his deceased dad, when instead what he desperately needs and demands is sufficient cash to fend off his loan shark until he can overcome the growing obstacles to selling the Lamborghinis. Thus the final nail in the coffin of his feelings for his father is learning that the three million dollars in his father's estate have all been given by Mr. Babbitt, senior, to an unnamed beneficiary. The sad backdrop of tear-like rain pouring into an otherwise empty but leaf-strewn swimming pool, along with his father's dying prize roses, seem to depict Charlie's poignant state perfectly.

In addition to the imagery of cars and the background we have now touched on one of the most important but initially almost imperceptible metaphors of the movie, namely the meanings it ascribes to reflection. Charlie's marked antagonism at the sight of his girlfriend perusing his photograph from the past so intently, like his obsession with automobiles, can only hint at the fundamental underpinning of the movie that reflection represents. While there are occasions when this facet of the film must seem subliminal, it carries such weight for the movie's pivotal progression that it may well be *Rain Man's* central trope.

Reflections come in many forms in the movie, and the significance of reflection extends from the visual surface of the plot to some deep subconscious impulse. Charlie's initial refusal to let Susanna look at the picture from his past indicates that he is powerfully opposed to looking inwards at his own psychologically fragile state, and equally hostile to anyone else trying to. He is both literally and figuratively incapable of reflection. Of course, we can see reflections in mirrors, windows, glass, water and even in the eyes of those around us. Photos are also reflections, but unlike those examples previously listed, they are reflections that can travel through time. Most importantly in Charlie's case, reflection also means thinking deeply, facing up to things, and potentially reforming his erring ways, implying the fundamental flaws in his character at the beginning of the film.

After Charlie hunts down the location of the beneficiary of his father's millions to a special home for people with such conditions as autism, he is stonewalled by the doctor in charge. Unknown to Charlie, the beneficiary (a patient at the institution) gets into Charlie's newly acquired vintage car and sits down next to Susanna. This takes place directly below the doctor's office, and the camera angle shows the whole episode from inside, with Charlie peering out of the window. His profile is clearly visible in the pane, but he sees neither his own reflection nor Ray's movements. This is a crucial moment of revelation as Charlie discovers that Ray is his brother, someone whose existence he had never even suspected before. While to Charlie, Ray's inability to express his feelings or relate to others seems pitiful, the irony is that in many ways his brother reflects the dysfunctional state of Charlie's own

inability to communicate honestly.

Charlie seizes Ray from the institution in an attempt to secure what he believes is his rightful inheritance, regarding Ray as less a person than a commodity, a mere means to a mercenary end. But he irreversibly alienates Susanna when he finally admits the same. She walks out of their hotel room in the middle of the night, shocked that her boyfriend has no scruples, and even worse, that he will rarely confide in her or seek her opinion before taking big decisions. While Charlie is determined not to build a meaningful relationship with his brother, as he becomes exposed to someone who actually reflects his own communicative failings (albeit distortedly) he does begin to change, and ultimately finds himself on the verge of taking a more human interest in his only flesh and blood relative. There can be no doubt that even subconsciously he begins to see himself in Ray. He comes to take a deeper interest, even if it is simply to gain some measure of control over the situation.

Ray's aversions to even remotely dangerous forms of transportation and to going out in the rain seriously threaten Charlie's return to Los Angeles, and to fixing his growing problems concerned with selling the sports cars, bringing Charlie to the brink of despair, and it is this imminent divorce from his dream of getting rich quick that drives him to getting a handle on Ray's problems by seeking out a doctor, although the only one available in their location is naturally not a specialist in autism. As he searches through a phone box directory, we see Ray reflected in the glass window of the box as he gets out of the car and wanders off, again with Charlie as the unseeing exception to this sight. So once more we can conclude that Charlie still cannot "see" or understand what is important in his life as yet.

Charlie's ability to reflect on himself develops through the process of first taking an interest in Ray's condition, and then taking better and better care of his brother. This in inverse proportion to his prospects of getting rich by selling the cars, as he learns that his efforts to avert disaster fail one by one, and his dream is about to be snatched by his loan agent for defaulting on the repayment date. This is a healthy progression, however, because his original dream was so distorted that it did not allow him to see what really mattered. Now he is ready to see, Ray is ready to show. As the moment of climactic revelation nears, we see both brothers standing in front of the bathroom mirror, and for the first time, their reflections unite as Charlie's eyes are opened to the truth of his past. Ray shows him an old photograph of his adolescent self and Charlie as barely a toddler. Charlie finally realizes that they had lived together. Sadly it was after the passing of his mother, and although Ray had devoted himself to Charlie's care, a bathroom accident when he made his younger brother's bath too hot, led to him being institutionalized and their permanent separation. When the bath of the present spooks Ray, he drops the photograph into the water, and its sinking is a micro image of the

past tragedy. But despite Ray's outburst, Charlie has both found his long-lost brother and his own humanity. Despite Ray's ups and downs, Charlie's hard-heartedness has transformed, and he reflects the care given him by his brother when he was small by attending to Ray's rituals in the understanding that they are all Ray has to survive by.

