Comparing and Contrasting the Films "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" in Terms of Aesthetic

Elements

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HUMA 383: Humanities in Global Contexts

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July 26, 2022

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"Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are two coming-of-age teen comedy films which center upon the lives of an American teenage girl who is at the top of her high school's social hierarchy. The protagonist in "Clueless" is Cher Horowitz, an attractive, wealthy, and popular teenage girl who takes her schoolmate Tai under her wing, makes over her looks, and escalates her popularity. After Tai becomes popular, her relationship with Cher is strained. In "Mean Girls", Regina George is an attractive, wealthy, and popular teenage girl who takes her schoolmate Cady Heron (the protagonist) under her wing, makes over her looks, and escalates her popularity. Like in "Clueless", when Cady in "Mean Girls" becomes popular, her relationship with Regina is strained. It is evident that these two films have much in common when it comes to plot and themes, but they also share many similarities in terms of aesthetic elements. In terms of aesthetics, "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are similar in that they both employ soft lighting, medium shots, and continuity editing, but they are different in that "Mean Girls" employs split-screen shots and "Clueless" does not.

So, "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are aesthetically similar in that they capitalize upon soft lighting. Soft lighting, usually some form of diffused lighting, is frequently employed for "beauty shots" or to "soften the appearance" of a character (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 53). Soft light is intended to occult bodily imperfections to produce "a fetishized image of beauty, innocence, or vulnerability" (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 53). When soft lighting is employed, shadows are faint and the image contains less contrast (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 53). An

example of soft lighting in "Clueless" is when Cher walks down the staircase in a white Calvin Klein dress that intrigues Josh. In this scene, Cher's sex appeal is supposed to be underscored, so it is imperative that her bodily imperfections remain hidden. An example of soft lighting in "Mean Girls" is when Cady walks down her school's hallway with the plastics while "Pass That Dutch" by Missy Elliott is playing in the background. Cady is intended to be glamorized in this scene because in the scenes immediately afterwards, her classmates are seen commenting on her looks and popularity. Again, because Cady is glamorized here, her features are softened and her bodily imperfections are concealed. In these scenes in both films, there is no shadows or contrast on Cher and Cady's faces. And so, in that way, it is observed that "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are similar in terms of aesthetics in that they both utilize soft lighting.

"Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are also aesthetically similar in that they utilize medium shots. A medium shot is one that includes a character from the waist upwards (Moore, n.d.). Described as a "functional shot", a medium shot can be effective for "shooting exposition scenes, for carrying movement, and for dialogue" (Giannetti, 1996, p. 11). "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are both extremely dialogue-heavy movies, so it makes sense that they both make generous use of medium shots. An example of a medium shot in "Clueless" is at the beginning of the movie when Cher picks up Dionne at her house and they drive off to school. In this scene, Cher is shown in her car from the waist up and when both girls are in the vehicle, they are shown from the waist up. An example of a medium shot in "Mean Girls" is at the end of the film when Cady makes her acceptance speech after being crowned Spring Fling queen. Cady is filmed exclusively from the waist up. Hence, in such a manner, it is observed that "Clueless" and "Mean

Girls" are alike in that their most frequently employed shots are medium shots.

Additionally, "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are aesthetically similar in that they use continuity editing. Continuity editing is defined as "the process of putting shots together to create the impression of continuous narrative time and visually coherent space" (Moore, n.d.). By employing continuity editing, filmmakers can draw focus to the action and emotions of a story as opposed to the shot editing (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 82). A common technique in continuity editing is shot/reverse-shot, which allows us to "move between two characters and still see reactions in their faces" (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 82). To employ this technique, two cameras are set at opposing angles to film the two characters individually, and the editor will "assemble these two sets of footage to create a back-and-forth rhythm of two characters speaking" (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 82). By combining footage of the first character with the second character (a "shot" and its "reverse shot"), the editor enables the viewer to experience the conversation in more detail than a long shot that includes both characters in the frame simultaneously (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 82). In addition, the "rhythm" of the editing - "bouncing" between the shot and its reverse shot - feels like a "visual conversation" and "becomes more engaging to watch than simply a static shot" (Moss & Wilson, n.d., pp. 82-83). When employing the shot/reverse-shot convention, it is custom to have the camera angles set up so that "one character always speaks from the left and one character always from the right" (Moss & Wilson, n.d.). This custom makes it easier for the audience to process, "especially as the conversation becomes faster, more heated, or more emotional" (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 83). When you always tape the conversation from one side of the "axis of action", the

"directionality" of the conversation is preserved (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 83). This principle

that you never cross the axis of action within a single scene is referred to as the "180-degree

rule" (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 83). An example of the 180 degree rule in "Clueless" is when

Cher's father confronts her about her three outstanding traffic tickets. We move between the two

characters and Cher is always on the left and her father is always on the right. An example of

the 180 degree rule in "Mean Girls" is when Cady sits down with the plastics in the cafeteria

and converses with Regina for the very first time. Again, we move between the two characters

and Cady is always on the right and Regina is always on the left. Soo, in this wise, it is observed

that "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are alike in that they both employ continuity editing.

    One way that "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" differ aesthetically is that "Mean

Girls" employs split screen shots and "Clueless" does not. In "Mean Girls", every time a

telephone call takes place, the screen is split to show the parties in their respective locations.

This is first introduced in the plastics' "three-way calling attacks". Regina calls Cady to confront

her about liking Aaron Samuels while Gretchen is secretly listening in. Cady then retaliates by

tricking Regina into trash talking Karen and Gretchen while Gretchen is secretly listening in.

Afterwards, Regina calls Karen who is on the other line with Gretchen. On a separate occasion,

Regina calls Taylor's mother pretending to be a Planned Parenthood employee with unfavorable

test results to prevent her from going out with Gretchen's love interest, Jason. In all these

instances, split-screen shots are employed to give the viewer an opportunity to decipher each

character's response to the telephone conversation. Split-screen shots make the telephone scenes

feel more personal, as we can see the characters more close up. In contrast, in "Clueless", every

time a telephone call takes place, the other party is not shown in the scene. For instance, when Cher calls Dionne to vent about her report card, Dionne is not shown in the scene - only her voice is heard. Likewise, when Cher is abandoned in a parking lot and attempts to call a cab, the operator's voice is heard, but is not shown in the scene. This makes the calls seem less dramatic and intimate. But, to the credit of "Clueless", these calls are more brief and light-hearted, so there is less need to draw attention to the characters' expressions during the calls. So, in this way, it is observed that "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" differ aesthetically in that "Mean Girls" employs split screen shots and "Clueless" does not.

Thus, in terms of aesthetics, "Clueless" and "Mean Girls" are similar in that they both employ soft lighting, medium shots, and continuity editing, but they are different in that "Mean Girls" employs split-screen shots and "Clueless" does not. Both of these films are cult classics and a staple in popular culture. To maximize our understanding of these films, it is crucial to pay attention to its aesthetic elements. These films have had a tremendous impact on contemporary cinema, so we must continue to analyze their aesthetics.

References

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