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Heroes and Antiheroes in American Film Discourse and Narrative

The HERO and ANTIHERO concepts can be implemented in various discourses. Among them, American film discourse is of special interest due to the global cultural effect of the American film industry (Ritzer & Stillman 2003: 37).

Film discourse is distinguished by a combined use of different semiotic resources that, if applied efficiently, form a meaningful and coherent narrative (Wildfeuer 2014: 21, 167). Its multimodality has an effect on the choice of linguistic means through which concepts are implemented in film discourse. Specifically, the HERO and ANTIHERO concepts take the form of artistic characters (of fiction) that can be viewed as fundamental elements in story development (Abbott 2008: 130). This study analyses verbal representations of the HERO and ANTIHERO concepts in feature films representing what is called the American monomyth, a narrative pattern rooted in Campbell's (2008) theory. This pattern is essentially an archetypal plot formula that reveals the evolution of the hero with a special emphasis on the idea of redemption rather than initiation (Lawrence & Jewett 2002: 5-6). A corresponding plot formula can be worked out for the antihero.

The poetics of film narrative can be regarded from a mental perspective. For this purpose, this study utilises the cognitive semiotic approach that links "semiotic relations established internally, between semantic contents by purely mental connectors, and those established externally, between expressed signs, or between signs and acts they command" (Brandt 2003: 29). From this standpoint, films are designed to cue spectators to perform certain operations facilitating their comprehension of the story (Bordwell 2008: 93). Bordwell's narration model presupposes that film representations are processed perceptually and then elaborated on the basis of schemas that are grounded in real-world knowledge (ibid.). This study suggests that linguistic means used for characterisation of heroes and antiheroes can be viewed as cues (expressed signs) helping spectators realise individual characteristics related to the corresponding concepts (their semantic contents). Different features of the characters are brought into focus at varying points of the story development. This means that the salience of individual characteristics of the HERO and ANTIHERO concepts revealed through these characters varies as the story unfolds. This way, narrative in film discourse can be considered as an essential characterisation tool through which various conceptual characteristics are activated.

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