11 Visual Storytelling

Potential speculations surrounding visual storytelling are numerous. One could indulge in a semiotic study of the signs and motifs on screen and assess their ideological function; or undertake an in-depth interrogation of a drama's use of mise-en-scène and draw alternative readings of meaning from various cultural and societal perspectives. Although these theories may prove useful for the screenwriter, enabling them to locate their art within a theoretical framework, we would like to focus on critical notions of visual storytelling linked directly to screenwriting practice. Debating notions which are deemed 'academic' are necessary in this section, but only when specifically connected with processes and reflections upon the art of writing.

Visual pleasure

This book speaks considerably about the notion of narrative pleasure. Stories are plotted in ways which appeal to audience emotions and expectations, possessing within them paradigms, sequences, turning points and narrative triggers which combine to form a holistic, pleasurable experience. The inference is that screenwriting assumes a commercial agenda, making the most of dramatic tools in order to appeal to the biggest audience. Visually speaking, we can develop a similar understanding. If the world is becoming more visually sophisticated and more eager to consume 'the look,' then screenwriting is perhaps one of the major contributing factors to this. Unlike classical dramas which would contain long dialogue-driven scenes, film and increasingly television today advances at breakneck speed with few scenes lasting more than two minutes, and most lasting less than one. The audience has become a visual expert, and more than this, hungry for visual pleasure over language. Jumping out of a burning aeroplane or skiing over the edge of a cliff is no longer seen as innovative, awe-inspiring action; it is the norm. Film-makers today have the burden of constantly trying to find the next big look, and screenwriters have to understand this shift and, if aiming for commercial success, incorporate it into their work.

That said, the sensory 'ride' that visual pleasure offers is highly alluring. Though visual spectacle is often the privileged playground of high budget Hollywood, it is possible to work with the concept of the sensory ride in terms of the emotional arc, and recently many films opt for smaller palettes, creating depth of drama rather than visual spectacle. Thus it is about discovering the right tone for a story, and understanding what makes a production possible (see Chapter 13).

Visual spectacle

Geoff King suggests that film (and television) spectacle 'offers a range of pleasures associated with the enjoyment of 'larger than life' representations, more luminous or intense than daily reality' (2000: 4). In essence, audiences sit in front of a screen and expect to see a step beyond reality; bigger and better than something they have experienced themselves. Action films have traditionally been associated with visual excess, sight and spectacle taking precedence over story and emotion. This is still often the case with action adventure films still pushing for the 'next best look,' but visual spectacle and sophistication is no longer tied solely to the visual elements of the screen (location, costume, movement). As Chapter 10 has shown, screenwriters are increasingly aware of alternative, non-linear methods of storytelling which in many cases encapsulate the idea of the visual spectacle. Parallel stories, for example, are based upon the assumption that the audience will possess the sophistication to make links between the interwoven narratives presented, and often the way these narratives are spliced together creates a heightened visual experience. In *The Hours*, the opening sequence which frames the three stories is a visual spectacle in itself, not like a *James Bond* movie with giant vistas infiltrated with chases, fights and explosions, but a spectacle created by the pace, camera movement and scene transitions which bind the three time frames together. Similarly with *Paris, Je T'aime*, although individually many of the films do not employ spectacular visual sequences (though there are some), collectively the film offers a sense of spectacle in presenting eighteen different worlds with eighteen different directors. Moving from film to film, the audience is invited to participate in a series of visual worlds connected by their very contrasting nature. Collectively, they provided an 'MTV style' experience of short, segmented narratives suitable for modern short attention spans.

Visual spectacle then should, for the screenwriter, be understood as a concept of invoking the audience into the narrative and offering a heightened experience of the eye. This does not solely necessitate the use of big explosions and camera tricks, but can be created by narrative experimentation. In fact, as King asserts, '[s]pectacle is often just as much a core aspect of Hollywood cinema as coherent narrative and should not necessarily be seen as a disruptive intrusion from some place outside' (Ibid.). What this means is that rather than view visual spectacle as a separate entity devised for instant audience gratification, it can be linked to elements of film-making such as narrative structure. For the screenwriter, this creates an awareness of how visual spectacle can be employed within the screenplay with a *function* rather than just for a *fashion*.

