Audience expectations: How viewers interact with movies

Luciano Mariani
info@cinemafocus.eu

Introduction

Psycho (by Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1960)

Marion Crane, a secretary in Phoenix, steals $40,000 in cash from her employer. She sets off to drive to her boyfriend Sam's home in the town of Fairvale, California. A heavy rainstorm forces Marion to stop at the Bates Motel just a few miles from Fairvale ...

The story told in *Psycho,* and particularly Marion's fate, hardly deserve to be recalled. However, 85 years after its first release, we may tend to underestimate the huge impact that this movie had on its audience back in 1960. People surely *expected* a suspense thriller from an already well-known director such as Hitchcock, but were shocked when what had been introduced as the main character (Marion) was murdered within the first half of the film. This had hardly ever been done in movies - Hitchcock had *subverted* his audience's expectations. Viewers expected to follow Marion's story, to see whether she would get away with her theft, to find out if she would eventually join her boyfriend, but halfway through the movie they realised that they were going to watch a horror story, with a different protagonist and an unusual, much subtler (and more intriguing) plot development. By playing with the "classical" conventions of the thriller film genre, he managed to provide a fresh approach to the genre itself: from then on, any filmmaker wishing to stage a thriller would have to take Hitchcock's achievement into consideration, but audiences, too, would have to adjust their *expectations* towards the thriller film genre as a whole.

1. Some preliminary remarks

Exploring the issue of cinema audience expectations involves a few basic assumptions about the role of audiences and their relationship with the film itself.

First, we assume that an audience is made up of individual viewers who bring to the viewing experience their own personal "baggage" of beliefs, attitudes and motivations, as well as their peculiar previous knowledge and experience with their psychological, social and cultural dimensions. Any consideration of an "audience" must thus necessarily consider the fact that individual differences are involved, which limits the way in which one can make overall generalizations. Second, viewers are not passive recipients of content (images and sounds) that they absorb without being aware of this process, but should rather be considered as active agents, cognitively and affectively involved in processing that content, albeit at different levels of consciousness. Without accepting this stance, it would not be possible to identify and describe the operations occurring in viewers' minds as they make sense of what they are watching and listening to. Third, this active agency on the audience's part implies a constant interaction between viewers and film, which allows for a dynamic range of actions and reactions which occur all along the viewing experience.

2. Expectations as part of a "contract" between film and audience

Even before a reader starts reading a novel or a viewer starts watching a film, a sort of implicit contract is established between the two parties involved. The book or movie offers some kind of content that the reader/viewer accepts to use, with a view to be entertained (with entertainment or enjoyment covering an array of different meanings, from being amused to being instructed to being moved towards reflection and discussion). The mere fact of entering this relationship implies the setting up of expectations towards the object of the reader/viewer's activity and the anticipation of some kind of result of this experience - i.e. the promise of a reward in return for the time, attention (and in most cases, money) invested in the experience itself.

"There is an implied contract between the author and the reader that goes something like this:

Give me your time and pay your money, and I'll let you experience what it's like to be

- A trapper in the North Woods
- An explorer in the Martian Desert
- A young woman in love with an older man
- A dying cancer patient ...

You must look hard at the offer you are making: Would you accept it, if you were the reader?"
(Note 1)

If one uses the metaphor of the "contract", one automatically accepts the implications usually associated with a "deal", including the characteristics of the object of the transaction, e.g. accepting commercials that may appear at regular intervals through a movie, defining the technical features of the product, such as the quality of the streaming service, plus a host of other features specifically defining the product - story, players, musical score, duration etc. A contract assumes the obligation on the part of both parties to fulfil its terms in order for both to reap a benefit. If the provider of the product violates the "rules" mutually agreed on, some consequences of various kinds may follow (e.g. the reader/viewer may spread her/his negative opinion and refuse any further engagement with that specific author). Of course, a "deal" in the field of entertainment does not imply all the features

of a proper legal contract, but the reader/viewer still has the power (and the right) to respond to any violations:

"In practice, audiences have three means by which they can attempt to redress perceived contract violations. The first is dissatisfaction, which manifests itself both in lessened engagement with an entertainment property and complaints made to other fans and the property's creators. The second is withdrawal, which manifests itself in the loss of the audience member as a viewer or customer. And the final means is boycotting, which manifests itself in an audience member actively trying to dissuade others from supporting or engaging with a property." (Note 2)

3. The range and content of possible expectations

Members of an audience approach the viewing experience with a wide range of expectations, which mirror the complex nature of the film as an entertainment "product". These expectations can refer to, e.g.:

- *movie genres*: one clearly expects quite different things from a western than from a musical comedy or a horror movie. Genres are powerful tools in the hands of the cinema industry (since they provide blueprints for the productions of specific movies addressed to particular audiences), as well as in the hands of audiences (since they orient viewers' choices and their subsequent reactions). However, the hybridization of genres, i.e. the tendency of movies to include features of different genres, producing "mixed" movies such as dramedies (drama + comedy) has been an important feature of movie making for several decades now. Audiences have gradually accepted and come to appreciate the peculiar content and tone of hybrid movies, which has made the issue of genres even more crucial than in the past. The importance of genres warrants special attention (see Section 8 below);

- *directors*: well-known directors often gain the rather ambiguous status of "authors", with recognizable aspects of their work in terms, e.g., of themes, topics, story treatment, techniques (i.e. ways of using film language), measure of engagement with social, cultural, political issues, and so on. All this turns into clear expectations towards any new work they release;

- *actor/actresses*: although experienced players can cover a range of different roles and characters, many players have distinct and quite recognizable "public images" associated with particular film genres or thematic content (e.g. John Wayne in westerns, Cary Grant in comedies), and viewers often approach the film experience with the anticipated pleasure of finding recognizable performances from their favourite players;

- *topics/themes/events*: a movie can be attractive to some viewers because it tells a particular story or deals with a particular theme, which they expect to be interesting, informative or even exciting. Movies dealing with historical, social or cultural events can also raise the expectations of interested audiences, particularly if the events are recent or refer to present-day concerns (as is often the case, e.g., with documentaries). A movie's claim that "the story is based on real events" can create particularly keen expectations, and the same can happen to a movie that is supposed to convey a particular "message". A special case is that of adaptations, when the plot of the movie is based on a book, a play, an opera, a ballet or another previous movie, which viewers are already familiar with: the special interest is then for viewers to compare the new movie with the original work, which gives rise to expectations to check the similarities with and/or differences from the picture that viewers have already made in their minds about the plot, characters, event, tone, etc. ("I liked the book better than the movie"; "the movie captures the essential qualities of the book" ...). And the success of long-

standing "sagas" like the James Bond or Star Wars movies or the superhero" franchises (not to mention the phenomenon of TV series) is witness to the existence of audiences whose expectations are, to a lesser or larger extent, predictable;

- *style* or *form*: rather than by the content of a movie, viewers can be attracted by the way the movie itself deals with that content, i.e. the stylistic choices that a director may have made with regards to the ways in which elements of film language (like mise-en-scène, camera movements, editing, musical score, etc.) were used to give a particular form to the story. Some directors, as already mentioned, are well known for their very personal and original use of film style, and their audiences may then expect to enjoy their movies from this point of view too;

- *critical reviews*: positive and negative reviews of a movie have always played an important role in shaping relevant expectations, but in the digital age the range of reviewing agents has expanded to an unpredictable extent thanks to the Internet and the social networks: viewers are literally overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, which includes, in addition to more traditional professional critics' reviews in newspapers and magazines, a host of other (in)formal sources like websites, blogs, newsfeeds etc. A peculiar place in this information super-rich menu is offered by fan clubs, "fanzines" and other film bluffs products, which do not just provide simple reviews but a host of other types of information about the movie world, massively impacting on the formation, development and circulation of expectations with regard to individual movies as well as to the movie world in general. Traditional word-of-mouth opinions and advice are finding new ways to affect ideas about and approaches to movies;

- *awards*: the ever-increasing array of awards impacts more than ever before on viewers' perception of the value and importance of movies, with an increasing number of festivals beyond the "traditional" ones (Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Toronto, to name the best-known ones) working as powerful boosters in the worldwide distribution of movies and the associated popularity of players and directors;

- *marketing strategies*: the ways and means to promote a movie cover all the previous features: posters and trailers, the traditional vehicles for publicizing a movie, are now just one of the promotional materials made available through the new digital media;

- *cultural and social backgrounds*: movies can be approached and evaluated differently according to the different sets of beliefs and values that shape societies and cultural communities. In addition, each culture displays different narrative conventions, whereby storytelling is structured in its own particular way - which is why certain movies from a culture may be difficult to understand and appreciate by audiences in different cultures.

