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Fish Tank: Studying the Conveyance of Theme Through Film

Ethan Michael Roberts
Bachelor of Arts in Film with Specialization in Production

HONORS PROJECT

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FACULTY ADVISORS

Professor Daniel E. William, MFA
Department of Theatre and Film

Professor Aimee S. Reid, MFA
Department of Theatre and Film

Abstract

In a 2005 interview, acclaimed independent filmmaker Todd Solondz spoke out against crafting movies solely on the basis of expressing oneself. He advised novice writers/directors to observe of their projects: “Is this some kind of solipsistic exercise? Or does it, in fact, communicate something to larger worlds?” (Falzone 28). Filmmakers may craft pieces as means of personal expression, but films that do not, as Solondz states, communicate something—like a meaningful thematic idea—fall into the realms of popcorn entertainment or empty, shallow art. Consequentially, filmmakers may have brilliant thematic ideas, but without the knowledge of how to communicate them through film, these themes and messages are lost. Therefore, learning how to capably communicate ideas is key to any filmmaker’s education.

In this Honors Project, my objective was to successfully helm a short film that effectively and fluidly conveyed a complex thematic idea. Taking into account the research I conducted on theories of film criticism as well as close viewings of thematically rich films, I produced, directed, and edited a short film that expressed an intricate thematic idea. I then tested the effectiveness of the film’s thematic communication by screening a polished cut for a closed audience and subsequently engaging the audience about their interpretations of the film’s theme via questionnaire. This report will outline the process of how I developed the theme, used David Bordwell’s theory of audience interpretation to construct a thematically strong film, and then conducted a test screening to gauge the effectiveness of the film’s communication.

Script and Theme

The script that I used for the project was an eighteen-page screenplay that I wrote as the final assignment of my Screenwriting course (THFM 4420). Under the working title *Fish Tank*, the script tells the story of two alienated high school-aged men opening up to each other during a party. The underlying thematic idea that I strove to express was that **meaningful human interaction dies as a result of societal sanctions.**

The script opens at a cast party following the conclusion of a high school play. The main character, 15-year-old Rowan, wanders aimlessly throughout the party. Bored, shy, and unable to find anyone to talk to, Rowan begins to explore the rest of the house. He ends up in the hostess’s bedroom, where he is confronted with a mysterious, rumbling silence. The silence impedes when a fellow classmate, Andrew, enters the room looking for a sanctuary to secretly drink a can of

pilfered alcohol. Though they do not know each other, the two boys begin to talk and open up to one another, Rowan revealing his homosexuality and Andrew revealing his alienation from his virginal, Christian girlfriend Tonya, who is also the party's hostess. After consuming much alcohol, Andrew and Rowan begin to have a physical encounter, only to be interrupted by Tonya's mother. She ushers Andrew from the room and back down the party, and Rowan is left alone.

As the screenwriter, the theme I wanted to explore was founded in Emile Durkheim's school of sociological thought, functionalism. In the theory of functionalism, society as a whole works to maintain an equilibrium between all of its parts (McClelland). Everything within society has a function in serving this purpose. Institutions such as the church and government all work together to maintain the status quo. In order to make sure all things serve functional purposes in society, there is a consensus of values and norms that all good citizens abide by. Durkheim stated that society is "more or less [an] organized totality of beliefs and sentiments common to all members of the group" (Kivisto 39-40). Anyone or anything that violates these rules is considered a deviant. When an individual deviates from the conventions and norms of society, "the social isolation in which [one] is kept produces the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word" (44).

The two main subjects of the script, Andrew and Rowan, are both alienated from the dominant societal group; their high school peers. Rowan is isolated because he cannot conform to the imposed heterosexual role, an identity crucial to most high school norms. Andrew is isolated because he desires a deeper meaning to life than that provided to him by his girlfriend, church, and his soccer friends (staples of the normal majority). Their inability to conform to the pull of high school society standards results in isolation and other social punishment; they both feel negatively about who they are. Rowan and Andrew attempt to be anecdotes to each other's emptiness through a comforting relationship—one that is not strictly platonic, romantic, or sexual. But in the end, society's pull—exemplified by the character of the mother in the final scene—is too strong and they are forced apart.

