

Higher Media Studies: Media Analysis Question

“Media texts are shaped by their internal and external institutional contexts.”

*Describe the narrative and representations of **one** media text you have studied and explain how these have been shaped by their institutional contexts.*

The Institutional Shaping of ‘Shawshank’

Introduction

I am going to discuss ‘The Shawshank Redemption’ (henceforth TSR) (USA, Frank Darabont, 1994) produced by Castle Rock Entertainment. This was a mainstream A feature film with a budget of \$25m. Although unsuccessful at the box office the film was immensely successful when shown on television in the USA and had huge video rentals and sales. It is regularly voted number one or two in the IMDb top 250 movies.

By analysis of both narrative and representations I think we can see how both these aspects are shaped by the institutional contexts.

Internal context

Castle Rock Entertainment (CRE) is a mini-major which produces a few high-quality films each year. These are picked up and distributed by major studios. CRE prides itself in usually giving the director right of final cut. The internal studio controls may be divided into the **allocative** level (responsible for budget and ensuring deadlines are met) and the **operational** or **creative** level (responsible for pre-production, production and post-production). The main purpose of studios is to make profit by maximising audience appeal e.g. by telling a satisfying story; by reaching crossover audiences (black/white, young/old, male/female).

External context

US film ratings are determined by MPAA. This is a self-regulatory system. If a film is rated NC-17 (no children under 17) due to scenes of sex and or violence then it excludes the teenage audience and so reduces revenue. So producers will vet scripts for such scenes and demand that they be removed in order to gain a G, PG, PG13 or R rating. Similar rating systems operate throughout the world so representation of sex and violence must be considered.

Narrative structure

US film historian Kristin Thompson has analysed dozens of US films from the 1910s to the 1990s. She argues that the worldwide success of Hollywood lies in its ability to tell stories. Underlying the thousands of movies there lies a single four-part structure:

1. setup: initial situation with usually two plotlines
2. complicating action: takes action in new direction
3. development: protagonists struggle to their goals
4. climax: high action and resolution.

Each part is roughly the same length and is separated by major turning points. The whole film may be framed by a short prologue and/or epilogue.

TSR can be seen to have this structure:

Prologue: Shooting and Andy's trial

Setup: Andy goes to jail; Red refused parole.

Turning point 1: Andy helps guard and gets beer for men (so becoming integrated into prison)

Complicating action: Andy works in library and helps governor's scam.

Turning point 2: Andy plays Mozart to prisoners (expressing his hope for freedom).

Development: A new prisoner Tommy arrives – who can prove Andy's innocence.

Turning point 3: Tommy is killed.

Climax: Andy escapes and Red is paroled.

Epilogue: Andy and Red meet on Mexican beach

Thompson argues that the economic profit-seeking goals of Hollywood shapes the narrative of mainstream movies into this standard structure.

Narrative codes

Roland Barthes has suggested that narrative can be analysed in terms of narrative codes. The enigmatic code is posing and resolution of enigmas in order to keep the audience interested and watching.

The major enigmas of TSR are established early on – will the two leads ever get out of prison? When Andy escapes and Red is paroled a new enigma emerges: will Red and Andy meet up in Mexico? Darabont originally shot an enigmatic open ending with Red on a bus to Mexico with him wondering if he would ever see Andy again.

But the producers were not happy with this 'art cinema' irresolution and told the director that he was denying the audience the pleasure of Red and Andy's meeting up. So Darabont was persuaded to change the ending to a 'happy ending'. Given the impact of the film amongst audiences of all ages it would seem that the change was commercially justified.

The referential code is the use of the audience's cultural knowledge e.g. intertextual reference, general knowledge, social mores, etc. The film starts with Art Deco titles and the Inkspots singing 'If I Didn't Care'. This gives a nostalgic feeling to the opening and makes it seem to be targeted at older viewers. The film covers a period of over 20 years and as the actors change little the film uses references to film stars to mark the passage of time. Three posters feature: Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe and Raquel Welch. These references are of course more likely to be picked up by older viewers.

Representations

TSR contains violence and male rape but it is suggested rather than explicit hence it was not MPAA-rated NC17 but R which meant that it was restricted i.e. adult accompaniment for 17 or under. This enabled teenage viewers to see it and so made the potential cinema audience larger.

TSR can be seen as mixing elements of the prison, caper and buddy genres. In this case we have a biracial buddy film pairing black and white male leads. Such tactics are used by studios to increase crossover appeal.

Black critics have criticised the biracial buddy film because it generally portrays blacks as inferior to white. We can see this in TSR. Andy is educated and innocent but Red is uneducated and guilty. TSR otherwise seems to bypass racial issues which one suspects would be a major problem in prison – Red is just like any other white con. Perhaps this was economically shaped by Darabont thinking that racial issues would be uncomfortable for the audience and so spoil a ‘feelgood’ movie.

TSR can be seen as a damning critique of the brutal, dehumanising nature of US prisons. The narrative works by allowing one special individual the means of escape. This is typical of the individualist - rather than collectivist - ideology of mainstream movies. They represent the problems of society and only allow special individuals to ‘solve’ them. A more political film might have shown how collective violent or non-violent action could achieve change. But the Hollywood system rarely produces films which challenge the US dominant ideology of individualism.

Conclusion

I have shown that analysis of the narrative and representations of TSR are shaped by its profit-oriented institutional context. For example:

- four-act narrative structure typical of mainstream Hollywood movies
- use of enigmas to engage audience
- imposed ‘happy’ ending resolving the final enigma
- use of references to engage different audiences
- use of biracial pair to attract crossover audience
- downplaying of race as an issue
- implicit portrayal of sex and violence
- individualist ideology.