Such external sources of information interact with the already mentioned subjective "encyclopaedia" that each viewer brings with her/him to the viewing experience.

4. Expectations: a bridge between movies and audiences

This "baggage" of previous knowledge and experience shapes the kinds of expectations with which viewers approach a movie: in a way, they form the preliminary, familiar, predictable features of the experience (its "old" side), while the movie offers them, in addition to these "old" elements, some "new", original, unpredictable elements. The "contract" mentioned in Section 2 above consists precisely of the interaction between these "old" and "new" features - the movie must provide a sort of balance between "old", recognizable materials and "new", original elements, while the audience must find the corresponding balance between what they perceive as familiar and what they perceive

as "new". The fulfilment of the "contract" (and the positive outcome of the viewing experience) thus depends on the achievement of the best possible compromise between these two different and, in a way, contrasting elements (Fig. 1.)

```
<---------------------------------------------------------------->
   "old"                                           "new"
   same                                          different
  familiar                                       unfamiliar
 predictable                                    unpredictable
  tradition                                       novelty
  repetition                                     variation
```
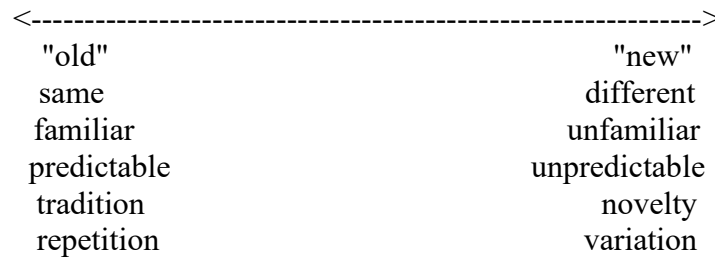
Fig. 1.

Most films strike a balance between the two extremes, trying to provide interesting, original, "novel" content while at the same time reassuring the audience with elements which they may find familiar and predictable (experience "A" in Fig. 2). Too much "novelty" may confuse or unsettle the audience (experience "B"), but too much "repetition" may make the movie boring and uninteresting (experience "C"). The two extremes of the continuum are rather rare (with "art", experimental movies privileging the "new"), but even what appears as the best possible balance (experience "A") may in fact be difficult, even impossible, to achieve; in other words, each movie must find the appropriate balance for what is considered to be its intended audience.
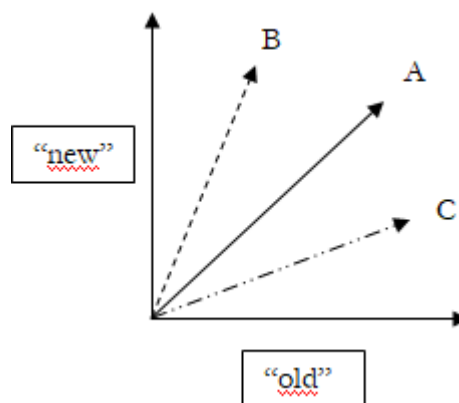

Fig. 2

Two factors affect the achievement of this balance. On the one hand, filmmakers can rely on *film genres*, which provide ample opportunities for the introduction of predictable elements - audiences are familiar with the stories, characters, setting, etc., which are "typical" of, say, a western, a romantic comedy or an action movie - but, once again, this familiarity, which makes a movie relatively easier to understand and appreciate by its audience, must be balanced with the appearance of a suitable degree of novelty to prevent boredom. (As already mentioned, the question of film genres is crucial in this respect - see Section 8 below.)

On the other hand, any audience is made up of individuals, each with her/his own personal "baggage" of knowledge and experience, and any movie tries to reach the appreciation of as many audience members as possible despite the role played by *individual differences* (luckily, there are as many factors unifying an audience as there are factors differentiating it!). This is quite a demanding

challenge for any filmmaker - how to make a movie acceptable and enjoyable to the largest majority (if not to all) of its audience members.

"Each spectator of a film brings with him a different personal experience. So, through a good storytelling and a precise manipulation, you must be able to bring everyone to applaud at the same time, to laugh at the same time, and to be afraid at the same time." Steven Spielberg

5. The temporal dimension of expectations

5.1. The actual viewing experience

Expectations cover the full arc of the viewing experience, from the initial decision to watch a particular movie to the final thoughts and feelings that remain in a viewer's mind.

- *Before* viewing, expectations to enjoy a movie (whatever this may mean for any individual viewer) can be based on any combination of the factors described in Section 3 above, which provide the *motivation* for the relevant choice, and a *disposition* to approach this experience with interest, curiosity and possibly a positive attitude. However, if the choice of the movie is made by others, or if the viewer holds reservations about it right from the start, expectations can have a negative sign.

- *During* viewing, expectations work as a sort of "online monitoring device", since they constantly allow viewers to compare what they expect to see and hear with what is actually seen and heard. As a result, the hypotheses (about every aspect of the movie, including, e.g. story, characters, themes) that viewers build from the very beginning may have to be adjusted in the light of what is actually experienced. In this way, viewers' minds constantly work, on the basis of this hypothesis-testing process, to extract meaning from the movie (interpretation) and to form value judgments (evaluation and appreciation). These *micro-* or *short-term* expectations, which refer to local, particular moments of the movie, gradually build and change their overall impression of the movie, leading them towards a *macro-* or *long-term* expectation covering large portions of the movie and, eventually, extending to the whole of it.

"[T[he spectator frames and tests expectations about upcoming story information ... assumptions and inferences take care of the "microscopic," moment-by-moment processing of the action, but at critical junctures we are tuned to expect particular events. Across scenes, hypotheses emerge with some clarity: will the character do x or y? A more indefinite but highly significant arc of "macroexpectation" may extend across a whole film ... So ongoing and insistent is the perceiver's drive to anticipate narrative information that a confirmed hypothesis easily becomes a tacit assumption, the ground for further hypotheses." (Note 3)

- *After* viewing, audiences can compare their initial expectations with their actual experience. By making use of their previous knowledge, they can now gauge the degree to which their expectations have been satisfied, i.e. whether and to what degree they have been confirmed or subverted. This process of evaluation can last for a considerable time, especially if viewers have the chance of exchanging their views with others, in a real or virtual environment, and particularly if viewers see themselves as movie fans or "movie bluffs".

5.2. Audiences change, but the "perception" of movies too

However, expectations are not limited to the actual viewing experience, but remain a factor associated with the movie itself through time. This can refer to the individual viewers, who may change their minds and develop alternative ideas and opinions about a movie - witness the fact that when the same movie is watched again after some time, one's reactions can be quite different: for example, one can wonder why the movie was evaluated positively the first time but then gives rise to a sense of disappointment on a further, later viewing (or the reverse). The fact is that people change, cultural sensibilities change too, and a movie, as a cultural product of a particular time in history, can be approached and appreciated in quite different ways by later generations, and even by the same people who watched it in the first place maybe years before ("I wonder why I liked it so much then" or "This film has aged very badly").

Changes in time thus affect the way a movie is received or consumed at different stages in its life: a movie can cause negative reactions when it is first released but then be subject to a reappraisal later, and possibly earn "a new reputation". For example, *The shining*, by Stanley Kubrick, was rather negatively received when it was released in 1980 (with the author of the original story, Stephen King, declaring himself dissatisfied with Kubrick's adaptation), but then, in the following years and decades, has been subject to constant re-evaluations until it has reached the status of a "cult" film.

