

# Timecode

(2000, Mike Figgis, USA)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area: Auteur Narrative

### Rationale for study

- *Timecode* explicitly draws attention to film form, gives emphasis to the filmmaking process and experiments with conventional narrative structures. *Timecode* explores issues in digital film technology and narrative structure.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening Sequence, Emma with the therapist 2:13- 6:29
- Lauren shoots Alex 1:21:47-1:26:36

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS STARTING POINTS Union - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography (including lighting)

- Medium – shot of female (Emma’s therapist) top right hand screen. This is the first character we see during the opening sequence; the shot frames her partially, creating enigma.
- Camera movement to the right reveals her face in a medium-close up shot, whilst Emma is introduced. There is a repetition of the shot which framed the therapist on the edge of the frame and Emma’s face is out of focus in a medium close-up shot of the side of her face.

- During this entire sequence a bright light remains constant on the therapist suggesting that her form of therapy, her questions and probing may shed light upon Emma’s problems with her husband Alex. The sustained lighting gives balance and stillness to the ‘action’ in this screen whilst the other three screens are gradually assembled.
- A close-up side shot of Emma’s face focuses our attention on her words: Alex has a ‘tiny, tiny wound’ and she is trying to soak up the ‘cut’ with tissues.
- As the interaction between the therapist and Emma unfolds, the camera shots alternate by turning up the resolution of one character whilst fading out the other, (during which time the diegetic sound complements this process).
- When Emma is out of focus, her voice is clearer and audible whilst the opposite is the case when the shot is clearer and the therapist’s face is shot in focus, thus actively drawing the spectators’ attention to the shots.
- As the four screens are gradually assembled over the duration of the sequence there is no apparent connection between the action in each.
- The exterior shot of the outside of a building includes close-up shots of two eyes, suggesting the idea of surveillance, as the eyes move from the top left screen to the bottom left and then bottom right screen.
- By contrast to the close-up shots of Emma and the therapist which dominate this sequence, full body shots of Lauren in the top left screen set another narrative in motion and contrast the stillness which their dialogue creates in the top right hand screen.
- Consider the connection between the zoom in on Lauren deflating Rose’s car tyre at the moment when Emma and her therapist engage in free word association and something important is revealed.
- Camera movement inside the film production company (bottom left screen) establishes POV shots shifting the spectators’ focus to three screens and enhances the contrast between

stillness and movement. This contrast, begins early in the film to draw attention to the film process and the timing of shots.

- Lighting during interior shots of the production company sustains spectators' attention on Emma.
- Framing of the female director's hands and upper body (but not her face) in bottom right screen, as she stands making her pitch to production team. They are captured in the same screen.
- Bottom left screen captures the female director in a two shot with the musician, addressing production team (in the next shot), capturing both in a medium side-shot, eyes closed.
- Focus on the same female director in a medium close-up shot aligning our simultaneous view of her in the bottom left and then bottom right screen. Camera shots reinforce idea of time being simultaneous.
- The camera zooms in close to Lauren climbing out of the Limo, suggesting the focus will be on her actions.
- A medium close-up of Lauren walking stridently towards the camera might intimidate the spectator, placing them in the scene.
- Lauren's movements which the camera follows brings movement which contrasts with Emma's sitting position in the top right hand screen, thus consistently drawing attention to film's intrinsic movement and stillness.
- In the top right screen, lighting is low key and the silhouettes create a sombre atmosphere to complement Emma's reflective mood.
- Front shot of Alex when Lauren asks who he is. Bright lighting on Alex sustains focus on this character.
- A symmetrical shot captures Lauren and Alex in a close-up, suggesting a 'head to head' between them as Lauren confronts him (Lauren in the bottom left screen and Alex in the bottom right).
- Tracking movement to capture Emma running towards the studio, suggesting her urgent need to see Alex, at this moment.
- Camera angle suggests Alex's vulnerability when he is bleeding on the floor, perhaps creating meanings about his role as a Hollywood director.
- Camera panning creates POV shots when the female director hides and films the shooting.
- A zoom in captures Alex on the female director's camera viewfinder and also frames him in the same screen, superimposing the image of fact and fiction/ real life and art, whilst the real events are captured on camera.

