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FILM307: The Language of Hollywood

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<p style="text-align:center">What Are We Doing?</p>

Hollywood wants to make 3D permanent, and Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* is testament that

3D isn't nearly there. *Gravity* could not be the same film without 3D, but this can be viewed both

positively and negatively. On the positive side, *Gravity* achieves powerful cinematographic

moments that would be either diminished or impossible in 2D. On the negative side, *Gravity*

refuses to let 3D stay subtle. For every inconspicuous and emotionally impactful use of 3D, there

is a showy and blaring use of 3D. The result is a film that verges on both finesse and gimmickry

in which the audience constantly oscillates between absorption, where a viewer feels subjectively

intimate *with* the characters, and astonishment, where a viewer feels objectively amazed *at* the

characters. *Gravity* demonstrates how 3D effectively contributes to the audience's experience of

the film, but also how 3D isn't mature enough to fade into the background, while other aesthetic

technologies such as sound have the right to go unnoticed in most films.

Gravity does not try to reinvent 3D and somehow magically make the technology

transparent and easy. Instead, the film focuses on taking techniques found in previous 3D films

and reusing proven methods to make the most accessible and "natural" 3D film to date. By

"natural," I mean immersive through absorption, wherein 3D fades to the background whilst

remaining equally as entertaining as, perhaps, invasive and nausea-inducing protrusion. *Gravity*

uses 3D to craft a story that is accentuated by a spectacular experience but not distracted by it,

because the intention is to convey an emotional experience to the audience. The film's scenes are

difficult to differentiate, as the film utilizes long takes and one primary setting (space), but the second shot is a good example of 3D's role within the film.

Similar to most artistically successful 3D films, *Gravity* uses 3D to accentuate emotional beats rather than astound the audience with gimmicky visuals. In the second shot, the film intends to make the audience feel oriented with protagonist Ryan Stone as she spirals out of control into complete isolation. Thus, the film intends to make the audience feel disoriented, alone, helpless, and in danger, just as Stone feels when the second shot begins. Once Matt Kowalski comes to her rescue, the tone changes to convey new hope and companionship, albeit diminished due to the dire circumstances. In order to express these two separate tones, *Gravity* uses 3D to convey depth and contrast.

Filmmakers have always viewed depth as the main facet of 3D, because depth allows for a film to protrude towards the viewer. Although protrusion, or negative parallax, is often viewed as too revealing of the "movie" quality of 3D films, Brian Gardner's dynamic floating windows allow for objects and subjects to protrude without breaking the barriers of the frame. Thus, film can bring objects very close to the viewer without splitting people in half through window, or edge, violations. This can be seen in *Gravity's* second shot, when the camera moves into Stone's helmet and physically places the viewer into Stone's perspective. Once inside of the helmet, the film uses rack focus to switch focus between the helmet's interior and the spinning exterior. What results is a claustrophobic encapsulation, similar to the beginning of *Avatar*, wherein Jake Sully is stuck in a small chamber whose small size is designated through a rack focus between bubbles above him and his immobile body. Even though Stone is dissimilarly spinning out of control in *Gravity*, her helplessness is conveyed in the same claustrophobic manner.

Gravity uses deep depth in order to convey the vastness and danger of space. This is especially apparent in the second shot, when Stone spins into the starry background as a black silhouette. At first, the shadow is closer to the camera, but as it gets smaller and further away, its 3D passes the point of convergence and Stone fades into the furthest possible inter-axial distance and the largest positive parallax. The resulting effect is a display of Stone's hopeless state, in which she has literally faded into space and has no chance of recovery. Even though the camera eventually brings her closer to the audience, this moment is meant to convey the drastic nature of the situation. The technique behind the effect is similar to *Coraline's* credit sequence, in which the doll floats into the window without touching the borders of the frame. Because the doll freely floats in space, it has the freedom to dynamically change distance to or from the viewer. Stone's body floats in actual space, so it has the same dynamic freedom.

Alongside depth, many 3D films use contrasting worlds to differentiate between flat and deep scenes, which deepens the impact 3D gives in its more exaggerated moments: in *Creature of the Black Lagoon*, the underwater world is deep and expansive, while the boat is clotheslined and narrow; in *Avatar*, the initial flyover is incredibly vast, while the abrupt cut into the spaceship highlights the limitations of manmade structures over natural worlds; in *Coraline*, two universes exist in parallel, where reality is explicitly flatter than the fantastical "other" world. *Gravity* utilizes two worlds in a different way, designated by the film's title. The film's setting is in direct contrast to the audience's world, because there is a complete lack of gravity. Thus, the film uses 3D to accentuate the unpredictability of outer space. In *Gravity's* second shot, the camera constantly changes what subject it is coordinated on. Sometimes, the camera aligns with Stone's spin, and sometimes it aligns with the earth. Through these contrasting alignments, we can see the spatial instability of Stone, as she wavers nearer and further away in the 3D realm,

while the earth stays stable at a constant, flat distance. Although a viewer does not see gravity in action, he or she understands that, because Stone flails in a seemingly endless 3D space, she has no control; she is hopeless.

