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4 Examining the Boundaries Between Fiction and Fact in the Narrative Cinema

DAVID HILES

Abstract

The film, *Stand By Me*, has been described as a small gem. First impression reveals little more than a linear plot, a story told, from Gordie's point-of-view, of a journey made by four boys to find a dead body. But, on closer inspection, the film reveals itself as far more complex in narrative structure. The film uses ambiguity of character, flashbacks and two types of voice-over narration, to offer not only an exploration of the nature of fictional storytelling, but also a profound examination of the subtle boundaries between fiction and fact in the conventions of narrative cinema.

Storytelling in *Stand By Me*

"It is the tale, not he who tells it". Stephen King (*Different Seasons*, 1982)

The plot of the film, *Stand By Me (SBM)*, directed by Rob Reiner, was based on an original short story by Stephen King (1982). It is the summer of '59, in Castle Rock, Oregon. A group of 12-year-old boys, Gordie, Chris, Teddy and Vern, overhear a story concerning the sighting of a dead body. Carried away by the sense of adventure, and the prospect of getting their names in the papers and becoming heroes, they set off to find the body. At the town scrapyard, Gordie narrowly escapes being savaged by Chopper, a dog with a reputation that is more myth than reality. Crossing a trestle bridge, Vern and Gordie are panic-stricken by a pursuing train. The boys camp for the night, and Gordie demonstrates his skills as a storyteller in his story of Lardass Hogan. Crossing a swamp offers a rite-of-passage in Gordie's growing up. Finally, they discover the body, but are challenged by a gang of teenagers, led by Ace Merrill. Chris is defiant, and Gordie frightens them away with a loaded gun. They decide to leave the body, and anonymously inform the local authorities. Returning to Castle Rock, ". . . the town seemed different". Only the friendship between Gordie and Chris survives the adventure.

On first impression, the film offers a nostalgic reminiscence of youthful adventure, naive grasping at emerging manhood. The plot is a simple linear telling of the story from Gordie's point-of-view, with brief flashbacks concerning Gordie's relationship with his dead brother, and the rift with his parents. However, on closer inspection it is a little more complicated. We cannot overlook that the story of the film is *the writing of a story* about four boys by the man in the car (played by Richard Dreyfuss) at the beginning of the film. The film is therefore a-story-within-a-story. Placing Gordie as the narrator, seems to identify "Dreyfuss" as the grown-up Gordie, who is now a writer and story-teller, recounting a childhood experience. But, in the final credits, "Dreyfuss" is identified only as *the writer*, (not Gordie). The identity of the writer is clearly ambivalent, and possibly the four boys are no more than the product of a writer's fictional imagination. It is interesting to note the importance of the use of Dreyfuss, a hollywood star-image, as the unnamed writer. This helps us recognise him in the final scene as the man in the car at the beginning.

Figure 1: Gordie, Chris, Vern and Teddy



"STAND BY ME"
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Moreover, the film explicitly explores the nature of narrative in many subtle ways. For example, the character, Gordie, is a story-teller, and, within-the-story-within-the-story there is a third level of storytelling, a series of stories, about a dog called Chopper, about the death of his brother Denny, the school milk money, and especially, Gordie's fictional creation of "Lardass Hogan". The very nature of story-telling is examined in each boy's response to this Lardass story. At this deeper level of story telling, each narrative provides a site for contestation between historical fact and fictional possibilities.

Approaching Film as a Discursive Practice

My own approach to the study of a film such as *SBM*, stresses a cultural psychology perspective, with its emphasis on a study of the meaning-making process. It is therefore less concerned with the processes of visual perception and human cognition, instead focusing on visual communication as a cultural activity and as a discursive practice (Turner, 2006). This involves the study of how the film viewer constructs meanings from complex presentations of stimuli (ie. edited shots, camera angles, elaborate visual and sound images, etc.), as well as responding to film as a text (ie. shots assembled into segments, scenes and complete narrative structures). Such an approach is not concerned with the production or making of films itself, or with the place of the film industry in our culture, or the aesthetics, authorship and criticism of film texts, except insofar as this might have a bearing on the psychological issues involved.