Making Meaning

In his book *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, American film theorist David Bordwell dissects how viewers and critics perceive and interpret meaning in

films. Bordwell states that meaning is constructed out of “textual cues” presented in the film, and he presents a concentric “map” of interpretive cues set in order of importance to audiences’ interpretations of filmic messages (Bordwell 170-71). At the very center of the diagram is characters; signifying their “traits, actions, and relationships” as the most important interpretive cues (170). Next in importance comes the diegetic world of the film, including facets such as the *mise-en-scène*, dramatic setting, and lighting. These two aspects of the film are enclosed in the final circle, illustrating the least prominent of interpretive cues, the film’s representational techniques—cinematic style, camerawork, editing, music. According to Bordwell, this “schema” reflects the human “comprehension process;” characters are the first cue audiences notice, followed by the diegetic world of the film, followed by how the characters and the world are presented stylistically (170). This hierarchal graph suggests that the specific interactions among these three pillars of cinema delegate the specific meanings, themes, and ideas that viewers gather.

Bordwell’s arrangement of this information provided me with a basic yet comprehensive approach to conveying theme, so I used it as a tool in developing *Fish Tank*. Though the information presented by Bordwell seems commonsensical, studying this critical analysis of audience interpretation equipped me with specific areas to cover in order to effectively communicate the theme of *Fish Tank*. By ensuring that the thematic idea was artistically supported by the filmic elements most critical to audience interpretation—characters, *mise-en-scène*, and nondiegetic representation—I anticipated that the film would feature a meticulously conveyed theme.

Character

In films, behaviors—personal traits, actions, and relationships—are what define characters. As Bordwell writes, “What a character is or has can be translated into what a character means” (154). Viewers “draw an ordinary inference from [the character’s] behavior...and use that as a basis for mapping a semantic field” (153). As described above, characters are central to the audience’s understanding of the film. In my writing, direction choices, and editing, I attempted to ensure the behaviors of the three main characters of *Fish Tank*—Rowan, Andrew, and Tonya’s

mother—were copacetic with the thematic idea that meaningful human interaction dies as a result of societal sanctions.¹

From the beginning of the script, the character of Rowan is most noticeably alienated from those around him. At the cast party, he can't seem to find the words to speak to any of his classmates. His deviant, homosexual feelings for Andrew become apparent through a series of longing glances, though Andrew is preoccupied with his girlfriend Tonya. Rowan's anti-social behavior continues when he leaves the party to explore the rest of the house. Later in the evening when he is talking to Andrew, Rowan mentions that he can't stand "parties" and "big groups of people" because people are "scared" of him; i.e. his deviance from the heterosexual norm leads his peers (read: society) to treat him as a pariah. In a climactic moment, Rowan confesses to Andrew:

“Sometimes I hear a silence... All sound just gets swallowed up. The only thing I can hear is what is going on inside. I can hear air getting passed between my lungs. And my muscles. Moving.”

When Andrew asks him how the silence feels, Rowan responds with “Lonely.” His society-sanctioned isolation prevents him from finding any meaningful human connection, resulting in loneliness. Even at the end of the script, Rowan's connection with Andrew is cut brief because Tonya's mother recognizes the deviance of pseudo-sexual behavior between two teenaged boys and separates them.

