Character Empathy and Moral Judgment in Pre-1908 Cinema

Abstract

This paper analyzes two major multi-shot films from the early cinema period, *Rescued by Rover* (Lewin Fitzhamon and Cecil M. Hepworth, UK, 1905) and *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, USA, 1903), to argue against Tom Gunning's notion that films made prior to 1908 lack the capacity to create character empathy or pass moral judgments on their characters' actions. In particular, the paper uses close textual analysis to reveal how the chase sequence and mise-en-scène in *Rescued by Rover* evince empathy by highlighting the complexity of the protagonist's physical plight and downplaying the visual appearance of the antagonist to arouse antipathy instead. It also demonstrates how through the final emblematic shot the film implicitly passes moral judgment by excluding one of the characters from the frame as a consequence of their earlier inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, the author asserts that *The Great Train Robbery* adopts a similar approach to evoking empathy for its characters by using a chase sequence based on real-life events and expressive mise-en-scène to manipulate audience identification. Lastly, increased narrative realism and the use of binary oppositions are two examples the author employs to claim that the film takes a minor moral standpoint over the unlawful subject matter. Whilst acknowledging the historical limitations imposed upon a study of this kind, the paper concludes by alleging that Gunning's account of pre-1908 cinema suffers from a flawed and inaccurate generalization, which ultimately overlooks the capability for films belonging to the 'cinema of attractions' to elicit empathy and evaluate the morality of their characters' actions.