5.3. Film styles and film audiences adapt to each other

Ways of making movies have constantly changed all through cinema's history, both as a result of technical innovations and as a response to new psychological, cultural and social sensibilities. Major technological advances, like the introduction of sound at the end of the 1920s, new colour films and widescreen formats in the 1950s, not to mention the digital revolution in the past few decades, have had a deep impact on movie making, both as a process and in its actual products. But changes in cultural scenes have had an even stronger impact. The "classical Hollywood canon", already in place by the end of the 1910s and brought to full development in Hollywood's "golden age" (roughly from the 1930s to the 1950s), was based on industrial processes that allowed the production of movies on a large scale through a series of established patterns that created clearly recognizable "movie worlds": a linear story structure with a beginning, a middle and an end; well defined characters acting on the basis of sound motivations; and a cause/effect chain that ensured a clear progression and development of the plot through to its (often, but not always, happy) ending. All this was meant to provide audiences with a viewing experience as clear and easy to follow as possible - and audiences responded in appropriate ways, by developing expectations that were (more often than not) fulfilled to a high degree.

But times change, and in the wake of the watershed provided by World War II, movies had to change in response to a new set of needs, values and attitudes, as well as to quickly evolving socio-cultural contexts. The "old" world was giving place to much less orderly and predictable environments: characters were now not so clearly defined, often "flawed" and unstable; their motivations were ambiguous and, as a consequence, the chain of causes and effects tended to break; events could now occur in ways that defied logical continuity and, as a result, plots tended to lose their well-defined, linear structure. In essence, ways of storytelling in modern and "postmodern" cinema have changed considerably starting from the 1960s, and have tended to become less linear and more complex, with time shifts and plot developments that are often less than predictable and sometimes quite difficult to follow: objective reality gives way to surreal imagery, narrators become unreliable and viewers are left to make sense out of an often chaotic presentation of events, leading them to question their

own perception of what they see and hear. However, audiences have adapted to such changes, which reflected major transitions in the cultural landscapes and could therefore in a way respond to new expectations. Changes in film styles and changes in audience expectations have thus mirrored each other, in a process of constant evolution in which the filmmaking industry has always managed to survive and thrive thanks to its continuous (although often implicit) dialogue with its audiences.

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind (by Michel Gondry, USA 2004)

The film follows two (ex-)lovers who undergo a memory erasure procedure to forget each other after the dissolution of their romantic relationship. Instead of using a strict chronological order, the film joins together different points in its protagonists' life, blends reality and imagination, and questions the very nature of memory itself. Viewers are left with the task of making sense of a narrative which challenges their expectations of how a traditional romantic drama should be told.

Memento (by Christopher Nolan, USA 2000)

Memento, too, is centred on time and its effects on memory, as well as on how feelings can impact on recollections, revealing how fragile our own sense of identity can become. The plot revolves around a man who is resolved to find out who raped and murdered his wife, besides causing a trauma which has left him in a serious condition of memory loss. The story is told in reverse chronological order, but is also made much more complex by the fact that images in colour alternate with images in black and white - which make the task of understanding very difficult for the audience - not to mention the danger that the protagonist himself, in his altered state, may not be so reliable in what he remembers.

6. When a movie plays with expectations: confirming vs subverting

61. "Fair play" vs "cheating"

A viewing experience, if considered as a "contract" between a movie and its audience, includes by definition the concept of "fair play": a movie must respect its viewers and offer them a coherent, honest product that will also acknowledge their intelligence and sensibility. A detective story, for example, must provide viewers with enough elements to allow them to make reasonable and logical hypotheses about its outcome - the introduction of new elements which are in conflict with the previous ones is certainly allowed as part of the "hypothesis testing" game (which is also part of the enjoyment of such a movie), but should be coherent with what has gone on up to that point, or at least not endanger the overall sense of "credibility" and "reliability" of the narration. If viewers perceive that a *subversion* or discontinuity has taken place, without enough clues to justify it within the context of the story, they may feel that a violation of the "contract" has occurred: the sense of surprise linked to the introduction of new elements, instead of being a pleasurable, engaging experience, turns the frustrated expectations into what may be felt as a breach of the "fair play" condition - "cheating". And even more important is the "final revelation" which closes the narrative: viewers expect an outcome coherent with what has gone on throughout the movie.

It is almost a rule, at least in "classical" detective stories, that both the detective (as a character) and the audience should have equal opportunities to follow the development of the action and "solve the

mystery", by having access to the same clues available to the detective. This "rule", however, can be played with in a variety of ways by the movie, whose main concern is to "manipulate" (to use the term employed by Spielberg in the above quotation) its audience in subtle but effective terms in order to provide the sense of surprise and suspense which is expected by this movie genre. The term "manipulation" is perhaps loaded with negative connotations, but it can also be taken to mean the carefully crafted distribution of clues during the movie, with the basic aim of ensuring the enjoyment of the story.

Horror, mystery, noir and detective stories (as well as other film genres) have often provided viewers with partial or even misleading information in order to raise their suspense level and invite them to "join in the game". Example of straightforward "cheating" are not so frequent, and one may be surprised to learn that the master of suspense, Hitchcock, definitely cheated his audience when, at the start of *Stage fright* (USA 1950), he inserted a flashback which then turned out to be false. A similar "trick" was used in *The usual suspects* (by Bryan Singer, USA 1995), by inserting an unreliable narrator and even a false point-of-view shot showing a witness in a final scene, with the result of confusing the audience and leaving them with more than a doubt as to the actual ending (watch the videos below).

Stage fright

The usual suspects

Of course, audiences do not generally like to be "cheated", but they may still find the outcome of such movies acceptable and even enjoyable if the overall structure of the story is cleverly crafted (also in terms of style, and not just narrative content) and provides enough reasons to accept what eventually manages to be an intelligent, engaging way of keeping the audience interested. As mentioned at the end of the previous section, all this also refers back to the disposition of modern audiences to accept types of film closure that do not provide clear-cut endings and leave them with a sense of "unfinished business".

6.2. New narratives and new audiences

The growing importance of *series* on television and streaming platforms has added new meanings to the "contract" between a movie and its audience. Series often last for several seasons, each including a number of episodes, which implies that stories and characters can go through many more "twists and turns" than in a standard 120-minutes single movie. This can create problems, e.g. with respect to the treatment of characters, who need to somehow change and develop while maintaining some or most of the personality traits that were established from the start. The challenges that series developers face is made even more serious by the nature of their audiences, who often turn into *fan communities* that are particularly keen on perceiving any undue or inefficient discontinuity in character development. These fan communities, whose influence is magnified by their massive presence on the Internet through blogs, social networks, web sites etc., can react in strong and unexpected ways to what they perceive to be unfair treatment of established, cherished characters, sometimes to the point of jeopardizing the whole series, by threatening to withdraw their fidelity (and their subscription to the streaming platforms). Series developers are thus forced to take fans' opinions into account, even if this may mean making alterations to the original scripts. Such is the huge power of new audiences, who seem to be able to have their say in the fulfilment of the "contract" to

previously unheard degrees. The question of story and character credibility has taken on a new force, and the subversion of expectations has become an even more dangerous move.

