

In *Die Hard*, a 1988 film directed by John McTiernan, viewers are effectively able to understand the psychological motivation of characters as well as the emotions they are experiencing. In this essay, I will argue that these ideas are reinforced through the use of film techniques such as mise-en-scene and cinematography. These ideas are also strongly presented through the use of common conventions of action genre films, and also through the film's classical Hollywood narrative structure.

Hollywood films are based on the psychological motivation of characters. In *Die Hard*, John McClean is going through the psychological struggle to save his marriage. Once the terrorists arrive he spends most of the film also going through the physical struggle of overcoming them (Writers Store 2010). His psychological goal of reconciling with his wife, Holly, is what is motivating him to defeat the terrorists.

*Die Hard* uses a step by step narration, where the conclusion and the goals of the protagonist are not reached until all obstacles in the narrative are removed (Strinati 33). Throughout the film, John, the protagonist, is faced with many challenges as he strives to achieve his goal of reconciling with his wife. John manages to defeat several terrorists as the story progresses. The final obstacle John has to overcome is the antagonist, and leader of the group of terrorists, Hans Gruber. Once he defeats Hans all the obstacles in the narrative are removed and he can reconcile with his wife. These events are great examples of the classical Hollywood narrative.

*Die Hard* follows Todorov's equilibrium model which presents a three act structure of a film (Seja, Film Form: Narrative as Formal System). The first part is the initial equilibrium stage and this is followed by the disequilibrium stage where problems arise (Strinati 29). The new equilibrium is the third and final part and this where normality is restored. In this particular

sequence we are presented with the climax of the film or in other words the final scenes of the disequilibrium stage. The end of this is marked when John manages to free Holly's hand from Hans' grasp, which causes Hans to fall to his death. A new equilibrium is created when John and Holly kiss. This can be linked back to the equilibrium at the very beginning of the film, where John and Holly were shown as having a disrupted relationship.

*Die Hard* is set in the city of Los Angeles and the events of the film take place in an existing building with a fictional name, the Nakatomi Plaza. At the beginning of the film we learn that a Christmas party is taking place on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor. An overwhelming setting, in this case a skyscraper in a big city, is typically used in action genre films as it suggests that a large-scale event is going to unfold. The main event in *Die Hard* involves a group of terrorists who want to steal 640 million dollars in bearer bonds from the Nakatomi vault. This particular sequence of the film takes place on the same floor the hostages were held on, the 30<sup>th</sup> floor. This is significant because the 30<sup>th</sup> floor is a lot more daunting than, for example, being on the first or second floors. As a result the hostages are further away from safety and this gives a sense of claustrophobia.

The props that are shown in this sequence of the film help to reveal more about the characters. They also help to push the narrative forward. At the beginning of this sequence, John punches a terrorist who then drops a bag containing some of the bearer bonds. The bearer bonds function as a motif in the film. Thompson and Bordwell define a motif as, "an element of a film that is repeated in a significant way" (68). The bearer bonds are frequently mentioned throughout the film and represent the goals and desires of the terrorists.

Guns are conventional in all action genre films. When Hans asks John to "put down the gun," John must obey him because Hans also has Holly under his control. When Hans first

points his gun at John, this causes John to start laughing to by some time. When Hans points his gun at John for a second time, John is forced to reach for the gun on his back and manages to kill one of Hans' henchman while also injuring Hans. This goes to show that the character with the gun has power and control. The use of the gun also helps to push the narrative forward. Another prop is the watch on Holly's hand. It becomes important when Hans falls out the window while still holding onto Holly. The watch is stopping the narrative from moving forward as it is preventing Hans from falling to his death. Hans is defeated once John manages to take the watch off Holly's hand.

The costumes and make up used in *Die Hard* show transformation among characters and also function as disguises (Seja, Mise-en-scene). In this sequence Hans and his henchman are wearing formal suits. This can be related back to the beginning of the film when the terrorists took control over the Nakatomi Plaza. By wearing these suits the terrorists are able to disguise themselves to the security guard. They appear to be regular looking Americans and therefore the security guard has no reason to be alarmed.