The perspective I will adopt is that visual meaning-making is a construction, and this happens between the film text and film viewer. Especially important is the idea that meaning is not a simple consequence of the shots chosen in compiling a film text, but is chiefly the result of contiguity between shots, and their placement within sequences, segments and scenes that make up the film (Worth, 1981). Towards this end, I have adapted and developed a set of analytical tools including: Bordwell's ways of meaning-making, diegetic analysis, scene analysis, shot analysis and visual code analysis, for the close examination of fictional narrative in the cinema.

Meaning-Making in *SBM*

The first tool that I use has been adapted from David Bordwell's four possible ways of constructing meaning (Bordwell, 1989). Bordwell's proposal is that there are only four possible ways of constructing meaning. The first two, *referential* and *explicit*, he considers to be literal denotative meanings, concerned with comprehension. The second two, *implicit* and *repressed*, are

concerned with connotation or interpretation. In addition, I have proposed a fifth, *self-reflexive* meaning, in which the text draws attention to its own status as a text, or cultural artefact, explicitly engaged in the meaning-making process. My view is that this fifth category of meaning-making is important and distinctive enough to be recognised in its own right, and cannot to be simply placed with repressed meanings. Other good examples of films that are self-reflexive might include: *Born on the Fourth of July* (Dir. Oliver Stone, 1989), *Unforgiven* (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 1992), *Orlando* (Dir. Sally Potter, 1992).

Referential Meaning

This is how the viewer constructs a concrete “world”, real or fictional, drawing on knowledge of cinematic conventions together with conceptions of causality, time, space, etc. In *SBM* this includes the small American town of Castle Rock, the boy’s outline characters, gangs, parents, railways, junk yards, dogs, trestle bridges, swamps, leeches, a dead body, etc, etc.

Explicit Meaning

This involves moving up a level of abstraction by assigning a conceptual meaning to the diegesis (story world) being constructed. In *SBM*, the most obvious examples include the film’s representation of America in the late 50s, family life, bullying, and the observations on friendship, which, despite the pettiness, mocking and superficiality, is never to be regained in later life (made explicit in the last words of the film).

Implicit Meaning

This involves the themes, issues or questions that the text raises, often in terms of the contradictions, tensions, ironies and ambiguities that the narrative presents. In *SBM*, these include the emotional/physical closeness and distance of individuals to each other, eg. Gordie to Chris, Gordie to Denny, Teddy to Vern, in contrast to the distance between Gordie and his father, Chris and Ace. *SBM* explores the construction of identity in a group of young boys, highlighting the cruel treatment received by children from adults. Chris carries the stigma of his family and delinquent brother, and suffers from a teacher's deceit. Gordie, the invisible boy, cannot come to terms with the death of Denny, his brother. He feels annihilated by a rejecting father who cannot recognise his talent as a writer. Teddy hardly had a chance in life, his father in a fit of rage held his ear to a stove and almost burnt it off. Vern is the perpetual scapegoat and victim. There are the issues raised by humiliation, intimidation, leadership, bullying, lies, deceit, shared pleasures, private moments, growing-

up, coming of age, death, etc. Some other important things to look out for are the extensive intertextuality; non-diegetic soundtrack; compression and expansion of time; and symbolic motifs (Hiles, 1997) such as: *the tree hut, the gun, the rail track, the bridge, the train, cigarettes, the river, a symbolic circumcision*, etc.