Case study: **There's still tomorrow** *(by Paola Cortellesi, Italy 2023)*

Trailer

Delia's side of the story

Plot summary	*Expectations*
In Rome, just after World War II has ended, people are experiencing poverty. A woman, Delia, is the wife of violent, abusive Ivano and mother of three children, including the teenage Marcella. Between domestic engagements she nurses her sullen father-in-law Ottorino and does sewing and repairs for various city stores, as well as laundry for the wealthy. She tries hard to save some money to buy Marcella's wedding dress.	*We are shown women's condition as victims of a violent patriarchal system, which seems to leave them no hope for a better future. However, we are also shown Delia's resiliency and expect to see what she is capable of.*
We see Delia meeting Nino, a car mechanic she had been in love with, and who is planning to move to the North of Italy in search of a better job. Nino still loves her, and begs her to leave Rome with him in the next few days, but Delia knows it would be impossible to leave her husband and children.	*We are left wondering is this love story can really have no "happy ending".*
When Delia receives a letter addressed to her, she is puzzled, since all mail is always addressed to her husbamd. She opens the letter, is shocked and troubled by its content and hides it in a box.	*Since the only "secret" in Delia's life seems to be her relationship with Nino, and as we see Delia hiding the letter, we tend to think that this is a message from him.*
A few days later, she meets Nino once again, and once again she realizes they must part forever. However, she then asks her friend Marisa to help her, by pretending they will be together the next Sunday afternoon. Marisa agrees, but warns Delia: "If you are leaving Ivano, be sure he won't find you ... if he does, he'll kill you".	*Marisa has no doubts about Delia's plan - which, however, Delia does not confirm. We tend to expect what Marisa expects.*
On Saturday night, she puts a new blouse and the mysterious letter in her bag ... Meanwhile, we see Nino packing up, ready to leave Rome ...	*Delia's preparations, and the image of Nino packing, seem to confirm our expectations.*
On Sunday morning, the sudden death of Delia's father-in-law complicates her life as she sees her house filled with relatives and friends. However, she tells her friend Marisa, "There's still	*Again, all of Delia's actions seems to confirm our hypothesis that she is indeed leaving home.*

tomorrow". Then she leaves an envelope with all the money next to her daughter's bed. Early on Monday morning, Delia finds an excuse to leave the house, but, as she goes out, she inadvertently drops the letter to the floor. She runs through the streets, goes past Nino's garage, and we see her changing into her new blouse and putting on some lipstick.	
Meanwhile, Ivano finds the letter and, furious, throws it away and runs after his wife. When Marcella gets up, she finds the envelope with the money. She picks up the letter from the floor ... Next we see Delia in a crowd of women, waiting before a building. We come to realize that this is June 3rd, 1946, the weekend when Italians were asked to vote and choose between monarchy and republic (as well as the first time women were granted the right to vote). Suddenly, Delia is shocked to find out that she has lost the "letter" (i.e. the voting card), and Ivano is now reaching her ... but Marcella succeeds in giving Delia the card, so that she can now vote, and share this glorious day with all the other women ...	*We tend to read Ivano's reaction in the same way ...* *... Until we find out what the "letter" really is and what the stakes are: Delia celebrates her first day of "freedom" with all the women as Italy enters a new era ...*

The movie clearly plays with its viewers' expectations that the mysterious letter, which shows up after Delia and Nino's meeting, has to do with their relationship, perhaps an invitation to leave the city together ... All the subsequent events seem to confirm this hypothesis, although the "escape plan" is an inference on Marisa (Delia's friend)'s part, which Delia does *not* confirm. And we are led to hold on to our expectations since many details of Delia's behaviour seem to go in this direction. So the final revelation comes as a surprise - also adding a new meaning and a new value to Delia's experience: women's vote at this important referendum has the power to point to a different future than the gloomy present. Of course, if we had been told what the "letter" actually was, or if we had known the exact day of the year as the crucial date of the referendum, our expectations would have been quite different ... The final subversion of expectations heightens the moral value of the movie and conveys its message in a much more powerful way.

7. Two crucial stages in the viewing experience: openings and endings

7.1. Openings

"The sequential nature of narrative makes the initial portions of a text crucial for the establishment of hypotheses. A character initially described as virtuous will tend to be considered so even in the face of some contrary evidence; the initial hypotheses will be qualified but not demolished unless very strong evidence is brought forward." (Note 4)

A film's opening sequences bear particular importance since they introduce viewers to the filmic world, thus creating the initial set of expectations that will guide them through the rest of the movie. As stated in the above quotation, these expectations ar particularly strong and will remain the main source of meaning making unless further, strong evidence is produced to change and update them.

The importance of this initial "meeting" with a movie can hardly be overemphasized. The opening sequence is where the audience and the movie start interacting, where the demand (the audience)

meets the offer (the film), where we stop for a moment on the threshold of a new experience. It is a moment of transition, a passage into a different world, a bridge between the "real" reality of our everyday lives and the "fictional" reality of the movie. At the start of this paper, we identified the film-audience relationship as a sort of a "contract", and a contract, by definition, implies a sharing of information, needs, motivations and attitudes; in other words, the existence of a *common ground* shared by producers and consumers.

If the producers think or fear that their audience (or considerable parts of it) may not share this "common ground" they must provide either explicit information, or assume that the viewers will be able to find out for themselves the missing items through inferences or implication. We may not have seen a certain character yet, but through the dialogues and other non-verbal information we may rightly assume that such a character exists and has certain positive or negative characteristics. We may watch a group of easy-going teenagers start a trip through a forest, but the audiovisual signals the film has conveyed may well make us assume that this will not be a pleasant picnic in the country - rather the start of a horrific experience. In a way, then, producers and consumers are always interacting through the filmic text: the former will provide enough (but not too much!) information for the latter to follow the story, and the latter will inevitably ask themselves questions each time that some new, unexpected item of information appears on the screen. Asking and answering questions, like in an ordinary conversation, and cooperating to make the conversation "flow", are thus a feature of the film producer/film consumer relationship. We can thus fully appreciate the role and importance of opening sequences: they often (although not always) establish the context, the situation, the characters, activating the information that the viewers already possess (e.g. a Far West context, the typical characters in a high school, the tensions in a jail) and, at the same time, providing the viewers with the initial amount of *new* information, enough for them to ask themselves questions about the story which is about to unfold before their eyes and ears - in a word, creating the "common ground" that will allow them to follow (and make meaning of) later sequences.

Although, generally speaking, one could say that an opening sequence is designed to "hook" the viewers and involve their interest and emotions right from the start, films do this in very different ways, and certainly not to the same extent. This is what allows us to identify several different *functions* that film openings can fulfil - keeping in mind that an initial sequence can fulfil more than one of these functions. Relevant expectations can thus be set by, e.g.:

- *providing a prologue*, or an event (or a series of events) that sets the narrative in motion:

Don't look now (by Nicolas Roeg, GB/Italy 1973)

Shots of a girl, wearing a red raincoat, playing in a garden (the recognizable architecture of an English country home is shown in the background), alternate with shots of their parents, John and Laura, inside the house. John is watching a slideshow, but suddenly has a sort of premonition and hurries outside ... and as streaks of blood start spreading across some of the slides he was watching (particularly a church), he soon discovers that his young daughter Christine has drowned. This is the tragic background event that sets the story in motion: we will follow the grief-tricken couple to Venice, where John has accepted a commission from a bishop to restore an ancient church. Some of the details shown in the opening sequence (like the girl's red raincoat, the church slides and the blood) will be crucial for the ensuing narrative taking place in Venice.

- *establishing the place and time of a film's world,* i.e. setting up the spatial and temporal setting in which the action will take place:

Frenzy (by Alfred Hitchcock, GB 1972)

The film starts with a crowd attending a speech by the Mayor of London on the banks of the river Thames (with the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben clearly visible at one point as a background). The people's attention, however, quickly switches to what is actually happening below them: police are dragging to shore the body of a girl, who is wearing a tie around her neck - and some members of the crowd comment about this is being another killing by the "necktie murderer".

- *introducing a film's characters:*

Pirates of the Caribbean - The curse of the Black Pearl (by Gore Verbinski, USA 2003)

Set against sea and sky, with the background of triumphant music score, we are shown the first image of pirate captain John Sparrow (Johnny Depp) aboard a small ship. All the images of this opening sequences serve to introduce the hero of the story, highlighting his imposing figure with medium- and close-up shots, as well as his prowess, physical strength, and good looks ...