The appearance of John McClean's character is more stylized with graphical qualities. At the start of the film he is wearing a jacket and for the majority of the film he is wearing a singlet. However in this sequence he is not wearing anything on his upper body, which is covered in blood, scratches and sweat. His appearance shows narrative progression because as the film progresses we see more cuts, blood and sweat appear on John's body. All of these signify the previous struggles and obstacles John has had to overcome.

Different lighting techniques are used to create certain feelings and guide our attention to certain details. Hard lighting can be used to present details in a clear and crisp way (Thompson and Bordwell 132). An example of this occurs straight after Hans asks John to

put down his gun. It seems that a top light is shining down on John's upper body. The top light is used to clearly show the sweat and blood on him. The strong reflection on his body enhances the fact that he is hurt and exhausted after encountering many problems throughout the film.

Early on in the sequence John is limping towards Hans. A silhouette of John is created from a light on the wall behind him and the absence of a key light. The silhouette is effective because it hides details and therefore creates a threatening feeling. Another way details can be hidden is through the use of an attached shadow, where light fails to illuminate part of a surface (Thompson and Bordwell 131). An example of this occurs in the shot where Hans is hanging out the window and turns his head towards John and Holly. Only the left side of Hans' face is lit. This emphasises the threatening feeling, as well as the fact that Hans is the evil antagonist.

The performance of the actors on the screen can tell us a lot about their character. Hans slowly moves across the screen while staying focused on John at the same time. Even though his movements are slow they are also steady and authoritative. Hans wants to prove to John that he is in control of the situation. John's movements are also slow but for a different reason. John is the injured protagonist and his limp allows us to remember that he has previously faced many physical struggles.

For large parts of this sequence the foreground and background are both in focus. By having the background in focus we can see the damage to the walls and floor. This allows us to view the damage that the building has endured throughout the course of the film. In other words the state of the building shows narrative progression. This sequence also makes great use of the racking focus technique. This occurs when the filmmaker adjusts perspective from

foreground to background, or vice versa (Thompson and Bordwell 178). In one shot the background is in focus and Hans is getting ready to shoot John. But the focus then shifts to John in the foreground and we are shown a gun taped onto his back. Suspense begins to build up when the foreground becomes in focus because we realise that John knows more than Hans, and that he has a plan for when Hans eventually points the gun at him.

The distance of the camera varies in this sequence as long shots, mid shots and close ups are all used. Close up shots are used to show facial expressions and to get into the head space of characters (Thompson and Bordwell 195). This occurs in the scene when Hans is hanging out the window and John is trying to take the watch off Holly's hand. The stern expression on Hans' face reflects his evil thoughts and intentions of shooting John. A close up on John's face shows him tightening his lips. This allows us to assume that he is using all his strength to take the watch off Holly's hand. Holly is shown screaming with her eyebrows raised and this is because she is in a frightening situation and is feeling scared. An extreme close up is used to show John successfully taking the watch off Holly's hand. This allows us to see the exact moment when Hans loses his grip of Holly's hand. The effect of this is to illustrate the exact moment when Hans is defeated.

The mid shot, or two shot, is used to show the relationship between characters. When we see a mid shot of Hans holding a gun to Holly's head, we realise that this is a conflicting relationship and that Holly is being held against her will. Near the end of the sequence we are presented with a mid shot of Holly and John kissing. This is to show that both characters are feeling safe together and are in love. Long shots are occasionally used to remind us of the setting. A long shot of Hans falling down the building allows us to see the extent of his

fall. It also allows us to remember the role the high-rise building plays with regards to *Die Hard* being an action film.