Repressed or Symptomatic Meaning

This is disguised meaning, often at odds with the referential, explicit or implicit meanings, sometimes difficult to identify, and each viewer may have their own individual repressed interpretations. An example is the unconscious *death wish* that the boys are subjected to. Their journey is not without danger, eg. the dark looming train, setting out without food for an overnight journey, the gun, the stand-off with Ace's gang. Another consideration is that this type of meaning may be a consequence of the artist's obsessions. So, we cannot overlook the fact that the film is based on a short story by Stephen King, who grew up in Castle Rock as a child, with his own anxieties as a writer. It is therefore significant that Gordie is a storyteller and would-be writer, who feels that his talents go unrecognised (except by his brother, Denny, and by Chris). He is confused, and feels guilty about his brother's death. Asked, "What do you do?" by the store-keeper, he answers "I don't know!" Gordie's suppressed anger is his motivation as a storyteller, realised in his creation of Lardass Hogan, who is misunderstood and mocked by his community. Lardass' ultimate revenge is Gordie's and King's fantasy of their own ultimate revenge.

Self-Reflexive Meaning

Finally, it is important to approach *SBM* from a fifth, *self-reflexive* construction of meaning operating in the text. We cannot overlook the fact that the character, Gordie, is a story-teller, and, within-the-story-within-the-story is another, crucial story, *the story of Lardass Hogan*. The very nature of storytelling, and what a story is, becomes examined in the responses of Teddy and Vern to the *Lardass* story. Both seem to have difficulty in understanding what a *story* is in the first place. Teddy wants another more complete ending – "Then what happened?" Vern asks, "Did Lardass have to pay to get into the contest?" Gordie's resistance to such requests for changed endings and further details, affirms his position as a skilled storyteller, and this in turn affirms *SBM* as a film that is concerned with the nature of storytelling. Another aspect of the self-reflexive meaning making in *SBM* concerns the position one wishes to take with respect to the writer's sources. The film can just as easily be interpreted as a fictional account inspired by reading a newspaper article, or as a historical account of an event remembered from childhood. This ambiguity indicates that the film is also concerned with the boundaries between fiction and fact.

Diegetic Analysis

It is useful to begin any visual analysis with a close study of the text's story-world (ie. its *diegesis*). In broad terms, *SBM*'s diegesis can be represented formally as follows:

(The writer (The journey (Denny) (Chopper) (Lardass) (The milk money)))

The outer brackets acknowledge the world of the writer, who "creates" a world in which the four boys go on a journey to find a dead body. Within this journey-world, several other story-worlds are introduced – Gordie's conflict over the death of Denny; Chopper, the dog that is more *myth* than reality; Gordie's fictional creation of Lardass; the stealing of the milk money by Chris, contested by the different narrative accounts on offer. This simplification of the diegesis hardly does full justice to other narrative asides, such as the issue of "who or what is Goofy", or the deep discussions of why "Wagon Train never gets anywhere". Nevertheless, it does seem that *SBM* celebrates narrative, myth, and the discovery of storytelling in the mind of a young boy.

Scene Analysis

The *scene* is a film's smallest dramatic unit. It represents a coherent sequence of action, approximately happening over a continuous period of time, in one location or possibly several related locations, with the same characters. Allowance is made for ellipsis, and/or other discontinuities introduced for dramatic effect. The start of a scene will involve a significant dislocation in terms of place, and/or time, and/or characters. The first shot of a scene involves an establishing shot, with the editing between scenes following different conventions to the editing within a scene. A scene can usually be broken down into several *segments*. A segment is a group of several shots that is basically centred on one location of action, and is coherent in terms of elapsed time.

The *shot* is the basic unit of film construction, consisting of an uninterrupted sequence of frames, shot by the camera from more or less one position (allowance being made for camera movements, special effects, etc.). Nevertheless, while it can be regarded as the basic unit of meaning in the construction of a scene, it is, in turn, constructed from the more basic cinematic codes.

