What is the interrelationship between genre and narrative in your chosen text?

Genre and narrative exist in all media texts; one can’t be present without the other as everything contains some sort of narrative and therefore fits into a genre because of the way the story is told “any communication has to use shared conventions not only of language itself but also the more complex expectations of genre” (Chamberlain/Thompson, 2004: 1) audiences respond to a text because of the genre and the way the narrative is told, the two “are metalanguages, they ‘suggest’ to an audience how to read a text” (Lacey, 2000: 248) due to previous genre and narrative knowledge audiences will have an understanding of what the text is trying to tell them and how it wants them to respond.

The text I have Chosen is American Beauty (1999), written by Alan Ball, it was a low budget film that went from just being an art-house film to a mainstream modern masterpiece that grossed £350 million worldwide and received accolades from all over the world, with 5 Oscar wins, 6 BAFTA awards and 3 Golden Globes.

This film communicates a story to the audience via the characters and the non-diegetic narration at the beginning and end of the film by the protagonist Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), it could be argued that the film is a non-genre film “a genre is a type, kind or class of messages that share distinctive and identifiable aesthetics, stylistics, substantive, and/or ideological conventions” (Ott/Mack, 2010: 110) because the film has so many genres, it can’t be specifically categorised as it doesn’t have distinctive conventions of one genre; it features conventions of the drama genre but also contains many other sub-genres such as comedy/black comedy, romance, action/violence, crime, melodrama, tragedy and fantasy.

Genre theorist Rick Altman (Altman: 1989) states how genre classifications are down to the pre-reading and knowledge that audiences have of texts, before they watch a film they will know the story, characters, conventions, and mise en scene of the genre because of the “well established visual and narrative codes and conventions of any genre, which ensure that ‘it is easy to understand the text in a particular pre-determined way’” (Taylor/Willis, 1999: 64) this is where American Beauty managed to trick audiences as the posters and DVD covers of the film made it look like a romantic genre film, it appealed to women mainly because of this and women talk, so buzz around the film spread by word of mouth. The film then drew in crowds who were familiar with different genres, because it contains so many genres the audience don’t have any pre-determined ideas about what could happen; there are so many different characters and stories within the narrative which all create questions, and keep the audience guessing.
The fact that the film has a variety of genres means the audience recognise different genres within the narrative resulting in “pleasure and enjoyment [which the] audiences derive from... texts broadly fitting into certain generic groupings” (Taylor/Willis, 1999: 57) the typical conventions of the genre become recognisable to the audience and they enjoy the film because of it, for example Janie and Ricky getting together and running away together is typical of the romance genre, audiences familiar with this genre will expect this outcome and when it happens they will be pleased that they guessed correctly. The typical narrative of the romance genre; boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love; means the audience can relate to the characters, Janie and Ricky and their story as it’s been seen before, the conventions of the genre conform in the same way, but are just repeated with a different story. This is where narrative and genre relate to each other, because the conventions of individual genres have the same narratives repeated over and over again but with different events, characters and settings.

A narrative is the telling of a story, it “serves certain essential functions for human beings, such as organising a set of events according to chronology and tell-ability in order to facilitate the understanding of those events” (Herman/Jahn/Ryan, 2005: 203) American Beauty is a linear film that has its events mainly in chronological order which makes it easily understandable, expect for before the credits of the film there is a scene which doesn’t mean anything, but it is then later repeated in the middle of the film where it fits into the narrative and makes sense. At first the audience have no idea who the characters are in this scene, it is filmed on a hand held video camera with a grainy image and the character talk’s right into the camera in a documentary style, which gives it the impression of it being a flash forward. The speech from the two characters in it, Janie and Ricky, sets the scene with Janie answering with ‘Yer, would you?’ when Ricky asks about killing her dad then Lester narrates ‘this is my life, I’m 42 years old, in less than a year I’ll be dead, of course I don’t know that yet’ the film then begins with Lester’s morning routine, and the grainy documentary style scene has no relation to anything that goes on which uses enigma codes (Barthes: 1970) to make the audience wonder about why he’s going to be killed, when he’s going to be killed, how and who did it and whether the scene with Janie just before it has anything to do with his death.

