Thematic and Narrative Standards in American Cinema: An Analysis on Character Arc, Catharsis and Audience's Bias

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Abstract— Movies and TV series are a visual medium, that are intended to evoke the sensory root of vision and the auditory system. The niche, in the cinematic and the television medium is not the mere presence of a story and the subsequent plot attached to it but it is the culmination of expert writing, character arcs (of all the characters) in the movie and TV series, the cathartic experience of the protagonist/antagonist and the plot that builds up to a boiling point which has nowhere to go other than to ingrain in the psyche of the audience. The cinematic and television masterpiece that demands further analysis by critics, which becomes the standard on which many other movies and TV series are made, is not without its own flaws. In spite of said existing flaws, there seems to be a glaring indication that the movie and TV masterpiece has the above qualities mentioned in order to fulfil its place as the 'movie of all movies' or simple put cinematic masterpieces. For the sake of brevity and convenience, let us call the criteria in which every movie must be judged as writing, character arc, catharsis, cast's performance, and plot or 'WCACCP' analysis, for short. Critically acclaimed movies (Christopher Nolan's movies) and television series (breaking bad) have an unparralled depth in them that other modern movies or TV series simply fail to match, baring a few exceptions like Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather Trilogy (1972-1990), Brian de Palma's Scarface (1983), all of Martin Scorsese's movies, Stanley Kubrick's movies such as 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), The Shining (1980) and Dr. Strangelove (1964), Orson Welles's Citizen Kane (1941) and the 'master of suspense' Alfred Hitchcock's movies such as Psycho (1960) and Vertigo (1958) to name a few. The aim of this paper is to formulate a link between the biases of the audience as well the struggle of the directors and the writers in producing a work of art, being cinema. The audience's reaction to a particular genre of movies and TV series as well as the category of audience that the writers and directors focus on is a key aspect to dwell deep into.

Keywords— Audience psyche, catharsis, character arc, cinematic medium, plot, writing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Movies and TV series are the crux of cultural heritage of a particular country and its people. We as people establish this connection with the effect that the visual medium of movies and TV series has on our psyche. That is why human beings believe that cinematic mediums are the best representation of their culture and what society represents as a whole. Thus it is important to analyse the effects that such cinematic mediums (Movies and TV series) have on us. The audience's psyche is crucial to the analysis of whether a particular

cinematic work is a 'good masterpiece' of a film or a bad one. When considering what constitutes as being a 'classic' movie, we can look at five cogs that make up a movie or TV series being writing, character arc, cathartic experience of the protagonist/antagonist, the cast's performance and the plot (or 'WCACCP' analysis for short). Only with all these five cogs turning properly can a particular cinematic work be considered as a 'classic' over a regular commercialized cinematic work. The 'WCACCP' in the critically acclaimed TV series drama AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) is so

deeply engrained in the series that audiences still have a profound effect when they view it till this day or after multiple viewings. However, TV series such as NBC's sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004) pander to the common denominator and has no real depth of meaning or cinematic flavour underneath the comedic timing of the dialogues and the quirkiness of the beloved six characters. We can see a glaring difference in the two TV series and that is the basis of this research paper. When we look at cinematic motion pictures that fall under the 'classic' umbrella and adhere to the 'WCACCP' cogs of perfection, we will be taking a look at Christopher Nolan's Sci-Fi/Thriller *Inception* (2010), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy* (1972-1990), all of Martin Scorsese's movies (mainly *Goodfellas* (1990) and *The Departed* (2006)) and the 'Master of Suspense' himself Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). These cinematic works are considered by the general audience as well as the film critics to be the 'classics' and they live up to their reputation. It is not to say that these cinematic works are devoid of any imperfections but the idea being that they are miniscule compared to their depth as a cinematic art form. On the other spectrum we have cinematic works such as Michael Bay's *Transformers* series (2007-2017) and *Pearl Harbour* (2001) or *The Fast and the Furious* series (2001-) which not only have been less appreciated by the critics but also panders only to the teenage/adolescence audiences with their quirky one liners and fast paced explosive set pieces and CGI based action with their big budget productions all give us an illusion of a 'classic' movie but missing the key aspect in the 'WCACCP' traits that a movie is required to have.