- Rose is framed with Alex and then Lauren – the same shot, different angles and perspectives, suggesting her connection to both characters.
- During the earthquake, all four screens are initially out of focus suggesting a lack of connection between the characters and enhancing the idea that the physical shock of the earthquake can at least be felt by everyone, at the same time.

### Mise-en-Scène

- The therapist is sitting down, facing Emma suggesting her authority to steer the dialogue
- Taking the four screens as a composite whole, Emma and the therapist remain the top right screen for the entire sequence, ensuring the spectator can focus on Emma's narrative and the metaphor of wound she describes.
- When all three screens go black at one point, Emma's story remains, suggesting its underlying importance to the whole narrative.
- The exterior shots of the building (and the close-ups of the eyes) are in black and white reinforcing the lack of connection and continuity between each screen / narrative.
- Shots of Lauren leaving her house capture bold colours of the garden and suggest the prominent parts to be played by Lauren and Rose.
- When the entire production team is framed in the shot, having a meeting around the table, Alex is situated at the head of the table, signifying his importance.
- Consider how the scene is set for Lauren's confrontation with Alex. They are framed simultaneously with the same (medium close-up) shot, whilst she is in the bottom left screen and Alex is in the bottom right screen.
- When Lauren shoots Alex, we see the blood as he lies on the floor. The low resolution suggests he is badly wounded.
- Bottom right screen: Production team assembled seated around meeting table, looking at two speakers making their pitch. Alex seated at the head as the director.
- The massage therapist is standing over Alex's associate/ colleague, arguably 'massaging his ego' (this is Hollywood).
- Contrasting mood is established in the top right hand screen with red, orange and warm colours setting a sombre mood as Emma is captured with her friend in a close-up.
- Lauren's two tone dress code, her black shirt and white suit stands out foreshadowing her actions.

- Alex in the centre of the frame, on the floor with the blood spreading, visualises the events described by Emma in her therapy session.

### Editing

- The pace of editing alternates between the overall action across the four split screens and the pace of action which takes place within one particular screen.
- Editing is key in the opening as it assembles movement and action within all four screens whilst sometimes moving images from one screen to another, for example the close-up shot of the eyes which move from the top left screen to the bottom left and then the bottom right.
- Editing plays a part in suggesting continuity between the action, allowing the spectator to make connections between the characters and narrative within and across the four screens.
- When Alex is on the floor bleeding and holding his stomach, Emma (in another screen) starts to walk quickly, holding her stomach to suggest a connection with Alex.
- The long take which sustains the camera focus on Alex is emphasised by Lauren's movement as she exits the room and building.

### Sound

- Consider the effectiveness of separating diegetic sound from its matching visuals, for example when Emma and the therapist are in dialogue, this enhances the spectators' appreciation of the filmmaking process.
- At the beginning of the sequence, the faintness of Emma's voice-over suggests the difficulties she is experiencing in understanding her relationship with Alex.
- Her voice is steady and clear and synchronised with a focused close-up of the side of her face at the moment she refers to the 'tiny wound' on Alex's hand.
- Non-diegetic saxophone music is interlaced between the diegetic dialogue between Emma and her therapist, dissolving the intensity of their conversation and allowing the spectator to pause and reflect.
- Towards the end of the sequence, the diegetic sound between the therapist and Emma recedes as a new narrative will take over, with non-diegetic drum beats defining this shift. Lauren and Rose's voices are heard and the spectators' focus shifts to the top left screen.
- Sound of a heart-beat, when Lauren

gets out of the car and goes in to the studio, looking for Alex.

- The layers of non-diegetic music together with the heart-beat build up anticipation around Lauren's intentions for going inside the studio.
- As the sequence progresses, there are overlapping layers of diegetic sound: the production team expressing fear and panic when Lauren presents the gun, the sound of the heart beat and non-diegetic music which 'connects' all the characters and emotions.
- When Lauren fires the gun, the gun-shot defines the moment, whilst the saxophone music has the effect of dissolving the tension.
- Consider the impact of seeing all the actors in each of the four screens speak whilst their dialogue cannot be heard by spectators.
- This silence compounds the tension around Lauren's determination to search for Alex.
- Sound is separated from its corresponding visuals in this clip. For example consider the moment when Alex stands up and says 'I'm Alex'. This diegetic sound comes from inside the frame where Alex is located (bottom right), whilst his response is intended for Lauren, who is in the bottom left frame. It is the spectator who synthesises the dialogue and diegetic sound with the image, to connect the narrative threads and offer continuity. Hence throughout the film the idea of disconnection between the characters/ individuals is emphasised through the separation of sound and visuals and the spectator attempts to bring unity and meaning.
- Diegetic sound of the earthquake which becomes a defining moment. Here it reveals and articulates emotions as Emma calls Alex to say 'I love you', whilst in an earlier sequence after an earthquake tremor, she tells him 'I'm going to leave you'.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- Hollywood film industry – an ironic and reflective representation of pretentiousness – actors/directors/production teams/the way mainstream filmmaking functions (Rose wants to sleep with Alex, to gain audition); egos of those in Hollywood – the massage therapist on call to 'massage' egos.
- Representations of film as an art – female director pitches an ambitious art film

