

The False Reality of Film

Excerpt

Key Idea 1

Film is a mass-communication medium produced to stimulate the audiences: to laugh, cry, empathize, entertain, inform, propagandize, canalize, and many, many other objectives that influence the audience's thinking and behavior. I look at the entire spectrum of the film genres to see how such influence is accomplished. In this monograph, I'm using the term film to include all manner of kinetic motion-media.

Key Idea 2

Though all films have an aura of reality, ranging from intense to shallow, reality has only moderate influence on the information film's effectiveness as an entertainment, thought provoking, or communication tool. Rather, it's the audience's perception of reality that facilitates communication. Such perception is based on many factors. The two prime ones are:

- the audience's acceptance of the film as the authoritative source and
- the ability of the film to engender threshold empathy in the audience.

Key Idea 3

As a formal (authoritative) channel of communication, film's power in the deliberate process of informing (and entertaining) lies in its ability to control visual and aural stimuli—initiating and guiding the receptive behavior (response) of the audience. Film's visual primacy as the crucial element in influencing audience response is established with high statistical significance by a number of researchers. Charles F. Hoban and Edward B. van Ormer in 1950 concluded from empirical research that maximum communication in information film is engendered when at least 70% of the information is encoded in the kinetic visuals; aural information should not exceed 30%. In a 1980 survey, the National Audiovisual Association concluded that 83% of learning comes from visual information and that audiences remember (long-term) 30% of what they see and 50% of what they see and hear.

Key Idea 4

Acknowledging that reality per se can never be achieved in film, it follows that realism is a function of audience perception of the film's messages. It matters not whether the messages are real (true) or not real. What matters is whether the audience believes the messages to be real and accepts them in the context presented. Credibility of the sender is an important, though not compelling factor, nonetheless.

Key Idea 5

Film, as the powerful mass communication tool it is, encompasses a broad continuum of genres ranging from hard information that approaches absolute reality to symbolic surrealism that approaches complete abstraction. Within this continuum of film as a medium, I have defined five general film types: information, documentary, narrative, enrichment, and experimental. Each type has its own set of distinguishing characteristics and its own set of representations or distortions of reality.

Key Idea 6

The critical elements in classifying film by type are the purpose of the film, its primary audience, the production techniques and scope, plausibility of the plot, credibility of the characterizations, reality of the events, and the distribution scheme.

I define the five film types with the following general properties:

Information film is a mass-communication tool produced to communicate messages to audiences so that they will act or think in a way to accomplish the goals established for the film, that is, what to do or think, how to do it, or why to do it.

Documentary film is produced to enlighten the masses on a contemporary topic, a social idea, or an editorial position through the technique of creative treatment of actuality—a restaging or recreating, according to the filmmaker's interpretation, of some facet of life and the world in which we live. That is, the film is a representation without introducing a fictional story interest.

Narrative or entertainment film, as a business venture, is produced primarily to make a profit. Almost always this film is a drama based on human emotions, experience, and conflicts, and many of the dramaturgical elements are fictional. Narrative film has very high production value compared to the other types and is viewed on the public channels of television and in theaters. Profit is realized by selling air-time or collecting admissions for providing enjoyment, pleasure, diversion, to very large heterogeneous audiences.

Enrichment film is a category of film that is difficult to classify because it is usually produced for aesthetic enjoyment and peer recognition. Generally, this film has no specific communication goal to achieve except in the broadest terms of a central theme. Frequently, profit, realized from film sales or rentals, is a strong, underlying motive. Often, the theme is chimerical, production techniques are unorthodox, and the budget is limited. Usually, the film is privately funded or, occasionally, financed by grants. Enrichment film is screened at film festivals and in museums, cine clubs, classrooms, and other private channels for selected audiences. At times, such films may be seen on television and even more rarely in commercial theaters.

Experimental film, which includes "abstract film" and "surreal film," can be the filmmaker's statement of some inner compulsion, an interpretation of a dream, for example, expressed by a collage of imaginary images distorted in time and space—a grotesque illusion. Often, visual abstract patterns prevail in a fantasy of artistic experimentation not bound by any tradition and not produced to accepted norms. New filmic techniques are employed. Nowadays, the experimental film is frequently privately funded, sometimes by grants.

Clearly, other features could be considered and evaluated. The treatment presented is not to be construed as limiting or dogmatic. It reflects my conception of this complex and amorphous topic, illustrates the extreme differences in film as a mass communication medium, circumscribes the spectrum of each film type.

Reviewer Comments

“Marty has developed a unique and compelling insight into the very foundation of film effectiveness by his cogent analysis of the false reality in film. This book is a must read for any in the communication profession.”—Patricia Rye, former national president of Information Film Producers of America.

“This book on the reality in the five film genres is a first. For the first time an award-winning filmmaker investigates the distinctive rationale of what makes a film work with audiences so that they will connect with us on a personal level.”—Brian McCaleb, Consulting Professionals United.

“Mr. Shelton’s investigation into the audiences’ reaction to the false reality in film is a critically important breakthrough in understanding how and why films work. His analysis of dozens of films plotted on his Film Reality Scale is masterful insight.”—Ron Marriott, screenwriter.

“Clearly, Shelton has unveiled in this book an exceptional and deliberative perspective into the essential nature of film, and how our audience’s perception of reality engenders their commitment to join us. His categorization of films into five genres establishes a new and defining singularity for our profession. If you make films this book is essential reading.”—Mark Pahuta, filmmaker.