The film also contains fantasy scenes, where Lester sexually fantasises about Janie’s friend Angela, she is made to be seen from the male gaze as a sex object. The scenes use mis en scene and camera editing to show fantasy; they are in slow motion with every detail about movement emphasised greatly, the surroundings are very dull and bare, often with Angela in the spotlight which makes her the centre of attention. Angela often repeats her movements,
either unzipping her top or moving her arm closer to Lester, these repetition of movements makes the events happen in a virtual time zone, and makes the audience very aware that this is a fantasy scene and not part of the sequential narrative. The high contrast red roses show up very vividly and denote love, lust and pure sexual desire, some feature steam which obscures the image that is seen on screen and makes the audience feel as though they are seeing someone’s sexual fantasy, something that they shouldn’t be seeing. The only diegetic speech in these fantasies is Angela speaking ‘I’ve been waiting for you’ which is said in a very sexual way, the rest is deep/low music and sounds that signify dreaming and fantasy.

These fantasy scenes put the audiences through a ‘suspension of disbelief’ where they believe the unbelievable for the sake of the story, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Coleridge: 1817) stated how this is the inward human nature allowing itself to imagine something that is unimaginable. What’s going on in the fantasy scenes clearly isn’t real as Angela isn’t actually lying in a bed of roses but the audience can see this and put it into context with the story, they know it’s unlikely to happen within the narrative but still believe it’s realistic, Siegfried Kracauer, a theorist, describes this in the context of all movies; “Every moviegoer will have observed that spell of trance-like absorption… Now he gets lost in the flow of images and intimate reveries” (Kracauer, 1960: 171) he is describing how the audience are aware of the change in their mental state, it’s almost like they are so absorbed in the film that they are dreaming while being consciously aware they are watching something that is not real, but they have been immersed in what’s going on and accept that in the context of the film it is real and believable. This especially relates to ‘American Beauty’ where he talks about the “flow of images and intimate reveries” as this is exactly what the fantasy scenes are about; the audience are lost in the slow moving images of roses, sex, steam and lust and feel as though they are prying on someone’s very intimate sexual fantasy, it’s not real as it’s happening in Lester’s mind so it’s not for them to see, they feel as though they should look away, yet they can’t help but watch.

Although the narrative does contain fantasy scenes and one scene out of chronological order, it is still a classic realistic text. Noel Burch (Burch: 1969) describes a realist text as an “institutional mode of representation” which is a way of making a text believable to the audience by showing the world as it is and the way things really are. The genre conventions of the film allow it to cross some boundaries i.e. the fantasy scenes, which still make it a realist text. The text is believable to the audience as the editing in the fantasy scenes make it obvious that Lester is dreaming, when the audience think of a dream or fantasy that they have had then it will have similar mis en scene to that of the scenes in the film, the editing
signifies a dream land which therefore makes it real as the text is representing events as they actually would occur in life.

‘American Beauty’ represents the ideology of the ‘all American Dream’ with the mis en scene of the picket fences, the happy neighbourhoods, college girls, happily married couples, football games and high contrast lighting which all denote a happy, fulfilled and perfect lifestyle but when looking closer at all of this the narrative is representing a dark side to the lifestyle and how society has made people conform to certain stereotypes. For example gender; Lester is a working family man, he’s the breadwinner of the family and when he loses his job and realises his wife is cheating on him then he loses sight of everything in his life because he is not the dominant male anymore, and he tries to become a butch, healthy manly man for Angela where he can be seen as a dominant man in that relationship, but he forgets about what really makes him happy; being a father to Janie and a wife to Carolyn.

Verisimilitude is used within the film to represent the characters in a realistic light, verisimilitude is described as “the imitation of the visual appearance of the world, people and objects as it appears to the human eye” (Lister/Dovey, 2003: 140) and American Beauty uses this to appeal to the audience, people relate to real life characters, events and stories and everyone knows the feeling of trying hard to fit in. The characters in the film all want to be normal, when Lester says ‘our marriage is just for show, a commercial for how normal we are when we are anything but’ a lot of people will recognise this as a way of understanding not everyone can be normal, the stereotypical view of being normal is that it’s something to be ashamed of.