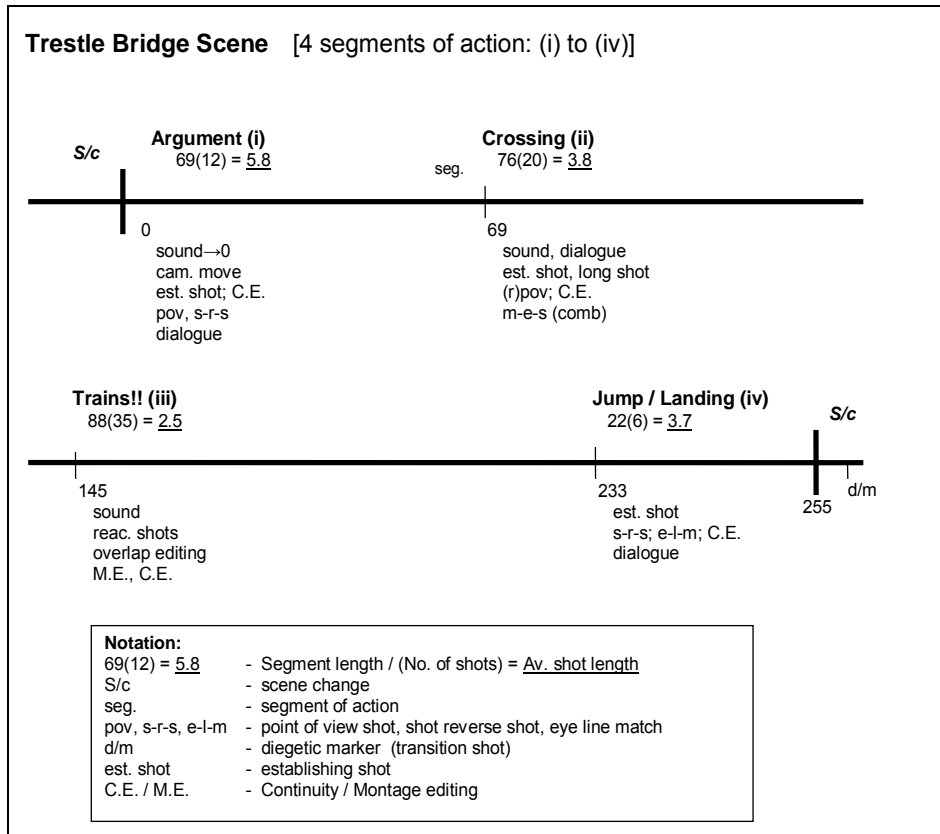
It is relatively straightforward to breakdown the diegesis of a film into its constituent scenes. Scene analysis then proceeds by breaking a scene down into a number of segments of action, then subjecting these to a visual code analysis

of the editing, cinematography, mise-en-scene, and sound. Discretion is needed with respect to the detail this analysis takes, and only certain key scenes need to be analyzed in this way. In what follows, it is well worth remembering that the focus is always upon “*what is happening when we watch a film?*” My approach is to present the analysis diagrammatically, as in Figure 2. We will analyze just three scenes closely here: the *Trestle Bridge*, *Junkyard* and *Campfire* scenes.

The Trestle Bridge Scene

The analysis (Figure 2) involves determining where the scene starts and ends, measuring the length of the scene in seconds, and using a bold line of suitable length marking this appropriately (“0 sec” labelling the start of the scene). This scene seems to consist of four segments of action, (i) the arguments concerning whether to cross, (ii) beginning to cross the bridge, (iii) the panic of an approaching train, and (iv) the final jumping from the track, landing unceremoniously on the ground. These segments are then measured, placed on the line, and labelled appropriately (as in Figure 2). Next, the shots in each segment are counted, and the average shot length for each segment is calculated and written above the line. Then below the line, annotations of relevant cinematic codes used in the segment are made. The striking feature of this scene is in the contrasting use of editing to drive the narrative. Segments (i) and (iv), involving dialogue, use the codes of shot reverse shot, eye line match and continuity editing, whereas in Segment (iii) the panic/action uses a shorter average shot length, montage editing, reaction shots and the innovative use of overlap editing to expand “real time” for dramatic effect.