- *conveying a film's main theme:*

Full metal jacket (by Stanley Kubrick, USA 1987)

The opening sequence is made up of a series of shots of young men being shaved to zero, their thick hair falling under the razor ... Most viewers will immediately recognise this as part of a very early military training (and the following sequences will indeed show these young marine corps recruits at a training camp before being sent to fight in the Vietnam War). The opening sequence thus captures the theme of the film, which is not just about war, but how about training for war implies erasing all traces of individual character and the transformation of young boys into efficient "killing machines". As so often in Kubrick's films, the background music, in this case a sort of country ballad ("Goodbye sweetheart"), serves as an ironic yet touching counterpoint: these boys are called upon to serve America and forget all about their previous life ...

- *suggesting the tone and genre of a film:*

Fight Club (by David Fincher, USA/Germany 1999)

The opening titles are here superimposed on flickering images (of what might appear to be neural connections?), with metallic upbeat music in the background. Although we then see a boy's eyes and a gun pushed through his mouth, we are not giving much in terms of story events, but are instead introduced to the tone of the film, which we may on the surface qualify as a thriller: however, the fuzzy images seem to emphasize the ambiguity of the storytelling which will follow, the uncertain meanings that are going to be conveyed ...

7.2. Endings

Film endings are the other crucial moment in a viewing experience, when audience expectations eventually confront the resolution of the plot and lead to the final fulfilment of the "contract" between film and audience - the "promise" of a certain kind of experience and its actual realization in terms of story "closure".

In "classical" cinema, film endings tended to satisfy the expectations set up all through the movie, with audiences finding what they had expected to happen since the very start of the movie, particularly in terms of what a particular film genre shaped as "legitimate" expectations. In many cases, this coincided with the "happy ending" that viewers could look forward to, like the villain being beaten by the hero in a western or the final establishment of the romantic couple in a comedy or drama. However, the label "happy" when applied to a film ending is not without ambiguities. "Happy" might mean more than just a superficial "positive" conclusion of a movie according to its "generic" expectations, and it could well encompass other, more complex ways of bringing a plot, or a character's arc, to its resolution. Even in "classical" Hollywood cinema, endings could be structured in such a way that viewers could "enjoy" them without necessarily implying a resolution in terms of "happiness" (both from a character's and a viewer's point of view). For example, *They live by night* (by Nicholas Ray, USA 1948) tells the tragic story of a 23-year-old man, Bowie (Farley Granger), who, during the difficult times of the Great Depression in 1930s America, has been sentenced for a murder he committed at the age of 16. He escapes from prison with two older criminals, who involve him in a bank robbery. As he falls in love with a girl, Bowie desperately tries to escape from both his ex-fellow prisoners and the police, but is finally tracked down and shot in front of his girlfriend (watch the video below). This is not a "happy" ending in absolute terms - however, audiences' expectations are fulfilled, both in terms of moral judgment (Bowie has a criminal record, after all, and in a way he deserves to be "punished"), and in terms of dramatic, "romantic" action (his tragic love story resonates with viewers, who can sympathise with his plight and in this way "enjoy" the not-so-happy ending (in a way that is obviously very different from the "happy" closure of, e.g. a comedy).

They live by night

Film endings can also imply a degree of *surprise*, when the resolution of the plot goes against viewers' "natural" expectations, although, as we have already mentioned, the ending must still preserve a degree of coherence with the context of the story as set up all though the film narrative. For example, *Some like it hot* (by Billy Wilder, USA 1959) involves audiences in two different "love stories", one about a standard, traditional heterosexual couple (Sugar, the singer and ukulele player, i.e. Marilyn Monroe, and Joe, the saxophone player, i.e. Tony Curtis), and the other about an "impossible" couple (an aging millionaire and Jerry, the double bass player disguised as a woman). There is no realistic "way out" for the latter couple, but the film cleverly rounds it up with the well-known final joke ("Nobody's perfect!") - once again, not a "classical" happy ending, and certainly no "realistic" ending,

but the audience can still revel in the surprising punch line and take it as an acceptable, though unexpected, closure (watch the video below).

Some like it hot

"Modern" and "post-modern" cinema often tells stories involving complex characters and series of events that lead to uncertain, "open" endings. An early example from "New Hollywood" cinema is *The graduate* (by Mike Nichols, USA 1967), which tells the story of Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman), a boy who is seduced by a family friend (Anne Bancroft), even if he then actually falls in love with the latter's daughter, Elaine (Katharine Ross). Determined to overcome the scandal quickly, Elaine's family organizes a wedding with another boy, and Benjamin runs desperately towards the church where Elaine has just been married. Benjamin snatches the girl from the groom's hands and escapes with Elaine aboard a bus. In the final sequence (watch the video below), the two sit smiling at the back of the bus, but their expressions immediately become uncertain: when Benjamin looks at Elaine, she is looking away, thoughtful; when Elaine looks at Benjamin, he's smiling, but in a different direction. In fact, they don't look at each other, but they look in front of themselves, as if in front of the future, with insecurity if not with real apprehension: who could say that "they all lived happily ever after"? And all this while the musical motif returns (*The sound of silence*, by Simon & Garfunkel), which had opened the film and accompanied the saddest moments of the story, and which now seals the final situation of the characters with ... "silence". Viewers do not see their expectations really subverted, but neither can they enjoy a full, conclusive "happy ending".

The graduate

In the same way, some recent "legal films", or movies involving a crime and a court trial, go against the most obvious expectation for this film genre, i.e. that events are clearly explained, a sentence is passed and "justice is done". Instead, the narration of the details of the crime is often ambiguous, characters are not described in a clear-cut way, and events, including "flashbacks", complicate the story and evolve in contradictory ways. As a result, viewers are not offered a linear, structured plot, and are eventually led to a very open ending, in which there is no "official" closure and no revelation of "guilt" or "innocence", no discovery of the "truth". One might think that such "unsatisfactory" endings may frustrate audiences, but in fact their interest and involvement are kept high by the accumulation of contradictions and ambiguities, so that they can find satisfaction in processing the facts themselves - instead of building expectations towards a definite outcome, such movies invite viewers to take an active part in the analysis of the plot and its characters, and in this way even accept an open ending without feeling frustrated. Once again, audiences "enjoy" these movies in very different ways than they might do in a conventional storyline. For example, in *Saint Omer* (by Alice Diop, France 2022), we follow the case of Laurence Coly, a graduate student and Senegalese immigrant who is charged of the murder of her 15-month-old daughter, having left her on a beach to be drowned by the tide. Although lots of evidence is presented, the film cuts before the outcome of the trial is announced, so that viewers are left to their own judgment. And *The Goldman case* (by Cédric Kahn, France 2023) tells about the second trial held to Pierre Goldman, an extreme left militant accused of killing two people during a badly ended robbery. The defence struggles to collaborate with the riotous accused, who seems more interested to exploit the trial as a way to declare his political

views, but still manages to identify evident inconsistencies in the official version of the facts. Goldman is eventually acquitted, but the story leaves viewers with more than a doubt (watch the videos below).

Saint Omer

The Goldman case

8. The importance of film genres

8.1. Genre conventions

Film genres are themselves another evidence of the tight relationship between movies and their audiences. As certain kinds of films become popular, i.e. as their appeal to wide sectors of audiences grows, the film industry recognizes them as a distinct "kind" of movies and genres are born, with movies of a particular genre starting to be produced on a mass scale. So genres are defined and recognized as one of the main elements in the "contract" between production and consumption (Note 5).

The crucial factor which explains the importance of film genres has to do precisely with audience expectations. Viewers start watching a "generic" movie by expecting to find particular, well known *conventions* of the genre illustrated by the movie. A convention is, for example, the fact that in musicals, characters often move smoothly from speaking to singing and dancing to music that suddenly seems to come into existence out of nowhere: viewers readily accept this as "part of the game" of watching a musical. Conversely, this convention would not be acceptable in a dramatic, "epic" or war film, where we are invited to "suspend our disbelief" and move into the fictional world of the film, which must ensure a degree of realism to depict an illusionary yet "believable" world.

Conventions cover a wide range of filmic elements, e.g.