King offers an analysis of some of the 'traditional' elements of spectacle employed in *The Last Kiss Goodnight* (Ibid.: 91–4). He discusses how the audience is pulled into the film's scenes, the experimental editing and 3D-style audience perspective creating a heightened sense of reaction and interaction. His subtitle notes how quite literally the film offers 'a series of blows to the consciousness and emotions of the audience.' This is interesting because it suggests that although the spectacular scenes give visual appeal, they also invoke psychological attachment. Spectacle is thus an experience of emotion as well as one of vision, once more highlighting that the screenwriter's concerns with narrative are embodied in a wider, critical understanding of visual storytelling. A more recent trilogy of films serves this argument well: *The Bourne Identity*, *The Bourne Supremacy* and *The Bourne Ultimatum*. Although these films are spectacular in their experimentation with the 'look' and 'feel' of a scene, the camera adopting documentary-style aesthetics and heavy use of chases, fights and explosions, through this they offer a deep understanding of character and narrative journey. Car chases, rooftop fights and plunges from skyscrapers are not simply there to fuel visual expectation; they fulfil emotional experience. The over-arching story of the trilogy is the desperate attempt by protagonist Jason Bourne to find out who he really is and work out why the CIA is trying to kill him. For the audience this is the real substance of the films, the pinnacle of dramatic need and character motivation. Therefore, when the audience is taken on a camera ride of thrills, spills and motion sickness, they are also taken on a ride of desperation and passion. The psychosomatic effects of the visual spectacle are aligned with the narrative of Jason Bourne. The audience is put in his place, chased around the world and forced to make quick, sharp decisions.

The sheer determination of the CIA to kill him, and his own unknowingness about why this is, is depicted by the camera. Therefore, as well as offering an array of visual delight, the films offer a tumultuous journey of a naïve, desperate individual. Even the flashbacks Bourne experiences, reminding him momentarily of his past, are narrative drives as well as (if not more than) visual spectacles. Although they may satisfy an audience's craving for stimulating visual aesthetics, they crucially serve to piece together the narrative drive of the films; memory and a reconciliation of it.

We can therefore argue that visual spectacle can be repositioned for those whose interests lie within screenwriting. Although on the one hand notions of screen spectacle can be argued as excess, not necessarily pertaining to narrative intentions and somewhat disrupting the flow of a plot, conversely it can be argued for a reiteration of narrative, one which makes an attempt to visually represent emotion. These speculations are perhaps vulnerable to those whose concerns are different, visual theoreticians, for example, but when considering screenwriting as a site of knowledge they make absolute sense; the value of such critical insight comes in how this information is applied in practice. For the screenwriter working to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the discipline, an interrogation of visual spectacle can certainly offer alternative, usable possibilities.

Visual consumption

It is not only the look and pleasure of the film that is important for contemporary audiences. To extend the pleasure of the drama, both visually and to some extent narratively, production companies actively seek ways of exploiting the 'brand' of the story and forcing it into other areas of popular culture:

In an age in which the big Hollywood studios have become absorbed into giant conglomerates, the prevalence of spectacle and special effects has been boosted by a growing demand for products that can be further exploited in multimedia forms such as computer games and theme-park rides.

(Ibid.: 2–3)

Thus, the pleasure of a drama goes beyond the traditional screen. If the advent of video, DVD and published screenplays can be called *secondary texts*, then concepts like the computer game, theme park

ride and even everyday products (wallpaper, socks, diary, birthday card) can be termed *hyper texts*. They are visually driven products or services no longer confined within the realms of a screen, but allowing a fantasy of character ('being Jack Sparrow') and re-experiencing of the world ('pirates on boats') to invade everyday life and blur boundaries between fact and fiction, life and drama. In some cases it even becomes unclear which 'text' came first: the film or the book? Did they make the *Pirates of the Caribbean* theme park ride because of the film, or was the film made because of the success of the ride? On the surface these may seem like bizarre questions, but they are a condition of contemporary life. Culture is obsessed with the appeal of the look, with instant recognition of a type, of verisimilitude, so it is perhaps no wonder the look of a film or TV drama is dispersed into everyday culture. Ironically, this places subsequent demands from the audience who, because they have become so used to visual culture and product offered by such texts, now expect more of it to be rearticulated in the original text. For example, if a computer game released after a film allows interactivity and offers new perspectives of character and world, any follow-up film to the original will have to incorporate this. If an audience can gain more visual pleasure out of the game than the new film, it is likely the new film will flop. The new film will have to 'better' the game, adopting perhaps even newer visual techniques, aiming to pull in the audience hungry for more with each text. These speculative debates about visual pleasure are not allied to every audience demographic and to every genre, but are seen as pervasive models. For a screenwriter working on a relevant project, these debates are paramount. Visual pleasure is all around us, and epitomised by film and television. Whether a product of or a producer of the ever-increasing need for visual satisfaction, screenwriting must face up to the challenge.

Advanced visual production techniques and animation

The rise of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) has enabled the screenwriter to enter whole new territories, making scripts more akin to prose fiction in that the imagination can run riot. Screenwriters are no longer tied to naturalism or what is possible in practice. The ultimate expression of this is writing for animation, where the screenwriter can completely abandon the real and any concerns of what may or may not be possible on screen (beyond the costs of animating it).

