

Higher Media Studies: Media Analysis Question

*Discuss the pleasures that an audience might experience from **one** media text you know well. You should refer to the key aspects Narrative and Representation.*

The Pleasures 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/DVD rentals and sales. It is regularly voted number one or two in the IMDb top 250 movies.

By analysis of both the pleasures of narrative and representation I think we can account for the enormous worldwide popularity of TSR. But first I wish to consider the pleasure of humour as well as apply two influential theories of pleasure from Roland Barthes and Richard Dyer.

Humour

On the surface TSR seems a bleak story – an innocent man is jailed for some twenty years and subjected to mistreatment from the governor, prison officers and other prisoners. However the bleak subject matter is alleviated by an understatedly humorous voiceover by Morgan Freeman, as well as comic dialogue e.g. “ If I hear as much as a mouse fart in here” Such humour gives us the physical pleasure of laughing and may keep us watching the film so that the pleasure is repeated.

Barthes on pleasure

Barthes has described two different types of pleasure: ‘plaisir’ and the much rarer ‘jouissance’. ‘Plaisir’ is the routine, familiar pleasure which films provide. For most people TSR provides the familiar pleasures of a ‘good story’ with a ‘happy ending’.

‘Jouissance’ is a more extreme pleasure or ‘bliss’ which comes from a text shattering the audience’s expectations. The great popularity of TSR must come from the climactic moment of Andy’s escape – this comes as a surprise after it seems that any hope of proving his innocence had disappeared.

Dyer on entertainment

Richard Dyer argues that entertainment is escapist as it allows us to ‘escape’ temporarily from the inadequacies of real life:

Inadequacy	Entertainment
scarcity	abundance
exhaustion	energy
dreariness	intensity
manipulation	transparency
fragmentation	community

TSR provides such escape in the following scenes:

1. a feeling of community and intensity when the Andy manages to get beers for the prisoners when they are tarring the prison roof; this feeling is repeated when Andy plays a song from Mozart's 'Marriage of Figaro' over the public address.
2. a sense of community and transparency in the strong friendship between Andy and Red.
3. a sense of intensity when we see Andy's escape and when Andy and Red are reunited at the end of the film.

The whole film provides an escapist fantasy for the audience. In our lives we may feel trapped in difficult circumstances at home, school, college or work. Whilst watching TSR we can be moved into a world which, for a moment, resolves such entrapment by giving us a story in which the heroes escape from prison to a new life with lost of money.

The pleasures of narrative

In Todorov's model of classic narrative structure the narrative trajectory moves from an initial equilibrium to disequilibrium with an eventual return to equilibrium. The audience desires a return to equilibrium and the resolution of mainstream narratives usually provides equilibrium by satisfying the desire through a happy ending. In TSR we do not see much 'equilibrium' in the prologue – Andy is depressed, drunk and contemplating murder. Then we see him protesting his innocence to murder and his sentencing. The audience desires that both Andy and Red will be free. Andy is after all innocent and Red has paid his dues to society. TSR provides the 'happy ending' beloved of Hollywood.

Narrative codes are another source of audience pleasure Roland Barthes' enigmatic code works by posing and resolving enigmas which to try to keep the audience interested and involved in the story.

TSR established the two major enigmas in the prologue and in the first scene after the opening credits:

1. is Andy guilty?
2. will Red get parole?

Andy befriends a prisoner who is able to prove his innocence but he is killed on the orders of the Governor. So enigma 1 now changes – will Andy ever escape? When Andy escapes we are not aware of how he did it – so an enigma is now: how did Andy escape? This enigma is resolved through showing the escape in flashback with Red's voiceover.

Red says the 'right thing' at his first two parole board hearings but is refused parole. In his final hearing, Red seems to blow his chance by his comments to the parole board. But surprisingly he is freed. So enigma 2 changes to – will Andy and Red meet up?

Director Frank Darabont's first cut had an 'art film' unresolved ending – Red on a bus to Mexico wondering if he would ever see Andy again. But Castle Rock producers persuaded Darabont to tag on a happy ending and so resolve the final enigma.

So we see that TSR involves the audience by constantly posing and transforming enigmas.

Barthes' referential code is the use of the audience's cultural knowledge e.g. intertextual reference, general knowledge. Spotting such references is a source of audience pleasure. So a popular music fan may gain pleasure from identifying doowop and rock 'n' roll songs. Similarly the movie buff may like identifying the clip from 'Gilda' as well as the movie posters featuring Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe and Raquel Welch.

Representations

Another way of thinking about TSR is to analyse its representations. The representation of masculinity is that of hard macho men. The only 'feminine' man, Fat Ass, does not survive his first night in Shawshank. This macho discourse might be the reason why the film appeals to teenage boys who might also like the idea of the hero overcoming and defeating authority.

Given the racial tensions in the USA one might expect that one of the film's themes would be racism. However TSR seems to bypass the racial issues which one suspects would be a major problem in prison – Red is just like any other white con. This might derive from Stephen King's original novella in which Red was an Irish-American. Or perhaps it was economically shaped by Darabont thinking that racial issues would be uncomfortable for the audience and so spoil the pleasures of a 'feelgood' movie.

The use of a biracial pair in a 'buddy' movie like TSR is a common tactic to maximise the crossover audience. However some black filmgoers might refuse the pleasures of TSR because of its stereotypical characterisation: Andy is white, educated and innocent; but Red is black, uneducated and guilty.

Conclusion

The above analysis of TSR demonstrates that it has a number of pleasures:

- the physical pleasure of laughter.
- the 'plaisir' of a 'good story'.
- the 'jouissance' of Andy's ingeniously planned escape.
- psychological pleasure of 'losing oneself' in the film and escaping from everyday troubles.
- the pleasure of a traditional narrative structure with a 'happy ending'.
- narrative pleasures from enigmatic and referential codes.

The producers of TSR may have tried to ensure that the film is pleasurable by avoiding troubling issues such as race.

However TSR is not pleasurable for all viewers. For one person's pleasure may be another's 'unpleasure'. A filmgoer whose taste is art cinema may not gain much pleasure from a film whose cause-effect chain is so unrelentingly linear and whose enigmas are all resolved. There are different pleasures to be gained from non-mainstream narratives.