

EMBODIED VISIONS

Evolution, Emotion, Culture and Film

By Torben Grodal

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Review by Jule Selbo

“... to show how inspiration from the natural sciences is able to fertilize the study of culture and film studies.”

Torben Grodal

Those interested in the analysis of the screenwriting process have an opportunity in reading Torben Grodal's *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture and Film* (2009) to examine the craft of screenwriting in an accessible and innovative fashion - through a science-based examination of the audience's response to story, genre and thematic choices.

Grodal's area is film analysis and although the book is not specifically aimed at the screenwriter - his target, in fact, seems very wide - filmmakers, creators of video games, film and video game analysts, as well as cognitive theorists and perhaps even anthropologists - Grodal's approach is applicable to those in the screenwriting field as a support to more traditional examinations of film story. This latest work expands on Grodal's *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (1997), a book that explores recent developments in neuroscience and cognitive science in relation to narrative theory and film theory. The breakdown of his PECMA model (perception, emotion, cognition and motor action experienced in the processing of information through the phenomena of film) strives to explore the audience's preferences in genre and story by keeping in mind accepted theories of evolution - not just physical but mental (p.5). Grodal's view is that audience responses may be predicted by understanding predilections "embedded in our cognitive DNA". Using research in a

variety of sciences, Grodal makes his case: Each person is not self-created, there is a DNA heritage specific to the evolution of physicality as well as to emotions and even a deeply embedded heritage of thought. This theory, though seemingly out of the normal purvey of the screenwriter, may serve as fertile territory because of its focus on the understanding of the audience – which, in most cases, is of supreme importance to the screenwriter and/or filmmaker (be it the producer deciding whether or not to slate the screenplay for production or the audience in the movie theatre viewing the produced film).

Grodal's references are diverse and include cognitive scientists, philosophers, zoologists, biologists, filmmakers as well as film academics. In Part I, Grodal presents the theory that genres and themes, when in line with story elements based on deeply rooted human conditions, hold a special resonance with the audience and that “emotional dispositions to which they appeal are (cross-culturally) innate.” (p.27) For example, Grodal asserts that the popularity of the hunter-versus-hunted scenario in action, crime and horror genres can be traced to early man's need to battle beastly predators as well as human enemies for survival. He supports the theory that the “fight or flight” impulse is not being learned in the real time of one human lifetime, but it is an impulse embedded in human nature due to oft-repeated experiences of previous generations. Thus, he points out, stories utilizing plots in this domain quickly create empathetic understanding with an audience. (7) Grodal uses research in brain chemistry to examine why film stories exploring physical and emotional security appeal to children, pointing out that attachment “is linked to two estrogen derivatives, one that influences the mother/child bonding and one that influences male parenting behavior.” (p.27)

Chapter Three, “Love and Desire in the Cinema”, examines the evolutionary reasons for emotions such as love - a dominant or supporting element in many screenplays and the human need for it, whether it be for survival, for procreation, for status, or for self-esteem – and how this need for love forces action and conflict. Grodal pits the female's desire for bonding - and her use of negotiation to achieve that end - against the male's acceptance of anonymous (or at least non-bonding) sexual relations, thus pointing out the immediate discord that fuels much of the romance genre. Grodal cites Linda Williams' work on pornography through an assessment of Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, focusing on the conflict caused by the male character's attraction to “non-closed” relations and the female's desire for relations offering closure. Grodal also

considers the make up of the femme fatale, the aberrant female comfortable with the predominantly male desire of “non-closed” relationships - a woman who “uses sexuality to achieve non-sexual ends” (p.73). Grodal’s sources, some pointing to research in human biology and others to anthropological insights have relevance to the screenwriter’s task of constructing strong and relatable characters.

In subsequent chapters, Grodal touches on other genres such as melodrama, supernatural/fantasy and horror, citing biological and psychological predispositions of the audience that contribute to each genres’ popularity with particular film-goers. A screenwriter may ask for a deeper exploration into each film genre from Grodal, but as most creative souls crave inspiration rather than instruction, the depth certainly provokes stimulation and challenge.

In Part II, “Narrative, Visual Aestheticism, Brain and the PECMA Flow” Grodal provides a chart and explanation of his PECMA model - a flow system which is “...important for understanding the relation between the innate and the culturally acquired aspects” of the film experience. (p.152) He makes the distinctions between audience responses in the experiencing of literature, film and drama as well as video games. “Video games represent a new form of storytelling that integrates high-order goals with low-level muscle-and-attention-training stories in a medium that allows for the mass production of such experiences.” (p.172) Grodal differentiates between realist fiction (films with a beginning, middle and end that embrace final and emotional consequences for its characters) and the “playful” cognition of video games, playful because of their sense of never-ending and often repetitive narratives. Grodal cites a few experiments of open-ended storytelling in feature films but sees that the “options” remain the various visions of the filmmaker – not the spectator or – as in video games – the player.

Chapter Seven, “Stories for Eyes, Ears and Muscles” advises on the basic need for the writer/filmmaker to identify and focus on the character’s “high-order” goals due to the audience’s innate desire to navigate through a story in a mostly logical and understandable way; a desire that holds true in film narrative as well as storytelling in video games (p.160). Grodal references films such as *Paris, Texas* (adapted by Sam Shepard, directed by Wim Wenders) *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch), films written by

Andrei Tarkovsky and others whose screenplays do not follow the logical “high order goals” template and create a “cognitive dissonance”, thus appealing to a unique (and smaller) segment of the film-going audience. In Chapter Nine, “Art Film, The Transient Body and the Permanent Soul”, Grodal examines differences in films aimed at the high art audience and films aimed at the mass audience: High art films are more comfortable in transient storytelling while mass audience films, in most cases, feature subjective storytelling and a permanent conclusion. (p.205) Grodal is not making a value judgment - he simply makes the distinction (one that seems fairly obvious but may instigate creative sparks in the screenwriter tackling a story dilemma) between an audience willing and wired to “connect the dots” and the audience more comfortable in a passive role.

There seems to be a plethora of thoughts, theories and possibilities in Grodal's dense work - however, the screenwriter culling through its pages may find inspiration (or sense of confirmation or even interesting points of argument) within his evolutionary theory of film story. Those creatives open to the study of the human condition as well as human conditioning will find much to peruse regarding the appeal of certain genres and stories to an audience interested in film and related media.

TORBEN GRODAL is Professor of Film and Media at the University of Copenhagen. He is author of *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*. He has published books and articles on cultural history, film theory and film analysis, aesthetic theory, and video games combining humanistic methods with brain science.

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