- *"style"*: film noir, for example, employs low-key lighting, dark contexts, night scenes, as well flashbacks as formal narrative structures, while melodrama often uses stylistic excesses to underline the feelings and emotions of the characters: an excessive mise-en-scène, with vivid colours which highlight the presence of plenty of objects that become part of the emotional atmosphere; use of contrasting lights; and an excessive acting which underscores the passions lying beneath the surface of things;

- *soundtrack (including the music score):* for example, horror films would lose much of their impact if we removed the music and sounds that keep us on edge, only to be broken, sometimes quite unexpectedly, by some other sounds that make us jump to our feet; and "sweeping strings" are the usual accompaniment of love stories and other kinds of romantic drama, while electronic, even experimental soundtracks, are used as the score for science-fiction films;

- *setting*: space and time, i.e. where and when the story of a film takes place, are particularly important for some genres, less so for others. Comedies and dramas, for example, can take place everywhere and at any time - in the past, present and future, but most westerns focus on the American frontier (west of the Mississippi) in the latter half of the 19th century; horror movies often choose an isolated place (a lake, a cottage in a forest, a derelict building, a basement, a graveyard) as the perfect setting for the brutal killings that take place;

- *iconography:* this refers to the way that people, objects, animals and even abstract ideas are used in film. Some people and objects, by the very fact of having appeared in a long sequence of films, have thus become icons of that particular genre, i.e. they are readily accepted as symbols in the fictional reality of the film: wagons, horses, stagecoaches, sheriffs, gunfighters, "Indians" in westerns; priests as "exorcists" in horror films; raincoats, cigarettes and (again) guns as essential features of the detective in classic noir films; and of course several well-defined topic-based films (like the sports and war films) have their own sets of icons;

- *stories/themes and their narrative structures:* most films rely on a storyline that suggests some kind of conflict between characters (sometimes even *within* a character), or between characters and some external force, implying a problem that must be solved, usually by overcoming obstacles in order to reach a new "balance" by the end of the film. Different genres present conflicts of different kinds: not just heroes and villains (whether it's a western, a horror or a science-fiction film), but also lovers and their plights (such as in comedies and dramatic movies). However, as we have already mentioned, the final "closure" (including, but not necessarily, a "happy ending") is by no means mandatory: even in classical movies, and increasingly so in post-modern and contemporary cinema, a film may leave its basic issues open, thus denying the audience the reassuring feeling of a new balanced order. Besides, stories can handle their underlying themes in different ways across different socio-cultural contexts;

- *characters and their players (actors/actresses)*: characters' psychological traits, and above all their goals and motivations, explain their behaviour and the roles that they play in the overall storyline. In genre films they tend to be "icons", i.e. recognizable types that symbolize the main themes expressed in the movie, and, as such, they run the risk of becoming stereotypes or even caricatures: the detective and the "femme fatale" in film noir, the zombie or the serial killer in horror films, the "buddies" and the "nerds" in teen comedies, the coach and the team members in sports films, the cavalry and the "Indians" in westerns, and so on.

Taken together, these conventions help to shape the expectations with which viewers can legitimately expect to react, both cognitively and affectively, to the particular movie they choose to watch (e.g. laugh, cry, be entertained, be in suspense, process thoughts, etc.).

8.2. Between tradition and innovation

Film genres, by their very definition, imply that their particular conventions are respected and recognized by audiences, so that appropriate expectations are formed and eventually confirmed. However, as we have mentioned, filmmakers cannot simply apply a formula, thus running the risk of boring viewers. This calls for a dynamic balance between the "old" (established conventions) and the "new" (ways in which conventions are broken), so that viewers can, on the one hand, be reassured about the basic elements of a genre, and, on the other hand, challenged and intrigued by some original elements. *Confirming* vs *subverting* expectations is a matter of degrees, ad shown in Fig. 3, which shows that, at one end, "classical" genres ensure the maximum of confirmation while, at the other hand, "art" or experimental films provide a (usually high) degree of subversion (however, note that the audience of an experimental film may well be aware that their viewing experience will include unusual or unexpected elements).
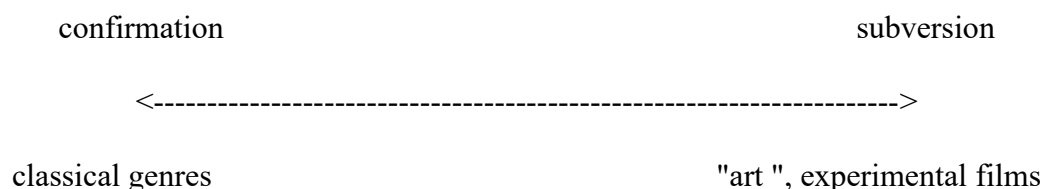
confirmation   subversion

<--->

classical genres   "art ", experimental films

Fig. 3

8.3. Genre hybridity

The very fact that for their very existence film genres must rely on a balance between repetition and variation makes them suitable objects for productive mixing. Especially in the past few decades, there has been a tendency to mix film genres in a process of *genre hybridization*. It is quite common to talk about, e.g. rom-coms (romantic comedies), dramedies (drama and comedy), docufiction (documentary and fiction), and movies mixing action and adventure, superhero and fantasy, detective and mystery, and so on. This phenomenon is not new to mainstream cinema: for example, in *The Player* (USA 1992, watch the video below), director Robert Altman tells the story of a Hollywood producer (Tim Robbins) who has to go through dozens of scripts daily submitted to him, and in doing so tries to ensure that as many genres as possible are catered for in a possible future movie. The film's brilliant irony effectively captures his efforts, but we might add that Altman's film is itself a mixture of comedy, drama and thriller, with a clear satirical outlook on Hollywood's unscrupulous practices.

The player

More recently, *Parasite* (by Bong Joon Ho, South Korea 2019) follows a poor family who infiltrate the life of a wealthy family, incurring in a series of events that range from comedy to thriller, including a strong satirical outlok on presnt-day Korean society (watch the video below left). And *Emila Pérez* (by Jacques Audiard, France 2024) follows a Mexican cartel leader (Karla Sofía Gascón) who aims to disappear and transition into a woman with the help of a lawyer (Zoe Saldaña): the film effectively mixes thriller, dark comedy and melodrama, but it has also been described as a *musical crime* film, since its characters at times burst out singing as in classical musicals (although the rationale for this and its effects are quite different)(watch the video below right).

Parasite   Emilia Pérez

Some instances of genre mixing (or hybrid films) can also be understood by referring to wider socio-cultural issues. As we mentioned in Section 5.3 above, changing cultural sensibilities and socio-cultural patterns have always been mirrored in cinema: the past few decades have witnessed an impressive crisis of ideologies and Western values, leaving behind it worldviews no more characterized by clear oppositions: the "good vs bad" dynamic of so many classical genres (e.g. sheriff and villain in the western; gangster and police in the crime movie, and even opposing characters in romance and comedy) has been replaced by a more nuanced opposition between characters who are more often than not problematic and in a way undefinable (like the tormented detective who has a number of problems of her/his own, reflecting the instability if not chaos that is a feature of modern

social and cultural contexts). The present is often a source of anxiety and doubt, and the future is often seen in gloomy terms if not as utterly dystopian. Even technological developments are, more often than not, portrayed as a source of possible problems and unclear challenges. *Blade runner* (by Ridley Scott, USA/Hong Kong 1982), for example, incorporates many of such themes, questioning the very nature of human beings and their role in a dark futuristic society - and it does so by paying clear homages to various genres, from science fiction to detective stories, from action movies to film noir (watch the video below).

Blade runner

The fact that modern audiences accept this mixing of genres, and tolerate a rather high degree of subversion of genre conventions, shows, once again, that, as viewers become more knowledgeable about films and filmmaking, the film industry can "run more risks" and "stretch" the boundaries of genres beyond levels which once would have been unimaginable (and unacceptable). Such flexibility on both *producers*' and *consumers*' sides can even go as far as, *paradoxically*, producing disappointment when no expectations are violated, which, for at least some members of an audience, can mean no transgression of conventions and therefore fewer opportunities to stimulate thought and a lower degree of interest and participation. Conversely, one must not forget that subverting genre expectations can often still be a dangerous process: some audiences can be discouraged by too much genre "bending", feel "lost" and eventually lose interest.