When Andrew is introduced, he is standing next to his girlfriend Tonya at the cast party, attempting with little success to be engaged in the group conversation. Similar to Rowan, Andrew also exhibits anti-social behavior by physically removing himself from the dominant group of people (the cast party) in order to drink by himself. In his conversation with Rowan, Andrew's disconnect from Tonya becomes apparent, as does his isolation from the rest of high

¹ Despite the fact that I had a specific underlying idea, I strove keep the film relatively character-based. I did not want the characters to become simply means to illustrate the theme. It was my intention for the film to come off as a realistic slice-of-life, not just the visualization of an allegory.

school society. It appears that Andrew's need for something more than that which is provided to him by social institutions—the church, herternormative relations, school sports—has lead him to be mentally sanctioned. In the following excerpt from one of Andrew's monologues, his social isolation becomes manifest:

“You're pretty quiet, I think. You just remind me of the guys I play soccer with. They never really say anything, either. Know what I mean? You can say stuff without really saying anything, you know? That shit makes me crazy. These people that Tonya and I go to church with, they say a lot. I mean they talk a lot but I don't think there is a meaning to the words. It's just words not saying anything. Tonya loves it, or she gets it....maybe I'm not just getting it.”

Though Andrew, like Rowan, yearns for a meaningful connection with a fellow human being, his society-sanctioned isolation also prevents him from engaging in anything more than shallow interactions with members of the soccer team and his church.

Though the deviance of Tonya's mother is apparent in the film, her social isolation is slightly more veiled. The character of Tonya's mother is introduced when she catches Rowan attempting to steal vodka from the fridge. Right away her staging isolates her from the dominant group: she sits alone in the kitchen, drinking wine and smoking a cigarette, while the cast party goes on in the living room. One of her first lines cues the audience in on her deviance:

“I told my daughter people would get bored unless she served spiked punch, but you know Tonya. Not a sense of humor. At all. God bless her.”

Certainly not something a good, typical mother would say about her daughter to a minor. This line also hints at a disconnect between her and her daughter. Tonya's mother's deviant behavior continues as she gives Rowan a bottle of vodka, telling him:

“I'm not inviting you to drink the whole thing. Parents who host lose the most and all that. Tonya and her churchgoing friends will be out for my blood.”

By referring to Tonya and her “churchgoing” friends in a derisive way, Tonya’s mother’s isolation from dominant society becomes discernable.

Unlike Rowan and Andrew, the character of Tonya’s mother does not noticeably suffer from social punishment for her deviance. However her character still supports the thematic idea that meaningful human interaction dies as a result of social sanctions. Consider the second time Tonya’s mother appears in the script, at the very end. She walks in on Rowan and Andrew being physically intimate in her daughter’s bedroom. She also notices the empty vodka bottle—the bottle she granted to Rowan—laying on the floor. Though she personally may not have a problem with the goings-on, she recognizes the resulting social punishment that would be inflicted on her if she were to allow her daughter’s underage boyfriend to continue a questionably alcohol-fueled, pseudo-homosexual tryst in her daughter’s bedroom. Acting out of fear of social sanction, Tonya’s mother is forced to break up the meaningful interaction happening between Andrew and Rowan.

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène can be defined as “the arrangement of scenery” and “properties” in a film; the term is used to define all visual aspects within the setting/world of the film (Edgar-Hunt 22). According to Bordwell’s “concentric-circle schema,” the mise-en-scène of the film is the next-important textual cue in an audience’s interpretation of a film’s meaning (170). For *Fish Tank*, my production team and I attempted to create a closed world that also concurred with the thematic idea. The main components of the mise-en-scène focused on were set and production design and lighting.²

The entirety of *Fish Tank* is set inside a singular house during the course of one night. In order to increase the sense of inescapability, at no point was the outside world shown. Curtains and blinds remained drawn on most of the windows with the exception of the window in the kitchen, which gives way to a pitch-black, impenetrable exterior. There were four main settings in the script—the bedroom in which Rowan and Andrew have the majority of their interaction, the kitchen in which Rowan interacts with Tonya’s mother, the living room in which the party is

² The multitudes of other aspects that make up mise-en-scene (props, hair and makeup, acting styles, et cetera) were all decided upon with under the stylistic lens of realism.

taking place, and the bathroom that Rowan enters when he is exploring the house.

