

DIGITAL STORYTELLING: THE NARRATIVE POWER OF VISUAL EFFECTS IN FILM

SHILO T MCCLEAN

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Technology is shaping how we tell stories in the digital age. As digitally produced effects become more and more prevalent in Hollywood films, filmmakers need to re-examine how stories are crafted and how the balance of style and substance is shifting. In her book, *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects*, Shilo T McClean presents a thoughtful argument for the co-existence of plot and visual effects in contemporary storytelling, specifically in filmmaking. More than that, she makes a case for a new kind of cinema, in which visual effects are integral to presenting narrative.

Much of *Digital Storytelling* focuses on Hollywood film production since the advent of computer generated (CG) effects.

McClean proposes that filmmakers can present compelling stories with scripts dependent on visual effects, and that the conventional literary arc of *beginning, rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion* can survive the onslaught of digital wizardry. The author is emphatic in her assertion that digital effects are becoming an important component of story development in contemporary film. She urges filmmakers not to 'underestimate the scope and power of digital effects', and to serve a narrative that is different and perhaps more interesting than the classic Hollywood 'cause and effect structure', with its neatly resolved ending.

The author maintains that bringing characters to life in a production environment with *wow factor* makes sense and serves story. This *wow factor*, generated by new technologies, creates moments of 'self-reflexive spectacle', and, according to McClean, is partly responsible for the reinvention of narrative structure. To emphasise this point, McClean cites Roger Warren Beebe, author of *After Arnold:*

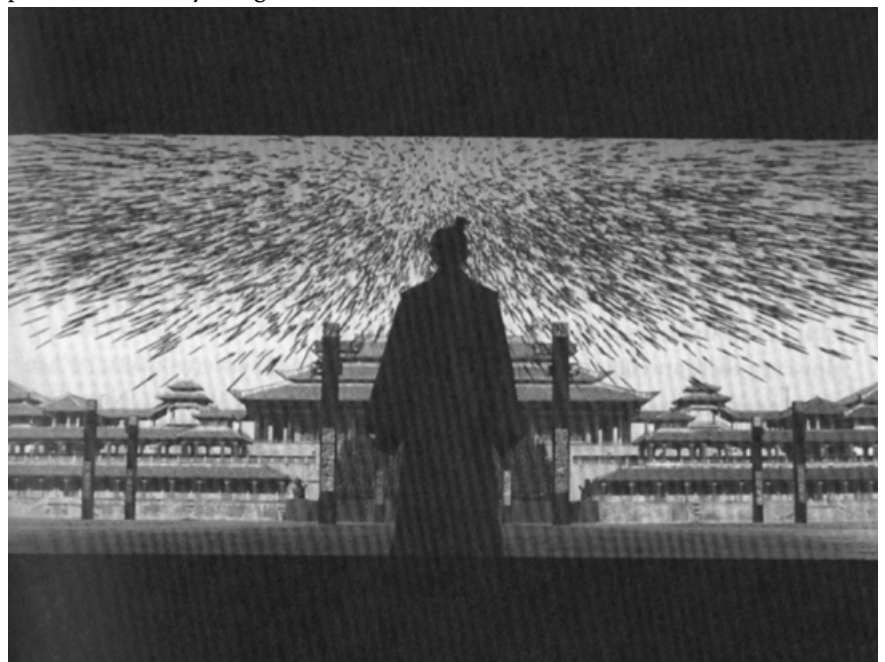


Narratives of the Posthuman Cinema, who writes that 'special effects offer a new kind of narrative – one that asks the audience to observe the pacing and the images as narrative'.

McClean is onto something here. It is inevitable that narrative structure will evolve, as new media provide unique platforms for storytelling. The four-inch

Background plate for the feature film *Hero*, directed by Zhang Yimou. Visual Effects by Animal Logic. Images courtesy of Animal Logic. © 2003 Elite Group Enterprises Inc. From *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film* by Shilo T McClean.

Composite of background plate and CG arrows for the feature film *Hero* directed by Zhang Yimou. Visual Effects by Animal Logic. Images courtesy of Animal Logic. © 2003 Elite Group Enterprises Inc. From *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film* by Shilo T McClean.



by three-inch screen of a handheld video playing device, for example, does not and cannot deliver the visual impact of a 40-foot by 23-foot theatre screen. Therefore, as more original content is created for the handheld screen – instead of repurposing and resizing content from the big screen to fit the handheld screen – visual effects become necessary to convey emotion, provide visual continuity, and ultimately keep the audience involved in the story.