Levi-Strauss’ (Strauss:1962) theory of binary opposites is present in this text, the relationship between Janie and Angela shows how different the 2 girls are, Angela is obsessed with boys and looking good, whereas Janie is trying to fit in by joining the cheerleading team but she has a boyfriend who Angela finds weird ‘what a freak’. Their friendship doesn’t last because these differences become apparent, Ricky says to Angela ‘And you’re boring, and you’re totally ordinary, and you know it’ but then Lester tells her ‘you couldn’t be ordinary if you tried’ this highlights how everyone has different perceptions of each other and people react to each other differently, it signifies how people should ‘look closer’ which is the tagline of the film, as not everything and everyone is as they seem.

Sexuality is also represented with Colonel Fitts being seen as an ‘alpha male’, he sticks to the stereotype of being a man’s man, he abuses his son, he likes to be referred to as ‘sir’ and he’s against homosexuals ‘I’d rather you were dead than be a f***ing f**ggot’ the story behind him
as a character relates to narrative theory (Todorov:1977) as the disequilibrium of the narrative is when he kisses Lester and reveals himself to be a gay man, which explains why he is so homophobic. This then leads to the restored order of Lester being killed by Colonel, and Carolyn and Janie who had motives to kill him, being shown as innocent. The new equilibrium in Lester realising what he had and appreciating it and realising that he is at last happy with what he had in life ‘I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it’s hard to stay mad, when there’s so much beauty in the world.. I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life’

The non-diegetic narrative by Lester makes the narrative flow seamlessly, he narrates at the beginning and the end but the narrative of the story all seems to be from his point of view, the audience side with him and feel an attachment towards his character because he seems to be the one telling the story. His daughter hates him, his wife is having an affair and he’s lusting after someone else so we feel sorry for him as he becomes the centre of attention for all the stories within the film, he seems to be a bad luck magnet and then he is killed because of all the people’s lives that he affected throughout. When’s he’s killed the audience will feel emotion towards this, all the events within the film could be applied to any family life so people will develop an emotional attachment towards Lester.

The interrelationship between genre and narrative in American Beauty is based mainly on people’s previous views and knowledge on American Culture. The sub-genres of the film allow it to cover a wide range of issues as it has narratives on romance, family, gender, sexuality, violence, fantasy etc. as the audience already have pre-determined views on all these matters then the film represents them in different ways through the narrative structure and story. Audiences already have ideas about what they find acceptable and unacceptable so they respond to the text in a way that reflects this as “genres contribute to the institutional, ideological and cultural factors influencing reception” (Herman/Jahn/Ryan, 2005: 204) because of the genre, American Beauty tries to push these boundaries by making the audience question their beliefs, maybe some behaviours are more acceptable under some circumstances? The film is reinforcing beliefs, such as the old fashioned view that being gay is unacceptable; Colonel Fitts is not religious or old fashioned yet his view of homophobia is similar to that of those who are.

All texts use a narrative, but it can only be used in a certain amount of ways, such as “another way of resolving a disruption, using a different set of characters, settings and so on” (Lacey, 2000: 248) this is the same with genre where only “variations on the genre form” (Lacey, 2000: 248) can be offered. ‘American Beauty’ uses this by referring to lots of genres within
the film, allowing audiences to gain pleasure from the narrative as they recognise these
genres from before, the narrative has enigma codes and engages the audience through
“narrative prediction based on clues offered: genre is one of the most influential of these
expectations”(Lacey, 2000: 134) the audience know what to expect from the romance genre,
action genre, comedy genre etc. and as all of these are included within ‘American beauty’
therefore meaning the audience know exactly what to expect throughout the film genre wise
as they have expectations from previous knowledge, while they can predict the stories within
the genres they cannot predict the whole narrative of the film. The narrative of the film is
realistic; it develops via ‘cause and effect’ whereby each character does something because of
someone else’s actions and responses which leads all the characters worlds to be intertwined.
The fantasy scenes and the flash forward are done in a way that allows them to be real within
the meaning of the film, this means that the audience are watching and believing the
narrative, the film seems to happen in real time with the events in chronological order and
the characters all reflecting an everyday life.
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