Though the lighting design maintains a dim, practically lit quality throughout the film, the living room is more brightly lit than the rest of the settings. This distinction serves to signify the disparity between the status quo and socially acceptable interactions (the cast party) and the shadowy, deviant actions happening in the other rooms. In contrast, the bedroom serves as more of a safe haven for Andrew and Rowan, and is therefore lit with more warmth and intimacy. The sanctuary provided by the bedroom is rather limited, however; the room's dull green walls are meant to evoke a similarity between the room and the fish tank. Just as the fish cannot escape the tank, the characters cannot escape their isolating world.

Nondiegetic Representation

The third and all-encompassing circle in Bordwell's diagram of meaning is inhabited by nondiegetic means of representation. These means include all of the representational techniques outside the world of the film that contribute to its style: framing and camerawork, sound and music, and editing. Bordwell describes representational techniques as oft ignored as stand-alone characteristics, stating most critics (and viewers) only take notice of interpretive cues from stylistic representation "in relation to characters' actions and inactions" (174). However, this factor does not downplay the overall importance of nondiegetic elements in assisting the film in its representation of theme, and the many of these stylistic components had to be decided upon with significant intention during the pre-production of *Fish Tank*.

One significant representational choice I made concerning the representation of *Fish Tank* was the decision to shoot the film using 16mm motion picture film stock rather than digital video. Several different reasons lead to this choice. Film and video each have distinctive looks that psychologically affect the audience in different ways, and motion picture film has certain abilities that accord with the visualization of *Fish Tank's* thematic idea—namely the abilities to visually convey immediacy and intimacy. The photochemical latitude of 16mm film gives the image captured more dynamic range, resulting in more detail captured, and a truer image. Films that I had researched and modeled the look of *Fish Tank* after in terms of color tone and thematic illustration all capitalize on the image produced by motion picture film, including *Blue Valentine* (Cianfrance, 2010), *No Country for Old Men* (Cohen & Cohen, 2007), *Paranoid Park* (Van Sant, 2007), and *Brick* (Johnson, 2005). Also, in the light of the possible demise of celluloid

(Kaufman) in the film industry, this research was extremely timely. Even though digital video may be prevalently used in independent film and student projects, the reality is that motion picture film sets the professional standard for artistic image capturing.

The philosophy behind *Fish Tank*'s framing and shot composition was also designed to support to theme. For the opening party scene, Rowan is often framed in a wide shot surrounded by space with other party-goers in the foreground or background, evoking feelings of isolation and being trapped in an open space; as if he is in a fish tank. In the bedroom when Rowan and Andrew first begin talking, they are always shown in wide or medium-wide shots and rarely share the frame. As the story progresses and the characters' interaction becomes more meaningful, the shots become progressively tighter on the characters, symbolizing their growing intimacy. As the two boys come together on the bed, they share a medium close-up two-shot that conveys their pivotal coming together. This aspect of visual closeness is abruptly exchanged for wider shots when Tonya's mother discovers the two boys and halts their intimacy.

In terms of sound design, the story called for two thematically important details: the sound of the silence Rowan hears and the hum of the fish tank. It was my vision for the "silence" to have a rumbling, heavy tone to it. By giving the sound an oppressive quality, I endeavored to underline the oppressiveness of society's pull on Rowan and his feelings of being "crushed" by loneliness and isolation. The consistent hum and bubbling sounds of the fish tank in the bedroom again evoke the feeling that the characters in trapped in a giant fish tank themselves. Sound design also encompasses the aspect of musical score, though I opted to only have music play during the closing credits of the film. Drawing inspiration from films like *Weekend* (Haigh, 2011) and *Interiors* (Allen, 1978), I justified this decision with the belief that too many non-diegetic "comforts" would remove the audience from the story and detract from the realism I hoped to convey.

Lastly, my decisions as chief editor for the film stemmed from my intention to construct a realistic snapshot of a moment between two people. With this deliberateness, I edited Andrew and Rowan's interaction so it unfolded at a slower pace, closer to real time than to cinematic time. Awkward pauses are drawn out and characters are given time to think about their responses and reactions. By adapting this outlook in my editing, I hoped to create a film that was honest in its representation of a connection, while also allowing the audience time to ruminate over what they are viewing.