8.4. Topic/theme appropriation

Rather than mixing genres within a single movie, films can sometimes incorporate discrete elements of a particular genre, making them part of the main narrative. This can be explained by referring to the concept of *intertextuality*, or the reference within one work to other works, which of course implies that viewers are familiar with the "older" content - another way for audiences to exploit their previous knowledge and experience of previous works in order to appreciate and enjoy the new one. This is what happens in *Young Frankenstein* (1974 - see Section 8.5 below), which imitates scenes from the original Frankenstein movie, *Bride of Frankenstein* (by James Whale, USA 1935). As a particularly illuminating example, consider *9 to 5* (by Colin Higgins, USA 1980), which tells the story of three working women (played by Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton) who live out their fantasies of getting even with and overthrowing their company's autocratic, "sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot" vice president (Dabney Coleman). In Violet (Lily Tomlin)'s fantasy, she imagines herself dressed as Snowwhite, in the company of animated forest animals, while feeding her boss a poison apple - a clear, parodic reference to the Disney classic (watch the video below). This clearly assumes that both Violet and the film audience are fully conversant in the cartoon genre.

9 to 5

8.5. Parody

"[G]enre development ... culminate[s] in a form (parodic) that relies on the audience holding a full understanding of the elements and tropes of the genre in question. It is a fulfillment of the "contract" between content creators and spectators, whereby the audience member's long-term relationship with

the genre has afforded them the ability to understand and appreciate a parody. The audience member "gets" the joke—and they have the joy of an "in-joke," by which only those in the know (i.e., with extensive knowledge of the genre) will be fully rewarded." (Note 6)

A natural development of genres leads to movies that, by referring back to one or more specific genres, become *self-referential* (and therefore achieve some kind of *reflexivity*) and, as a more radical change, become *parodies* of a film genre - in a way the ultimate recognition that a genre has fully developed its intrinsic potential and can now be exploited on a secondary level, by exposing and satirizing its forms and conventions. In parodies, conventions of a genre are recycled with a comic purpose. This presupposes that the audience is fully knowledgeable with the main features of a given genre, so that viewers can recognize them - which, in turn, gives the same viewers a double cause for entertainment, since they can enjoy the original conventions of the parodied genre and, at the same time, enjoy the comic or satirical way in which such conventions are treated. Practically every genre has given rise to corresponding parodies, which have sometimes been very successful as "original" movies in their own right. Examples include the horror, the western and the so-called "disaster movies", which became popular in the 1970s (watch the videos below).

Young Frankenstein (by Mel Brooks, USA 1974)

Blazing saddles (by Mel Brooks, USA 1974)   Airplane! (by Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker, USA 1980)

8.6. Audience genre expectations across cultures

A final important feature of genre is worth stressing, i.e. that, although we may attach very generic terms as "comedy" or "melodrama" to a variety of films produced at different times in history, in different national contexts, and by different authors, this "universal" nature of genres is in fact a product of a rather ethnocentric view. Most studies of genres have taken Western cinema, and Hollywood in particular, as their main focus, often ignoring or downplaying the importance of other world cinemas, many of which have developed their own "genres", which are often difficult to understand and appreciate through western eyes only. Some national genres have their own distinctive features, but often remain isolated within their national boundaries, since they do not enjoy worldwide distribution. In addition, even if we use rather generic terms as "adventure" or "thriller", their meaning may change when applied to different national or local cinemas, e.g. Indian "Bollywood" or Asian martial arts films - and the corresponding expectations of their audiences will vary as well.

Notes

1. Knight D. 1997. *Creating short fiction: The classic guide to writing short fiction*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, p. 54. Quoted in Austin A.C. 2007. *Expectations across entertainment media*, Master thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, pp. 5-6.

2. Ibid., pp. 11-12.

3. Bordwell D. 1985. *Narration in the fiction film,* University of Wisconsin Press, Madison. Quoted in Austin, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

4. Bordwell, op. cit., p. 38. Quoted in Bateman J.A. & Tseng C. 2013. "The establishment of interpretative expectations in film", *Review of cognitive linguistics*, 11, 2, p. 354.

5. However, genres can also be described in somewhat different terms by different categories of people, for example by critics or scholars *vs* audiences. See e.g. Jeffres L.W, Atkin D.J & Neuendorf K.A. 2023. *Audience genre expectations in the age of digital media*. Routledge, New York and London, pp. 47-55.

6. Jeffres et al., cit, p. 170.

Appendix

The two worksheets in this Appendix provide opportunities to experiment with audience expectations by focussing on the close analysis of movies and the factors involved in personal interaction with them.

Worksheet 1: Discovering expectations

At the cinema, the film is the same. It's you who are different.

(This appears at the entrance of the Interactive Movie Museum in Milan, Italy.)

When we are about to watch a movie, we activate, more or less consciously, several expectations, on the basis of our knowledge, experiences, beliefs and attitudes. The expectations, and the reactions they trigger during and after watching the film, are largely responsible for the opinion we form about the film, of the interpretation we provide and of the judgment we can express on the film itself. Expectations are a shared as well as a strictly personal factor:

- *shared*, because many other people who belong to our same culture, age, social situation, or profession - as well as people that somehow share with us important aspects of our life - tend to have a similar store of knowledge and experiences; but at the same time

- *personal*, because, as unique human beings, each of us exhibits individual differences and experiences which belong to no one else.

Let's try and see how these processes work in practice. Think of a film you would like to see in the near future. In the Worksheet below, fill in, in as much detail as you can, the *Factors to consider* column. Then, on the basis of this data, write in the next column the *Expectations* that your mind will generate. For example, if you are going to see the latest Woody Allen comedy, you can write in the Expectations column something like ... "one or more characters going through an "existential crisis", or an uninterrupted series of gags, or the setting in a famous city or ..." To give another example, if your friends have recommended a certain film and have told you what it is about, you can briefly summarize what you already know. Or, if you are going to see a horror film, you can list some

elements that you expect you will see: a group of friends gradually murdered as the story unfolds, torture scenes, a bloodshed ("splatter"), and so on.

Once you have filled in the Worksheet, and after watching the film in question, you can compare your expectations with your actual *Reactions*, making some notes in the last column. You will thus be able to evaluate how far the film has met your expectations or has rather gone against them.

Factors to consider		*Expectations*	*Reactions*
Film - title - year and country of production - duration - is it part of a series or a "saga" that you already know? - has it won any prize at a film festival? - has it been the topic of newspaper articles, television programmes, Internet posts ... for some particular reason? - have you noticed an advertising campaign? - if you are going to see this film at a cinema, is it supposed to become very popular and well distributed in movie theatres or will it be shown only in a few selected theatres and/or for just a few days? other:			
Director - have you already seen any films by this director? Does s/he tend to shoot a particular type of movie? - what themes or topics does s/he usually address? - do you know anything else about her/him? other:			
Actors/Actresses - are they famous? Have they been in other films you can recall? - are they usually cast in more or less similar roles? If so, what kind of roles?			