Both high and low camera angles are used in this sequence. They help to put across emotional information to the audience and give judgment about the characters in the shot (Seja, Cinematography). Near the end of the sequence, when Hans is falling to his death, we are presented with a high angle shot. The camera is positioned above the action. Although this is to show Holly's perspective, the high angle shot of Hans emphasises the point that he is now an insignificant, vulnerable character, and is being absorbed by the setting. A low angle shot is used to show the perspective of the policemen, who are outside the building looking up to the action. This angle helps to create a threatening feeling for us as an audience, as well as to show what the policemen are probably feeling.

When Hans is shown falling down the building from the perspective of the policemen, the camera moves vertically from top to bottom. This technique is known as a tilt. It reinforces the significance of the high rise building and therefore allows the audience to fully realise the extent of Hans' fall. A tracking/dolly shot occurs when the whole camera moves along with the action. This is used to portray movement of characters. An example of this occurs near the beginning of the sequence when John is walking towards Hans and Holly. As Hans moves to the right of screen so does the camera. Since the camera movement has now caused Hans' henchman to be off screen, we realise that he has become less important at this current time, and the focus is now on John's conversation with Hans.

The editing in this sequence helps to create rhythmic relations between shots. A steady beat is established when shots are of similar length. An example this can be seen when John walks towards Hans and when their conversation takes place. The slow tempo reinforces

the point that not much action is taking place. However a fast tempo is soon created when several short shots are used; starting from the shot of John pulling the gun from behind his back. This change in tempo helps to surprise us and shorten the amount of time we have to reflect on what just happened.

Diegetic sound is sound that has its source in story world (Thompson and Bordwell 284). One example of this is the falling sparks from a damaged light, which can be heard when John is walking towards Hans. The sound matches the images onscreen when we can see the sparks. But the sparks become offscreen sound when we cannot see them. The sparks maintain the same loudness regardless of whether they are onscreen or offscreen. This helps to create a sense of close spatial distance between the sound and the characters. The steady loudness of the sparks helps to create a rhythm and therefore allow us to concentrate on the images.

Non-diegetic sound has its source from outside the story world. The score of *Die Hard* was composed by Michael Karmen and involves classical, instrumental music. At the beginning of the sequence we are shown Hans slowly shifting to right of screen in response to John's movement. Accompanying this is a low pitched piece of music with a slow rhythm. The slow rhythm matches the movement of the characters and the low pitch creates a tense mood. It also emphasises the fact that Hans is carefully focusing on John. A different piece of music begins playing when John laughs. It is characterised by a faster beat that increases in volume. This is very effective because it is in contrast to the previous piece music. Also it does not fit the overall mood of this sequence. Therefore a feeling of suspense is created, as uncertainty is put into our mind as to what will happen next, and when.

*Die Hard* reinforces some characteristics of the ideology of being a male. Throughout the majority of the film John is wearing a singlet. This is a deliberate move by the director to show off John's body, in particular his muscles. This helps to reinforce the belief that males are physically strong. Benshoff and Griffin state that common types of behaviour in men involve control and leadership (250). The narrative of *Die Hard* emphasises these characteristics because John and Hans are the two main characters driving the narrative forward. They are also in control of most situations in the film.

*Die Hard* is considered to of caused an historical shift on the action film genre. This is because John's character breaks some of the naturalised beliefs of being a male. Earlier action films, such as *Terminator*, presented males as "indestructible one man armies" that lacked emotion (The 80s Movies Rewind 2009). John's character presented a new type of action hero. He makes mistakes, shows emotion, and the blood helps to reinforce his vulnerability. This idea is further emphasised in John's attitude towards the situation he is in. As Tasker points out, John seems to act like more of a "wise guy than tough guy" (239). There are moments in the film when he makes jokes to himself and seems confused at what is happening.

In conclusion, *Die Hard* makes great use of film techniques that allow us to understand the mental state of the characters in the film. In this particular sequence mise-en-scene, sound and cinematography are all used to illustrate this. Because *Die Hard* presented John McClean as an emotional male hero, the film is believed to have revolutionised the action genre film somewhat, since it broke a common belief about males being unemotional.



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