Test Audience

After seven days of production (resulting in over 5,000 feet of exposed film) and over a month of editing, a thirty-four minute first cut of *Fish Tank* was finished. As part of my research on effectively conveying theme, the first cut was screened in front of an audience of twenty-five people. This test audience was made up of faculty from Bowling Green State University's film program and undergraduate film students. Seeing as this group of people had been trained on reading cinematic theme and therefore possessed the tools and knowledge of filmic lingo to discuss theme, I believed them best equipped to give feedback on what sort of meaning *Fish Tank* presented, as well as the clarity of the intended theme.

The audience was given a short-answer questionnaire that asked them to describe what thematic ideas they believed film was attempting to convey, and what specific aspects of the film communicated that particular idea. After viewing the film, the audience was given twenty minutes to fill out the questionnaire. It was my intention to record their initial, visceral reactions to the film. I understand this presented a constraint on the test, since some people need more time than others to “digest” a film. It also must be understood that by having the participants physically write their reactions, rather than express them in some other manner, another constraint was presented in this method of gauging the audience's reaction.

Out of the twenty-five participants, fifteen people (60%) mentioned isolation and loneliness in relation to what they believed the theme to be, and five (20%) people mentioned the ideas of repression/suppression or being trapped. Six people (24%) specifically stated that society and/or social pressures/expectations/norms were at the root of the characters' isolation. Other thematic meanings derived by the audience members included sexuality, moments of connection, interaction, masculinity, and spirituality/the church.

When asked to describe what components of the film shaped their perception of theme, a majority of audience members (56%) identified character behavior—personality traits, actions and dialogue, and relationships—as the primary aspect that communicated a theme. However, as Fig. 1 illustrates, a majority of the audience members (71%) identified two or more of the textual cues of character, representation, and mise-en-scène that lead them to determine a theme. Fig. 2 illustrates specific aspects that the audience identified as communicating theme.