Set in space with ridiculous levels of CGI and its own laws for physics, *Gravity* is like most 3D films: expensive. The film underwent a production period that was similar in length to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. While Kubrick's space epic pioneered cinematographic techniques, *Gravity* instead aims to solidify 3D's place within cinema. Yet, both films are similar in their "movie" quality. Kubrick uses widescreen, color, and sound to direct his film so that his direction is obvious but powerful. Therefore, *2001: A Space Odyssey* prides the film medium by gloating Kubrick's auteurist direction. Meanwhile, *Gravity's* "movie" quality is apparent because of Cuarón's attempt to make 3D work, just like Cameron attempted with *Avatar.* Kubrick's film is powerful because it has the right to bring the audience's attention towards the cinematographic technology, since the audience is comfortable with the technology. As audiences are not yet comfortable with 3D, Cuarón doesn't have the luxury of an auteur's freedom. *Gravity* hasn't earned the right to use 3D as a tool of exaggerated artistic expression. Instead, 3D needs to learn how to operate on a smaller, subtler scale before it confidently leaps ahead.

It will be obvious when 3D is no longer considered a gimmick, because every film will utilize it. Currently, 3D is mostly limited to big budget productions that are either animated or use a heavy amount of CGI. Therefore, 3D is currently only used in the context of the spectacle. One possible reason for 3D's application to large films is because of the technological barrier. It is near impossible for someone to view 3D outside of a theater, and it is expensive to produce 3D films. Thus, 3D has been used to entice audiences towards cinemas in order to make these films

successful, especially since a big budget failure can be devastating to everyone involved. Until the technology sheds its exclusivity, experimentation will be limited purely to big directors who are chosen because they won't make mistakes, such as Henry Selick, Ang Lee, James Cameron, or Martin Scorsese. When applied to the same type of movie over and over, 3D becomes an extraneous characteristic of already lavishly produced films; the audience may not see the purpose of paying extra.

The development of sound took a completely different course, and while some may argue that sound is far more necessary to craft an intelligible film, the comparison is still apt. In Hollywood's exploitation of sound, directors made mistakes. This is only true because directors tried out different ways to apply sound to film, while 3D safely expands on previous techniques. (Look at the number of 3D films with multiple worlds: *Creature of the Black Lagoon, Coraline, Avatar, Life of Pi, and Gravity.*) Sound went from complete and utter failure in *The Bat Whispers*, to comedic success in *Monkey Business*, to dramatic success in *Scarface*, to romantic success in *The Clock*. Most importantly though, sound found success in the low budget realm with *The Ghost Ship*. Hollywood gradually brought sound to every genre and eventually made silent films defunct. Impressively, the span from *The Bat Whispers* to *The Ghost Ship* is under fifteen years, which is in stark contrast to *Creature of the Black Lagoon's* release in 1954 up until now. Sound conquered every genre in a measly fifteen years, but 3D still has its eyes set on a small number of film genres that flaunt the technology to make lots of money.

So, where is 3D heading, and what does it need to accomplish in order to find its way into every film? Well, it has to *let* itself into every film. All early sound films used the same type of soundtrack, which was and still is composed of the ambience, score, dialogue, and incidental sounds. Films like *The Bat Whispers* failed because they experimented with sound to see how it

would change cinema, especially since the 1929 sound version was a remake of a silent film. And, directors soon realized that incidental sounds could immerse audiences in the action, as shrill noises have a physical response on a viewer. This can be seen through the piercing gunshots in *Scarface*, or the swinging anchor in *The Ghost Ship*. Directors soon realized that the score could be used to symbolically represent the emotional experience of the characters, and therefore of the audience. This can be seen in the garden scene in *The Clock*, where the music builds to an extreme intensity that concludes with a kiss and a cathartic release. Every director has the technology of sound to use and exploit, while big companies have 3D to use and exploit. *The Ghost Ship* does not have a common counterpart in 3D, perhaps not because filmmakers don't have the potential to use 3D to impact emotional experiences in more genres, but rather that B-movies aren't able to use 3D. If no one can use it, and if the technology is kept safe with grandiose movies that have to earn back their enormous budgets, then how is 3D supposed to be considered as anything but a gimmick?

Directors clearly know how to use 3D. They consistently make films in which 3D impacts a deep emotional experience through different forms of parallax and focus. So, apply these methods to other movies. Make a film like *Before Midnight* in 3D, and challenge a director to carve a 3D masterpiece out of two people talking. Make more musicals in 3D, just as *Singin' in the Rain* prominently displayed both color and sound's imperative role in film through pure fun. *Guys and Dolls* did the same for widescreen, firmly displaying the new technology's practical use in cinema as a whole. As of now, 3D is esoteric. *Gravity* may be as far as directors can emotionally reach into the 3D spectacle, but there is so much more to see in other genres. It would be nice if we didn't have to wear glasses, or if I didn't get a headache every time I watched a 3D movie, too.