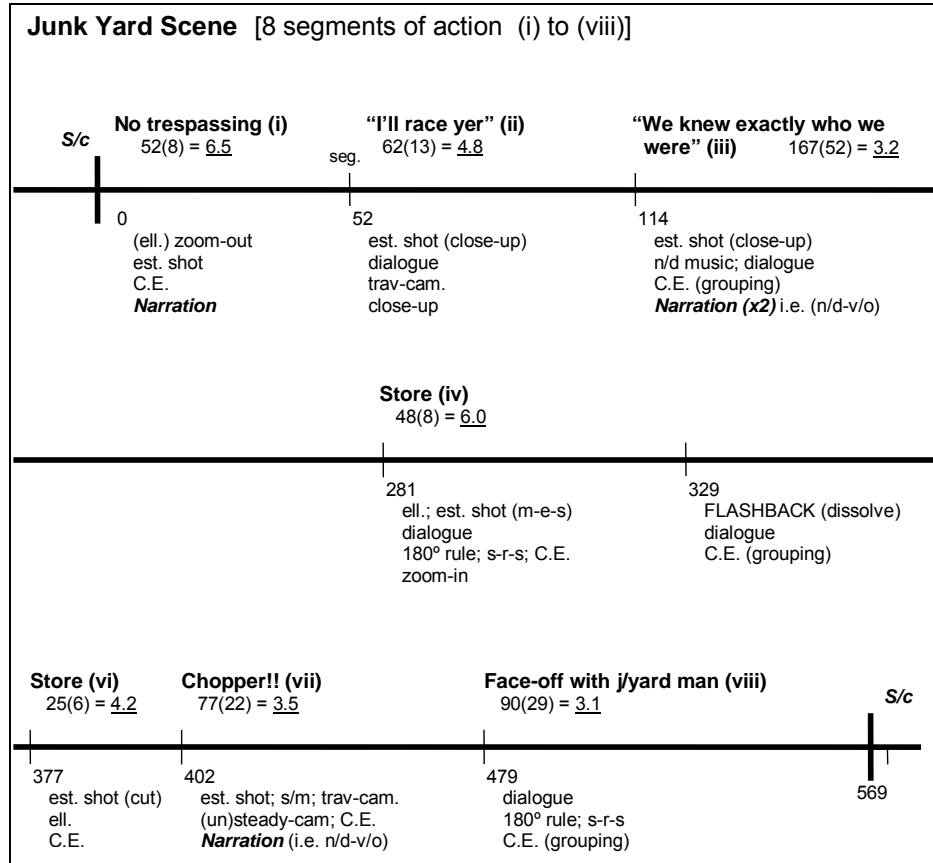
Figure 2: Scene Analysis - *Trestle Bridge*



The Junk Yard Scene

This scene is one of the most complex in the whole film. Made up of eight segments, it uses cutting to Gordie at a store some distance away, involving substantial ellipsis of time; a flashback to Gordie eating a meal with Denny, his father and mother; a return from the flashback to the store; followed quickly by a further elliptical cut returning to the junkyard (Figure 3). The scene makes dramatic use of non-diegetic voice-over (*n/d-v/o*) narration, using here the voice of Dreyfus, the “writer”. The striking feature of this scene is that the viewer effortlessly follows the narrative development without ever being aware of complexities in the visual codes being employed.