Of special interest are the many examples of films – commercial, independent, old and new – referred to in the text. With the large number the films mentioned, and their relationship to the subject matter articulated with clarity, it is likely that the reader will appreciate the impact visual effects have, have had, and will continue to have on film – if for no other reason than that the reader will probably have experienced one of these effects-driven films as an audience member. One particular example that will resonate with many readers is *Star Wars*. Under the direction of George Lucas, this film broke ground with its use of visual effects, but it also had a compelling plot that captured the attention of audiences worldwide. About this film, its integration of visual effects and story, and the impact this integration of effects has had on film production, McClean writes: ‘Lucas’ dedication to the craft and its ability to use effects in projects that struck a chord on a narrative level thus changed the filmmaking landscape’. Whether you are a fan of *Star Wars* or not, it is likely you will agree that it set a trend for many subsequent films.

A powerful story can be supported, and enhanced, by powerful visuals. *Digital Storytelling* makes this case with cogence. As with *Star Wars*, the author provides additional examples of films that are made meaningful, in terms of character development and plot intricacies, when visual effects dominate. Even when films are conceived as ‘blockbusters’, with the objective of making lots of money, digital effects can add cachet, even visual identity, that, when combined with a strong story, make a film unique.

The book is a call to screenwriters and filmmakers, present and future, to use digital technologies to add depth to their stories. Digital effects are not a substitute for story, nor do they trump literary integrity. Nonetheless, a story written for the screen can be told more effectively when presented with visual flair, or so the reader of *Digital Storytelling* will probably surmise.

Written as a doctoral thesis, *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects* is dense with references and academic in style. For that reason, it would be a good read for those studying screenwriting or filmmaking in the digital age. In addition to this, it is a compelling book, written with thoughtfulness and supported with research, on a topic that is current and relevant to many.

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The latest four books in the now extensive ‘Movie Icon’ series from Taschen celebrates the iconography of those legendary actors/performers of the Hollywood dream factory, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Mae West, and Liz Taylor. ‘Movie Icons’ are 192-page visual biographies of the stars, high quality, flexi-cover photo books with concise introductory essays by leading film writers, and approximately 150 mono/colour images selected by series editor Paul Duncan, including ‘previously unpublished photos showing the stars as they really are’. Each book includes a chronology, filmography and bibliography, with apposite quotes from the movies and from life. They are also beautifully designed and printed. This approach, having lots of pictures with just a little text, in some ways defines both

their strength and weakness. But what makes them of genuine interest (and worth every penny of the £5.99 cover price) is the sheer diversity and quality of the images found between their covers; portraits, posters, lobby cards and rare film stills. As a series, they constitute a memorable and highly entertaining visual record of the entire, and historically diverse, period of classical Hollywood cinema – from its inception around 1915, marking the close of the Belle Epoque, and witnessed by the early career of Mae West, to the late 1960s, the age of the Apollo Moon-landings and Vietnam War – when Sinatra’s, Taylor’s and Presley’s careers were on the wane.

The classical Hollywood style was fundamentally built on the principal of continuity editing or ‘invisible style’, where the camera and sound recording rarely called attention to themselves, as they might in a modernist or postmodernist work. This way of working was to become known as the Hollywood studio and star system, which had the unfortunate effect of standardising the way films in Hollywood were produced. Film workers, from the directors down, became merely the salaried journeymen of particular studios, which all too often resulted in a monotonous, though highly recognisable, uniformity of style: directors were encouraged to think of themselves as employees rather than artists, leaving little room for *auteurs* to flourish, though some exceptional mavericks, such as Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, managed to buck this trend. Hollywood had competition, however, from the emergent, ubiquitous medium of television and from the growing popularity of *auteurism*, initially from France, where brilliant, stylish young directors such as Jean Luc Goddard began to produce cheap, visually striking and idiosyncratic movies, filming with newly invented hand-held cameras on the streets of Paris. The old, moribund, Hollywood studio system began to look increasingly dated and inflexible in the light of these exciting new developments, and they were to inaugurate the end of 50 years of rule of Hollywood classicism.

The weakness of the Taschen books is that with only brief, highly summary biographical introductions, they can offer no theoretical framework within which a reader can place this particular aspect of film’s history, limiting them somewhat to a (presumably intended) popular readership.