Teaching Tropes and Clichés in Bullet in the Brain

Christensen, Jørgen Riber

Published in:
Short Film Studies

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.1386/sfs_00019_1

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in:
Short Film Studies, 10, 2, 219-223, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs_00019_1].

Teaching tropes and Clichés in *Bullet in the Brain*

Jørgen Riber Christensen, Aalborg University

Abstract

Based on the narrative mechanisms of the short film, the article addresses its use of clichés and tropes. The focus is on the migration of these tropes from a narrative position to a thematic level – a migration regarded as a metafictional device with the aim of explaining the fate of the main character.

Keywords

clichés

tropes

metafiction

teaching

bank robbers

emotions

In Shot 169 Anders does ‘not remember his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted him with her predictability’. This ennui of predictability runs through the film. Everything has been seen or read before, by Anders and by the audience of the film, and the voice-over states that ‘everything began to remind him of something else’. Classroom teaching with a teacher, problematic in one form or another, abounds in films and media: Netflix’s recent *The Kominsky Method* (Lorre, 2018) with a disillusioned acting coach, *Kindergarten Cop* (Reitman, 1990) with Arnold Schwarzenegger,

the Harry Potter films with Professor Snape, *Dead Poets Society* (Weir 1989), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Neame, 1969), *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) and the web wiki https://tvtropes.org/ can offer a plethora of examples. The same applies to the scene of a bank robbery: *Point Break* (Bigelow, 1991), *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (McTiernan, 1995), *Stander* (Hughes, 2003), *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967), *Heat* (Mann, 1995), *The Town* (Affleck, 2010) and obviously *The Bank Job* (Donaldson, 2008). Lines spoken in the robbery in *Bullet in the Brain* come right out of Mafia movies, such as *Donnie Brasco* (Newell, 1997) and the Godfather films: 'Fuck with me again, you're history. *Capiche?*' (Shot 134), and Anders explicitly compares the bank robbery situation with the two armed intruders in Hemingway's 'The Killers' ([1927] 1997). He also quotes Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 'Thou speakest wiser than thou art aware of' ([1623] 2004: II, 4) when addressing one of the robbers (Shot 116). The robber has just threatened Anders by saying 'You think I'm playing games here, because I'm not playing games'. This wisdom of the robber consists in his intertextual ability to quote a much used action movie badass line, which for instance was parodied ad infinitum in the sitcom series *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005–06), and the robber, unaware, carries on quoting Travis from *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976): 'What the hell you lookin' at? […] You were looking at me'. This intertextual ability is the one praised by Eco, when he writes about the interrelationship between texts, which he suspects are not created by their authors. 'Works are created by works, texts are created by texts' ([1967] 1986: 199). A text is not autonomous, but is made up of a mosaic of quotations. They may come from a specific source, or they may be of so general a nature that they become stereotypical clichés or tropes. It is Anders' curse that he seems to be able to recognize them all.

Although he would have abhorred the phrase, 'Passed before his eyes' (Shot 162), the narrative mechanism implied in it is what Anders is subjected to in the final part of the film. Here again, we must deal with a literary reference. Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'

([1890] 2000) has the same narrative mechanism, that the final part of the short story is a dying man's thoughts constituting the action.

Clichés and tropes

Anders' contempt for the lack of originality and his disgust with recurring clichés are not exceptional. Abrams (1971: 25) considers clichés as 'hackneyed and cloying' and Cuddon (2014: 129) characterizes a cliché as 'A trite, over-used expression which is lifeless'. Drabble's (1987: 206) definition is also disparaging; she writes that the cliché 'by constant use has become hackneyed and has lost its sharp edge'. Eco, on the other hand, is not so categorical in his judgement: 'Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us.' (1994: 264). Amossy and Lyons (1982) disregard the lack of originality in the composition, and focus on reception or the act of reading in which the recognizability of clichés helps the reader in his or her emotional and intellectual identification with the text and its intertextual mechanisms. The cliché, they point out, balances in a 'dichotomy between Creation and Imitation, Originality and Banality, the Individual and the Collective', and it has classical roots: 'The sense that clichés are signs of the stereotypical stems from a historically dated attitude. Indeed, the concept of the cliché first arose in the modern era – in the nineteenth century. Classical rhetoric […] was unaware of the concept, and with good reason. Clichés such as 'brave as a lion', 'gentle as a lamb' and 'white as snow' were considered canonical examples of tropes.' (Amossy and Lyons 1982: 35) The term 'cliché', with its largely negative connotations, now seems to have been gradually supplanted by the more neutral term 'trope', which since classical times has gained the additional meaning of 'A significant or recurrent theme, esp. in a literary or cultural context; a motif' (Simpson and Weiner 2014).

A 100 clichés move us

If Anders is so disgusted with the accumulation of tropes and clichés in his world that he ends up dead with a bullet in his brain, why does the film function as a unified narrative that moves the audience?