II. ANALYSIS ON CINEMATIC WORKS

1.1 Fictional Crime Classics vs Realistic Crime Classics

In order for us to fully understand what it is that develops in an audience's mind and what constitutes their psyche when watching a cinematic work of either a movie or a TV series, we must first take a look at the various cinematic works and how they present their thematic, narrative and philosophical ideas through their movies and TV series. First let us take a look at the classic era of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy* (1972-1990) of how it represents a period in filmmaking where the performances of the actors were empathised over the actual story or plotline. The representation of Vito Corleone as the benevolent mafia crime lord who values honour and family over all else and

always looks to help the little guy. This movie is in stark contrast to Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) where it represents the violent psychopathic nature of the Cosa Nostra or the Sicilian Mafia and how they operated on a day to day basis with facts from real life events. We can compare both these films as being the prime examples of what the audience might undergo when they watch these two movies, where one movie preaches about honour, respect and family and the other movie gives a clear and unedited picture of reality that is the crime world and the harsh reality of people who are involved in the crime families of the Cosa Nostra.

1.2 Crime Drama vs Casual Sitcom

On the other end, we have the critically acclaimed TV series AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) that deals with the concepts of freedom, neoliberalism, crime, greed and the ideas of what it is like when the capitalistic nature of the economy offers a very corporate approach to crime (shown in characters like Gus Fring) and how a man faced with extreme odds and being dealt a very bad hand in life, deals with it choosing to go the easy way of getting recognized and building an empire and a name for himself rather than forgetting about the moral and ethical dilemma that is crime and drugs. On the other spectrum we have NBC's *Friends* (1994-2004) which is a sitcom that is intended to evoke the humorous emotions of people and represent the modern and regular life of people that live in New York and trying to make a living while facing normal everyday problems. It is safe to say that they do not adhere to any major philosophical ideals or deal with any intellectual concepts and is just there to get a laugh and joy out of the audience with their quirky one liners and their dialogue delivery with some slapstick humour thrown in the mix.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first article *Hollywood, The American Image And The Global Film Industry* by Andrew Alibbi talks about the Hollywood industry and how it reflects the 'American' sense as a whole to the Global film industry. The second article *American cinema's transitional era. Audiences, institutions, practices* by Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp talks about the transitional era of American cinema and how it has evolved or adapted itself over the years. The third article *Disappearing in Plain Sight: The Magic Trick and the Missed Event* by R. Joseph talks about the idea of infusing illusion in movies and how the visual art evokes the minds of the audiences. The fourth article *Time, Ethics, and the Films*

of Christopher Nolan by Tom Brislin emphasizes on the idea of time and ethics and how they play a vital role in the films of Christopher Nolan. The fifth article *"An Aesthetics of Astonishment" from Storytelling: Self-reflexive Tendencies of Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* by Radomir D. Kokeš emphasizes on the fact that the spectacle element that appear in movies is a trick asserted by the narration and the style of the classical filmmaking. The sixth article *The Monster in the Labyrinth - Finding Your Way In and Out of Inception* by L. Jensby gives us a sense of the labyrinth nature of both the plot as well as the cathartic experience we have when watching Christopher Nolan's Sci-Fi/Thriller *Inception* (2010). The seventh article *Cinematic Philosophy* by R. McGregor deals with the relationship between films and philosophy and they affect the audience, in particular reference to Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000). The eighth article *Crime and Punishment: Greed, Pride and Guilt in 'Breaking Bad'* by Alberto Nahum García Martínez and Pablo Echart talk about the motivations and reasoning behind the character of Walter White's actions throughout the series. The ninth article *Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence, and Greed in Breaking Bad* by Douglas Rasmussen uses the methods of Intertextuality to analyze the nuances and the concepts of Neoliberalism and medical debt in the modern society of the TV series *Breaking Bad (2008-2013)* . The tenth article *Simone de Beauvoir meets Walter White: Breaking Bad as Authentic Literature* by Kelly Beck uses the idea of Simone De Beauvoir of freedom and the philosophy in literature, the relationship between contemporary literature and how the TV series of *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) can be read as an authentic literature.

IV.   CONCLUSION

This research paper has attempted to bridge the gap between the what is considered to be a cinematic 'classic' work in terms of both movies as well as TV series and the not so good movies that just favour one set of audience or appeal to the lowest common denominator. However, this paper is not definitive in assessing the audience's bias as there is limited sample size and the analysis of the various cinematic works were only limited to how they were written, directed and presented to the audience in the silver screen and not what was intended and perceived by the audience at a particular point in time. From the limited scope of the research paper, we can come to a conclusion that the 'WCACCP' method of approaching a said cinematic work, whether it is a movie or

a TV series there will be a certain amount of evidence that we can draw from it to ascertain whether or not a particular cinematic work is considered a 'classic' or not and if that is the case how well do the audience respond to it in the initial stages of the movie or TV series' release. Thus it is important for us to understand the necessary attributes a cinematic work (movies and TV series) needs to have in order to be considered among the greats and not to be so overpowering that it cannot be understood by the average moviegoer and only cater to the intellectually elite and among the academicians or the film critics.

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