(to be shot as one long- take).

- Representations of relationships as artificial and lacking in real love/ trust: Lauren and Rose, Rose and Alex, Emma's attempts to understand marriage to Alex.
- Communication and connection between individuals is lost/experience of life/time is disparate (the earthquake); connection takes place intermittently – this idea represented through the film's production context (the long -takes are attempts to offer narrative continuity as a metaphor for fragmented time).

### **Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)**

- Striking visual style – the split screen into four, the simultaneous narratives, emphasis on time being synchronous. Mike Figgis explicitly engages with the possibilities and limitations of the medium and its storytelling function; fascinated with digital camera technology Union – *Timecode* is Figgis's venture with technology (as auteur, this becomes his signature).
- *Timecode* resists conventional narrative styles to challenge spectators' experience of film's narrative function .
- Individual screens develop narrative which looks mainstream but the 'feel' is challenging
- Figgis creates an edgy feel to the film, unnerving the spectator with the film's unfamiliar form.
- Alex's wound which is bleeding is an underlying motif with which the film begins and ends- Alex ends up literally bleeding; the image of corruption and infiltration – Alex recites William Blake's poem 'The Sick Rose' to Rose.
- The earthquake is a recurring motif which attempts to connect all the actors – it's a physical event which they all experience; this moment highlights their isolation.
- Figgis's interest in time – influenced by short film, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (Robert Enricho, France, 1962).

### **CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts**

#### **Historical**

- *Timecode* produced at crucial point in film history, during transition from analogue to digital technology.
- Other films which experiment with narrative – *Memento*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless*,

proving equally challenging for film spectator.

- *Timecode* introduces ideas we might find in other pre and post-millennium films about material culture and relationships and individuality such as *Fight club*.

#### **Production**

- *Timecode* shot with four cameras, simultaneously, in four long- takes.
- Actors encouraged to use scripts as guides, they improvised parts.
- Actors viewed footage at the end of each day and made notes for next shooting schedule.
- Figgis's experience as theatre director and his interest in music influenced the way the film was shot; use of music scores – actors worked from music sheets, using these as guides as to when they would be foregrounded in filming; they could see the filming of the other three narratives going on, in parallel to the camera focused on them.
- *Timecode* is produced outside of the production context of mainstream Hollywood (as an auteur, Figgis disenchanted with Hollywood and openly criticised its methods) and the studio system; it exemplifies the extreme characteristics of independent filmmaking as it experiments with film form and narrative style.
- He likens digital filmmaking to painting or writing a novel. He shoots other feature film, *Leaving Las Vegas* on 16mm rather than 35mm film, which is the norm in mainstream Hollywood.

### **SPECLIAIST STUDY AREA - Auteur & Narrative- STARTING POINTS**

- How does the director's decision to experiment with the filmmaking process and offer four split screens subvert mainstream narrative styles and structures?
- How are time and its simultaneity central to Figgis's experimental filmmaking?
- What challenges does *Timecode* present for its spectators? What role does the spectator play, in bringing continuity and creating meaning?
- *Timecode* offers a self-conscious reflection on the possibilities and limitations of film as distinctive aesthetic medium. Consider the debates in key sequences which discuss film form, the work of Russian filmmakers, Vertov, Eisenstein and the long-take. What is the significance of these debates and filmmakers

to the film's overall experimental project?

- How does Figgis use these debates to critique notions of art cinema and mainstream Hollywood?
- Why might we say that Figgis's

experimental filmmaking gives sound an important and independent role in the narrative process? How does this decision contribute to our understanding of *Timecode* as an experimental film?