The brothers come to reflect each other in many ways, perhaps most significantly by echoing each other's ways and ultimately their respective styles of thought and systems of values. Ray can even understand a joke when Charlie hides the maple syrup that Ray is always fixated on having ready before eating his breakfast pancakes. Equally significant is that Charlie can now be honest enough to admit that he does not know everything, and he can start to repair his relationship with Susanna by apologizing to her sincerely for perhaps the first time. As for Ray, Charlie enables him to express himself through a kind of numerical code ("Bet one for bad, and two for good") which he taught Ray while the latter bailed Charlie out of debt by counting cards at the casino.

In this way the car becomes the symbol of family again as it helps rekindle the love between the brothers that had disappeared so many years before, and the new family becomes complete when Susanna forgives Charlie and they take a victory ride around the cascading Las Vegas hotel fountains with Ray at the wheel, along with Charlie's supporting hand to guide him. The importance of making money for its own sake completely disappears, and Charlie can even decline the huge check that Ray's doctor offers him to leave his patient alone. Family has replaced money as Charlie's new mantra. And finally, Charlie can even sacrifice his own hunger for a family by giving Ray up to allow him to be well taken care of back at the institution. Their new bond is symbolized first through the dance that Charlie teaches, although still incompletely at that stage as Ray has an outburst when Charlie tries to hug him, and then fully when they touch heads and Ray spells out Charlie's name as the person who is now the most important in his life.

Part 4.

Conclusion

King's use of inanimate/animate crossover and horror imagery in his novella *The Body* is a carefully crafted and conceived success, but does not translate into the movie. Instead, the movie reinvents the story by rescheduling the era. The novel's 1960 present is time-shifted backwards to 1959 to allow a completely different atmosphere to infuse *Stand by Me*. This in turn supports the shift in thematic balance from a sense of death taking the upper hand in *The Body* to the dominance of friendship in the movie.

In the process, some of the original novelistic intentions slipped through inadvertently with unintentional effects, such as the coin-tossing scene when Vern interpreted four tails as meaning they would all die. In the novella three of the boys are dead by the final page and Gordie feels his own death imminent. In the movie only Chris dies, and his death is used to reinforce the theme of friendship more. This is one of a range of unintentional leftovers.

In addition, there are adaptations from the novella of images which transform the original intent, sometimes deliberately and sometimes by accident. Thus when Gordie crosses the rail bridge and crouches to feel the rail, he is stunned to feel the vibration of an approaching train. In the novel his effort to overcome his frozen panic is described as a boy standing in underwater slow motion on the ocean bed. In the movie this is just a momentary slowing of the scene and almost imperceptible. Being understated still makes it effective, but the whole thrust has shifted.

The imagistic core of *Rain Man*, that of reflection, may seem so minimalist at times as not to warrant enough attention even to recognize its existence, but this makes its overall effect all the more profound. It might have been that the director himself was not entirely aware of the depth of meaning of reflection at the outset, especially as so many hands were involved, and the movie got off to several false starts before Levinson gave it direction. Nonetheless, the closing titles take the opportunity to underline albeit retrospectively reflection's significance featuring as they do Ray's snapshots which were fore-grounded on the visit to the small town doctor.

Another unmistakable accumulation of imagery is that of the background and weather. The journey from the East to West Coast naturally allows for a breathtaking slideshow of different landscapes, but this is something more than incidental eye candy. Starting with the hazy sky and spurt of dust as Charlie u-turns to his father's funeral, then the dead roses and rain, and the movie-long emphasis on rain initialized by the title itself, the long train of atmospheric metamorphoses underscore how Charlie's heart changes from barren wasteland devoid of human emotion to the loving relationship he comes to rediscover with his brother and girlfriend. The highpoint of this process is the victory drive outside the casino when Charlie wholeheartedly supports Ray's dream to drive their father's car. As they circle the small road, in the background fountains cascade ever higher against a lush landscape of blue skies moving to the lush vegetation of Charlie's Los Angeles. When Ray describes Susanna's kiss as "wet" there is the sense that the new family bond between the three has brought them all to a plane of kindness and content none of them has experienced before.

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(デイビッド・ジョン・ウッド：英語学科 教授)