As screenwriting, the story still has to be expressed mainly in visual terms, but like a novel, it allows the writer's imagination to roam free and create any world they like. This fantasy aspect of cinema has been a surprisingly long standing element and the development of visual (VFX) and special effects (SFX) can be seen as the struggle to make the invisible visible; to allow the audience the pleasure of seeing what normally resides in the imagined. This is a powerful subconscious aspect of cinema-as-spectacle, and screenwriters can be instrumental in shaping these visual experiences, far more so than special effects supervisors, directors and animators, as the writing is where it is imagined.

Since visual effects tend to be expensive, such storytelling often has to veer towards the commercial to recoup the financial outlay. However, it is possible for independent productions to create low-budget CGI, as these techniques are now in the hands of 'bedroom producers', just like DV cameras and editing software. In this way the imagination really is the only limit and screenwriters can begin to embrace the visual possibilities of the digital age; see Chapter 14 for an accompanying exercise.

The sound-image relationship

Although screenwriting is discussed as a predominantly visual medium, some of the most powerful emotive experiences and memorable storytelling moments are enabled through the use of sound. Indeed, sound can be seen as the *unconscious* of cinema, whereby visuals carry surface meaning and content, and music and sound design create the emotional and sensory container through which that content can be mediated. The presence and impact of sound is often invisible to audiences, but nevertheless richly experienced; the invisible thread connecting them to the felt story.

Screenwriters are often told not to include direct references to songs or pieces of music in a script, this being a producer, director and sound supervisor role (soundtracks have huge potential costs and associated marketing issues). What is 'allowed' is if there is one specific piece of music associated with a particular character that plays a central narrative role (such as ABBA songs in *Muriel's Wedding*), and must be included for the story to work. Any more than this is usually seen as a mark of amateur writing. However, screenwriters can embrace sound rather than music as a highly useful tool in writing scene action. Sound creates much of the resonance and atmosphere for a scene, and

though it is difficult to replicate on the page, a skilled writer can suggest evocative sounds at key moments to provide subtle, sophisticated storytelling. Consider the following:

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Katy sits ensconced in the warm café. Outside sirens
wail, and the rain pours down. Footsteps rush past the
window. Katy lifts her coffee and sips slowly.
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In this scene, images and non-dialogue sound combine to create an evocative mood (warmth) and sense of world (safe) that deepens the reader's understanding of the character's internal state (ease), and may also provide rhythm and plot expectation. It is worth considering how a sound fits into the world or moment of the scene: is it intrusive or ignored; familiar or surprising; dramatic or reassuring? Sound is particularly useful in suspense genres, and all types of comedy, where they add not only atmosphere but a sense of rhythm and narrative structure. Sound should be used sparingly in a script, but in the right place can be a valuable asset to tone, world, character and subtext. Sound is a surprisingly relevant discussion within visual storytelling because in the screenwriter's craft, the two are closely connected and non-dialogue sound is expressed through visual scene action.

12 Dialogues and Voic

Working with voiceover

Many screenwriting texts warn against the use of voiceover, for a variety of good reasons. However, it is not voiceover itself that can be damaging, but rather the way it is employed. Novice writers often resort to it because their visual storytelling is not strong enough. Filled with awkward exposition it stops flow and *interrupts the drama*, pulling the audience out of the viewing experience. Though voiceover should be used with caution, it does possess many possibilities if used with purpose and skill. The secret of effective voiceover lies in the *added value* it brings; if it simply repeats what is already on screen or tries to provide factual information, the audience may feel they are being addressed by the writer rather than involved in the character. Writers need to be aware of the voiceover *function*. Who is speaking and what is the audience's relation to this narrative voice; can we trust it? Many Coen Brothers films, such as *The Big Lebowski* and *Blood Simple*, offer introductory voiceovers, often ironic in style, to set tone, character, world and theme. The story is contextualised through stating the theme, also true of *Magnolia*, where the unknown narrator offers audiences a way to interpret the coming events. In this way, introductory voiceovers can offer a thematic perspective to experience the story through an invitation to connect with the world.

As a type of dialogue, voiceover is closely connected to character. The danger when writing voiceover is that the writer uses it to impart fact in their own voice; when voiceover is imbued with character, it is more evocative and gains dramatic value. A deceptively simple example is *Veronique* (winner of the Orange FilmFour Prize for Short Film, 2002), in which a boy gives a tenderly comic account of his first love. One day on his regular bus journey to school, a beautiful girl appears and he falls head over heels in love. During the next few days he waits for her tirelessly, tries to pluck up courage to say hello, experiences bitter disappointment as his plans are thwarted, and ecstatic joy as she sits next to him. Then she mysteriously disappears; he never sees her again.