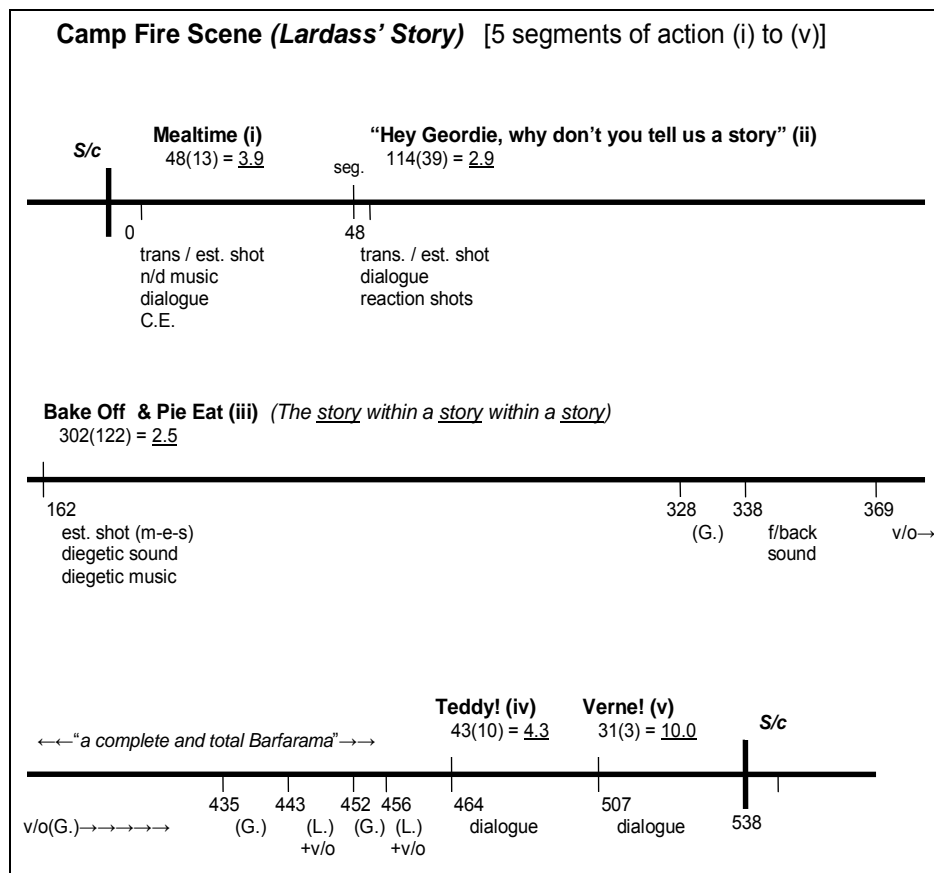
Figure 3: Scene Analysis – *Junk Yard*



The Campfire Scene

The story of Lardass Hogan, *the-story-within-a-story-within-a-story*, is told by Gordie during the Campfire scene. The scene can be broken down into five segments, with segment (iii) employing visual cutting between Gordie and the Pie-eat contest; a subtle flashback to Lardass' preparation before the start of the contest; and extended diegetic voice-over by Gordie, himself, telling the story (Figure 4). The scene finishes with two short segments where Teddy and Vern dispute Gordie's skill as a storyteller. The viewer cannot fail to learn something about the nature of storytelling from this sequence.

Figure 4: Scene analysis – *Campfire*



The "Older Gang" Scenes

One final feature that must not go unacknowledged, is the subtle observation that some of the story concerning particularly Ace's gang cannot be within Gordie's experience. Indeed, throughout the text we know more than any one character, i.e. the viewer is given *privileged* status with respect to the narrative. If Gordie is the historically younger "Dreyfuss" who is narrating events as he remembered them occurring, how could he be offering these accounts of Ace's gang? Is this dramatic licence, or the craft of the fiction writer at work? Or, is it Reiner challenging any simplistic boundary between fiction and fact?

The Boundaries Between Fact and Fiction

The main purpose of the scene analysis and visual code analysis is to provide a rich description of the techniques of cinematic narrative in action. One major outcome of this work is the complexity and subtlety of the narrative meaning-making that is involved. *SBM* is revealed as a self-reflexive text with a complex diegetic structure that celebrates the nature of narrative itself. By presenting the identity of “the writer” as ambivalent, it is quite possible that the boys are no more than the products of the Dreyfuss/Reiner/King imagination. At the heart of the film lies a tension between the text as a retelling of an actual event and the text as a work of imaginative fiction. Offering both of these possibilities simultaneously, with no clear basis for deciding between them, it would seem that *SBM* suggests that the boundary between fiction and fact in the narrative cinema can be very narrow indeed.

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