

**Semiotic, media and communication: Cultural representations in filmic and photographic documents**

EMICC Lugano 2009 – Prof. Peter Stockinger

**M1/M2 Course:**

**Understanding people's views and visions.**

A semiotic and cultural approach of amateur audiovisual productions.

**Theoretical Film Analysis**

On the video excerpt

**'FAMILY PARTY PROPOSAL GONE WRONG'**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlQzTRX-7MA>

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## **1. Introduction**

*Filming is a way of expressing emotions, our own and those of others, and creating a record of what was. What has been captured on film is history it will last forever and cannot be changed, film remembers long after the protagonists have forgotten.* Although all this is true, even in amateur filming today's technology allows us to adapt film and exemplify by choice excluding whole segments of reality.

The interesting aspect of film is that we see what is ON film, what the author of the film wants us to see; perhaps we should also take into account what is NOT in the film. Analysing amateur film can give us a deeper insight into what is 'behind' the scenes, why the person is filming, what message he/she intends to project and also a cultural look into people's private lives and how they see themselves. A camera can tell incredibly detailed stories some of them made clear by technology, the exact time of day for example, and some by our own noetic of life. Only the author of the film knows the whole story and perhaps not even he/she realises what has been captured until the film is viewed and analysed.

In this assignment we aim to analyse the first 35 seconds of a 2.06 min. home video found on youtube according to what we have learnt. The title and web address are:

'FAMILY PARTY PROPOSAL GONE WRONG' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlOzTRX-7MA>

## **2. Emotional analysis**

From our noetic as viewers we can interpret that this is a festive, family occasion. The iconic items which point to this are:

- **The Christmas tree**

The tree indicates that the time of year the situation occurs is around Christmas, this is traditionally in December.

- **The festive dress**

The clothes worn by the people we see in the video show that it is a festive occasion, all the people are dressed elegantly and the style of the clothes indicates that the video is quite recent.

- **Smiling happy faces and gestures**

All the people in the video are smiling and look like they are enjoying themselves; the 'pathos' we can experience through observing implies a happy occasion confirming our deduction of festivity. There is lots of interaction in pairs and small groups and background noise of chatting and soft Christmas music, positive emotions can be seen on faces.

- **Drinks in hands**

Once again a sign of festivity, we can recognise from our own background knowledge that there is reason for celebration.

- **People of different gender and generations grouped together.**

From this point we can deduce a family occasion, it seems that the people know each other well, at least three generations can be identified and there are obvious strong relationships between many of them.

From an intercultural point of view, by the clothes and the style of the living room, as well as the way this occasion is being celebrated, one can envisage a British home and family. Although this could be seen as a stereotypical observation we suspect that it is quite accurate.

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An important factor, one we can pinpoint easily to the Christian celebration of Christmas, is the sound of Christmas carols playing in the background. We can see that it is evening by the darkness outside so it could be a Christmas festivity perhaps on Christmas Eve as some cultures traditionally celebrate.

This is a pro-filmic situation where we can presume many things, as described above we assume that the setting presents the relaxed atmosphere of a family meeting. This could be a yearly tradition, as in many families, drinks before or after dinner perhaps in the private home of one of the family members. We can also speculate as to what they are planning to do; although we know that traditionally there would be a meal involved it seems that there are too many people for a sit down dinner therefore, it could be a stand up dinner or perhaps they are planning to go to a restaurant or have already eaten. All of this information, although only presupposed is done so because of our noetic regarding what we see and therefore recognise.

There is clear priority of filming on the people and the atmosphere in general. The self-presentation, or 'social face' (Goffman's words), of the author of the film is saying, "This is my family the people I love, this is how we celebrate, it shows how I perceive values" We presume that the reason the author of this film is filming this situation is because he would like to keep the moment as a memory, as part of a personal collection.

At the end of our 35 sec. we see a change in the atmosphere, there is an announcement. Was it expected? We don't think that the coming speech was the reason for the gathering, as getting dressed up for this seems a little over the top.

### **3. Technical analysis**

- 5 short shots seemingly in chronological order.
- No apparent editing – we deduct this from the errors such as the false start and the filming slot of a piece of material.
- The camera framed the living room and the people in it.
- The visual view was mainly level taking a low angle when filming those seated.
- We can see the organisation of the living room through panning.
- The filming was slightly modified (lady waving) showing that the people are conscious of being filmed.
- The camera movement was mainly panning the room.
- The filming is slightly jumpy showing us amateur filming.
- There is some, albeit very little, zooming.
- Longer static, framing shots on some scenes (young girl by Christmas tree)
- The image is not stabilized.
- The light is taken from a light source in the living room.
- There are neither credits nor a commentary to explain what is happening, there is however a title which hints considerably at the outcome.
- Simple techniques of filming.
- Internal façade only.
- The eidetic aspects of the visual shots are mainly people, typical objects found in a living room, the Christmas tree.
- There was a mistaken shot of some kind of textile that nobody has attempted to edit, once again showing amateur filming.

## **4. Grammar**

One most interesting point we encountered while analysing this film was how the **grammar** of a film is easily comparable to the **grammar** of language. The grammar was made evident when we considered how the 35 seconds analysed could be interpreted in a completely different way when taken out of its context. This is very similar to the grammar in language, if we take a sentence and communicate either spoken or written, without its context the meaning can be interpreted differently. Taken out of their context these 35 seconds can be seen as a pleasant family celebration just as we analysed above, however when we look at what surrounds the 35 seconds we see a title and a final section, which change the meaning of the film considerably.

In language grammar is made up of words, which make sentences. These sentences have various structures and sentences put together tell us something just as the protagonists in a film make up scenes and the scenes when put together tell us something.

### **Grammar definitions:**

**The concise OXFORD Dictionary**, Oxford University Press, gives various definitions of grammar here is one of them.

*“The study or rules of a language’s inflections or other means of showing the relation between words.”*

We observe that this definition can be applied to film ‘grammar’ quite easily:

*“The study or rules of a **film’s** inflections or other means of showing the relation between people and iconic items”*

One interprets discourse by observance or application of the rules of grammar; one interprets film in the same way.

We conclude that it makes a significant difference, when analysing a film if:

- There is a title
- If we know the context surrounding the part analysed

## **5. Conclusion**

From analysing these 35 sec. we can deduct that the film was recorded for one of the following reasons:

- simply out of habit “ we do this every year”
- the author’s knowledge of the coming speech (announcement)
- simply a new ‘Christmas’ toy to experiment with.
- Or could it have been staged?

On the one hand, the video clip does not seem staged, otherwise the people there should be professional actors, which evidently they are not. But as they are relaxed and not trying to pose, which happens when people are told about the filming beforehand, we may conclude the clip was just modified: people were aware of the camera but did not pay attention as everybody is used to filming these days.

On the other hand, if we watch all of the 2.06 min. of film then things look slightly different. Our opinion is that this film could have been staged; the reason for this is that we find it rather difficult to believe that one would want to make such an embarrassing situation public. Of course we don’t know for sure and perhaps it is a real situation people have different opinions of what should be, or can be, made public as we can see on youtube.

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## **6. Bibliography**

*The presentation of self in everyday life* Goffman, E. (1959) Anchor

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