During class, Anders himself may give the answer when he quotes from one of the narratological classics, E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* ([1927] 1963: 93). '"The king died and then the queen died,' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief", is a plot'. Or in Anders' words 'died of a broken heart' (Shot 55), and he continues 'You must layer that broken heart. So the fabric of what you tell cannot exist without it'. This appeal to empathy, emotions and pathos is reflected in the structure of the film. Its scenes fall into two groups. There are the real scenes largely negative with the busy crowded street, the classroom, the locked door of the bank and inside the bank with cross-cutting between them. There are also the memory scenes, including what Anders' did not remember, but, nevertheless, shown to the audience, with an erotic wood scene with Sherry, Anders' first lover, his wife smoking tranquilly in her bed, his daughter in her room, Anders seeing a woman jumping to her death from a building and finally the long scene with the boys playing baseball. The voice-over calls this sequence a 'comet tail of memory and hope, and talent and love' (Shots 227–32). All these scenes are charged with emotions, and paint a portrait of Anders' life full of emotions until he became a disillusioned teacher whose life consisted of tropes, or put another way, until Anders lived his life intertextually. He cannot help regarding life as a text made up by a whole catalogue of other texts in which he is a mere character, so at the start of the bank robbery he can only comment on it in a detached and ironical manner: 'Great script, eh?' (Shot 86). His evaluation of the possibly lethal robbery is as dismissive and depressingly negative as he was himself in his class, when he evaluated his students' papers: 'It's not so much that what you've

written is contemptibly bad. That's almost a given. What surprises me […] is that you are able to find your way here every week […] without assistance' (Shots 18–21). However, he does not spare himself either: 'I'm fairly certain I cannot teach you anything' (Shot 40). His life and his calling as a teacher consist of intertextual clichés, which he knows and recognizes far too well, and he reacts to this with contempt.

In the universe of the film, Anders' role is double. He is a character in the film script he sees as his life, but he is also the professional critic of the script. Consequently, the narrative style is not only intertextual with its many tropes, it is also metafictional, and very much so. Currie describes metafiction as liminal in the sense that it straddles 'extratextual references to real life and intertextual reference to other literature' and this 'signifies the artificiality of the fictional world while simultaneously offering realistic referential possibilities' (1995: 3–5). Anders lives liminally in his real life with its extratextual references to teaching and going to the bank, but simultaneously he combines these with all the intertextual tropes containing references to both films and literature. Currie continues that this metafictional mode 'places it on the boundary between fiction and criticism'. Anders is also a professional critic of the narration of his own life, as for instance when he quotes Forster. Both in class and in the bank, he cannot help teaching; he teaches the very tropes that are his undoing.

The tropes constitute the story of the film, and as in 'The king died and then the queen died', they follow one another. However, the tropes migrate from this narrative position to a thematic level, when they are encapsulated by the emotional force of the film. As 'the queen died of grief', so Anders dies of the ennui and meaninglessness of his life as a teacher, but the film teaches its audience that there is more to life than a textual procession of clichés and tropes.

References

Abrams, M. H. (1951), *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.

Affleck, Ben (2010), *The Town*, USA: Legendary Pictures.

Amossy, R. and Lyons, T. (1982), 'The cliché in the reading process', *SubStance*, 35:11&12, pp. 34–45.

Bierce, A. ([1890] 2000), 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge', in T. Quirk (ed.), *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians: And Other Stories* Tom Quirk, ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 11-19.

Bigelow, Kathryn (1991), *Point Break*, USA: Largo Entertainment.

Cuddon, J. A. (2014), *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Currie, M. (1995), *Metafiction*, Longman: London.

Donaldson, Roger (2008), *The Bank Job*, UK: Lionsgate.

Drabble, M. (1987), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eco, U. ([1967] 1986), *Travels in Hyperreality*, London: Pan Books.

____ (1994), 'Casablanca, or, the clichés are having a ball', in S. Maasik and J. Solomon (eds.), *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, Boston: Bedford Books, pp. 260- 264.

Everybody Hates Chris (2005–06, USA: CR Enterprises Inc., 3 Arts Entertainment and Paramount Network Television).

Forster, E. M. ([1927] 1963), *Aspects of the Novel*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Hemingway, E. ([1927] 1997), 'The Killers', in *Men without Women*, New York: Scribner, pp. 56-67.

Hughes, Bronwen (2003), *Stander*, South Africa: Grosvenor Park Productions and Seven Arts Pictures.

Hughes, John (1985), *The Breakfast Club*, USA: A&M Films and Channel Productions.

Lorre, Chuck (2018), *The Kominsky Method*, USA: Netflix.

Mann, Michael (1995), *Heat*, USA: Regency Enterprises.

McTiernan, John (1995), *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, USA: Cinergi Pictures.

Neame, Ronald (1969), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, UK: 20th Century Fox Productions.

Newell, Mike (1997), *Donnie Brasco*, USA: Mandalay Entertainment and Baltimore Pictures.

Penn, Arthur (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde*, USA: Warner Brothers, Seven Arts and Tatira-Hiller Productions.

Reitman, Ivan (1990), *Kindergarten Cop*, USA: Imagine Entertainment.

Scorsese, Martin (1976), *Taxi Driver*, USA: Bill, Phillips Productions, Italo and Judeo Productions.

Simpson, J. and E. Weiner (eds.), (2012), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shakespeare, W. ([1623] 2004), *As You Like It*, London: Methuen.

Weir, Peter (1998), *Dead Poet's Society*, USA: Touchstone Pictures.

Contributor details

Jørgen Riber Christensen is associate professor at the Institute of Communication, Aalborg University. He teaches film production and film narratology, and his research is in the fields of media, marketing, museology and literature.

E-mail: riber@hum.aau.dk

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0782-1421