Figure 1) Textual cues audience identified as communicating theme in *Fish Tank*

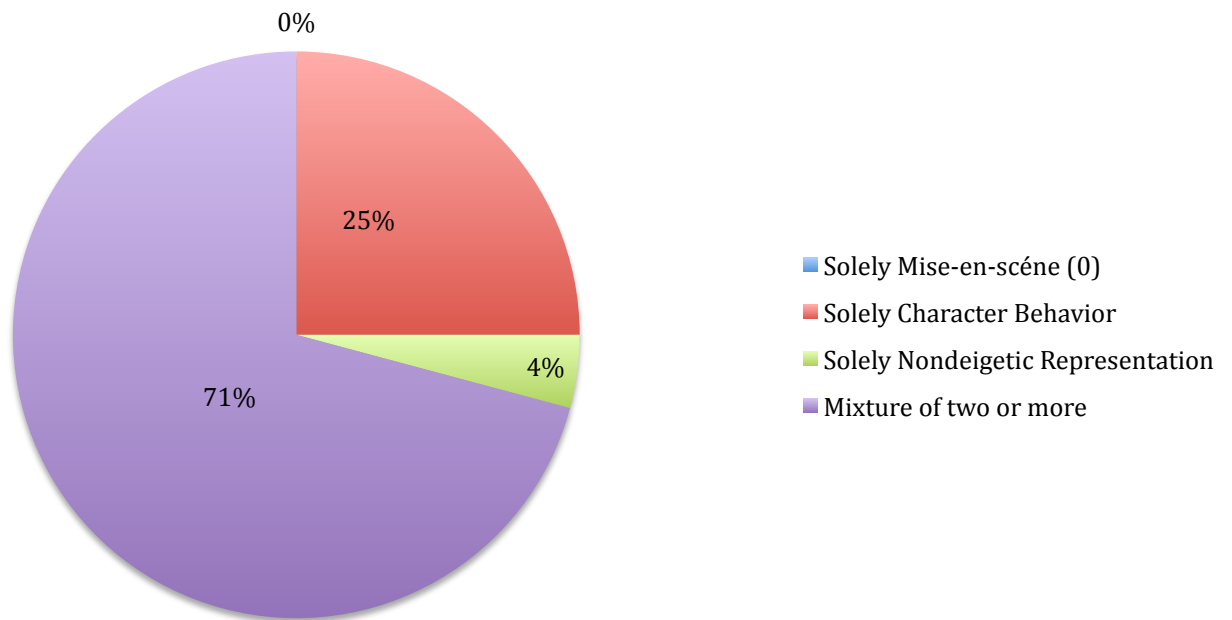
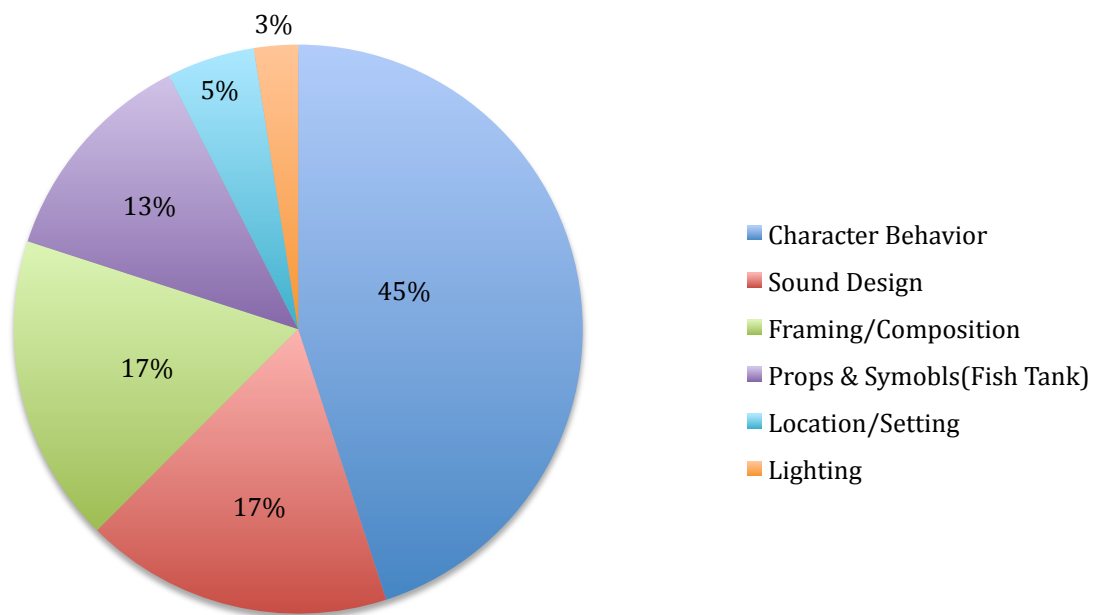


Figure 2) Specific filmic aspects audience identified as communicating theme in *Fish Tank*



Conclusion & Continuing Work

The data from the test audience proposes that it is a collaboration of Bordwell's three major textual cues—character, mise-en-scène, and nondiegetic representation—that best convey a specific theme to audiences; though character behavior clearly dominates the molding of audiences perception. In order for a filmmaker to ensure his or her film clearly communicates its intended themes, he or she must make certain all textual cues are supporting the thematic idea.

Though principle production is completed and I have a polished cut of the film, my work on *Fish Tank* is far from over. The questionnaires filled out by the test audience included a space for participants to give criticisms, and I received a good amount of constructive feedback. Additionally, the current cut of the film still features several audio problems. Once changes are made, my macro-goal for the film is to submit it to festivals, and I aspire for my thematic idea to be strong enough to promote public discourse on the topic of alienation as punishment from dominant social groups.

I believe this Honors Project has strengthened me as filmmaker on numerous levels. Not only have I gained the comprehensive experience of directing and editing a short 16mm film, but I also have achieved insight into the theory of how an audience perceives and interprets meaning in cinema. This learned knowledge has laid part of the path for my continuing quest to effectively communicate through film.

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