- is there anything in particular you appreciate/don't appreciate about them? other:			
Genre - does the film clearly belong to a certain genre? Or is it difficult to label or classify? - is it a genre (or sub-genre) you are fond of? - which aspects of this genre attract your attention or stimulate your involvement? other:			
Plot and theme - do you already know something about the plot? - does the film deal with topics or themes you know something about or are somehow familiar with? - is it set in places and in a "culture" which is more or less familiar to you or in a culture you don't know much about? other:			
Reviews - have you read any reviews or other information about the film? - have you talked about it with friends, relatives, people you know? - are there "rumours" or stories about the film, the director, the actors/actresses, the plot, etc., e.g. on the Internet? - has anybody recommended this film to you? Why? - have you personally chosen to see this film or have you just accepted somebody else's decision? other:			

Worksheet 2: Testing expectations

Each of us starts watching a film with a series of expectations, which address several factors: from film genre to actors/actresses, from reviews we have read to our previous knowledge of the theme dealt with ... and so on. These expectations are often confirmed as we watch the film; at other times, though, they are proved wrong, either partially or totally. Obviously, the pleasure we feel in watching a new film cannot be based on seeing only something we know very well - it would be terribly boring. But it is true that in a certain kind of film, that "type" or "genre" we are particularly fond of, we are pleased to meet certain actors/actresses, certain story developments which are familiar to us and we do not demand (or do not tolerate!) big "changes". Film production is well aware of these processes and is very careful in providing "products" which are as new and original as possible, but also more "reassuring", which are based on the audience's familiar expectations (incidentally, this is one reason for the success of long-running "sagas" or "series" like the James Bond or Star Wars ones, and the huge diffusion of TV series which run for several "seasons" ...).

This activity will allow you to test how your expectations are actually confirmed by watching a film or partially proved wrong, or perhaps completely subverted. In the Worksheet below, you will find a very short account of a film's initial sequences. Write next to each of them what you expect will happen in the film, how you think the plot may develop and be brought to an end. If you wish to carry out a deeper analysis, list in the third column the criteria which you used to create your expectations (e.g. the film's title? Its genre? The director? The actors/actresses? and so on). Then you can check the extent to which your expectations are confirmed or subverted in the following *Checklist*, which will provide you with a summary of the overall plot of each film.

N.B. Obviously this activity works best with films you have never seen or can very vaguely remember. If you know the film very well, you can still try to describe what kind of expectations a new spectator would be likely to form.

Short summary of the initial sequences	*Expectations*	*Criteria*
Stage fright, by Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1950, with Marlene Dietrich, Jane Wyman, Richard Todd, Michael Wilding Jane, a young student (Wyman) helps her friend Jonathan (Todd) to flee from the police chasing him. Jonathan tells her in a flashback that his lover Charlotte (Dietrich), a music-hall star, has killed her husband during a quarrel, and has then come to his house in a frenzied state, wearing a blood-stained dress. Jonathan has tried to help her, and has even gone to her home to get her a clean dress, but he may have been seen by Charlotte's maid and now he's in a big trouble ...		

Maurice, by James Ivory, GB 1987, with James Wilby and Hugh Grant Cambridge, at the start of last century. Two students, Maurice and Clive (Wilby and Grant) fall in love - but society is very strict and repressive and homosexuality is a crime. They are still enjoying a Platonic love as their university studies are getting near the end ...		
Ace in the hole, by Billy Wilder, USA 1951, with Kirk Douglas, Jan Sterling In a coal mine in New Mexico a miner (Sterling) has an accident and is buried alive. A lot of journalists, radios and TVs rush to the site to follow the case and provide a live broadcast. A journalist (Douglas) contacts the miner's wife and wins her confidence ...		
Arlington Road, by Mark Pellington, USA 1999, with Jeff Bridges, Tim Robbins, Joan Cusack Michael Faraday (Bridges), a widower, lives with his 10-year-old son in a house in the suburbs of Washington. One day the child of his new neighbours, the Langs (Robbins and Cusack) gets injured while playing with fireworks, and Michael finds him and takes him to hospital. As a result, he becomes friendly with the Langs, who seem a helpful, friendly couple. However, Michael starts feeling ill at ease when he discovers that Mr Lang tells lies and finds strange drawings at his house ...		
Ricky *(Ricky)*, by François Ozon, France/Italy 2009, with Alexandra Lamy and Sergi Lòpez Katie (Lamy), a factory worker who lives with her adolescent child, falls in love with a newly-employed fellow worker, Paco (Lòpez) and becomes pregnant. The presence of the newly-born Ricky makes things more difficult for the couple - the baby is not an "easy" child to deal with. After a few months, when bruises begin to appear on Ricky's back, Katie starts having doubts about Paco's behaviour ...		

Elevator to the gallows *(Ascenseur pour l'échafaud)*, by Louis Malle, France 1958, with Jeanne Moreau and Maurice Ronet One Friday night Julien (Ronet) kills his boss at the office, in order to start a new life with his wife Florence (Moreau). However, as he tries to escape from the office, he remains trapped in the lift, which is put out of use at the weekend. Florence thinks that Julien has left her, and wanders aimlessly through Paris. In the meantime, a young couple steal Julien's car ...		

Checklist

Stage fright

Jane hides Jonathan and in the meantime starts her own enquiries. She gets to know Inspector Wilding and soon falls in love with him. After a series of events, in a dramatic scene in the theatre where Charlotte works, Jonathan turns out to be the real murderer, and Jane nearly gets killed by him. This film, one of Hitchcock's less known ones, is famous for the initial flashback which is false - in other words, Hitchcock, in this unique case, has deliberately cheated his audience - thus creating a series of false expectations ...

Review from the [International Movie Data Base](imdb.com) (imdb.com); from Rotten Tomatoes

Maurice

The two friends take different routes: while Maurice starts working in the City of London, Clive goes on a tour in Greece, where he hopes to recover from the misery of this "impossible" love. Maurice, after trying to "cure his disease" , will eventually accept his homosexuality, finding a partner in Clive's groom and facing the inevitable problems this relationship will imply. Clive, on the other hand, will eventually marry a girl of his own social class and will try to lead a "normal" life ...

Review from imdb.com; from Rotten Tomatoes; from Roger Ebert's site

Ace in the hole

The journalist is actually a very ambitious man, who will stop at nothing in order to keep his "scoop" just for himself. He will pretend to do everything possible, and will even coordinate the rescue teams, so as to delay their work and keep the miner alive but still trapped down below. He will keep in touch with the miner until he eventually dies ...

Review from imdb.com; from Rotten Tomatoes; from Roger Ebert's site

Arlington Road

Michael's suspicions grow: maybe his neighbours are terrorists getting ready for an attack ... or is it just his paranoiac imagination? Michael is actually right: as events get frantic, Lang will even kidnap Michael's son on the day planned for the attack. As the irony of fate, Michael will get killed in the attack and will even be accused of being responsible for it. His son will be given in custody to some relatives, while the Langs will carry on their peaceful middle-class life ...

Review from imdb.com; from Rotten Tomatoes; from Roger Ebert's site

Ricky

Katie accuses Paco of abusing the baby, and, as a result, he leaves her. But the bruises on Ricky's back continue to grow, and Katie is at a loss what to do next. One day, while they are in a park, these bruises change into ... small wings, and Ricky starts soaring up into the air. Katie, surprised and shocked, will eventually let Ricky take flight towards his freedom ...

Review from imdb.com; from Rotten Tomatoes; from Roger Ebert's site

Elevator to the gallows

While Julien desperately but uselessly tries to get out of the lift, the young couple who have stolen his car ends up in a motel, where they meet a German couple and make friends with them. They even take some photos of them all, using Julien's camera. These photos are left at the motel lab for developing ... During the night, while trying to steal the German couple's car, the young man kills them using a gun found in Julien's car. The next morning the police arrest Florence for vagrancy and in the meantime, on the basis of clear clues (his car, his gun) accuse Julien of murdering the German couple. Florence denies knowing Julien but still tries to clear him from the charge. Given that Florences's husband cannot be found, the police gets the office porter to open the building and switch on the lift, thus setting Julien free. Florence succeeds in finding the young couple and accuses them of the Germans' murder - which would clear Julien of all charges. At this point the boy recalls the fact that in the film roll left at the motel there are photos showing him and his girl together with the German couple. So he rushes to the motel. Here the photos are being developed and the police immediately realize that the Germans were killed by the boy. Florence, too, arrives at the motel ... only to find out that among the photos being developed there are a few that Julien had taken of them both in intimate conversation ...

Review from imdb.com; from Rotten Tomatoes; from Roger Ebert's site

info@cinemafocus.eu