**A scholarly matrix? Parker, *Shame* (Dir. McQueen, 2011)and *Benign*.**

Steve McQueen’s *Shame* (2011) follows Brandon, a thirty-something year old business executive whose sex-addicted lifestyle is thrown into disarray upon the arrival of his younger sibling, Sissy. An analysis of McQueen and Abi Morgan’s screenplay with reference to Philip Parker’s ‘creative matrix’ (2006: 12), affords one a recognition of the intricate relations between the screenplay elements of *story*, *theme*, *form*, *plot*, *genre* and *style*, and how these elements construct *Shame*’s narrative. This essay shall dissect the creative matrix in relation to *Shame*, eventually detailing how this assessment has informed the development of my own screenplay, *Benign*.

In *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*, Parker details a ‘creative matrix’ that articulates the interdependent relations between the six aforementioned elements of screenwriting (2006: 12). Parker further notes that the “key relationships” between these elements are three pairs “based upon the strength of their impact on each other with respect to the finished screenplay.” (pp.13-14) These pairings are *story* and *theme*, *form* and *plot*, *genre* and *style*, and it is around these groupings that I shall structure this essay. Parker labels *Story* as a “recognised pattern of events which… act as a frame of motivational reference for characters…” and distinguishes two approaches; “developing character through story” and vice versa (p.17). By developing story through character, one is granted “a clear understanding of the characters’ motivations and... ultimately a main story” (p.17). McQueen and Morgan’s process would likely have pursued this approach, as the motivations for Brandon’s actions are primarily reflective of his characterisation. Thus, Brandon acts as an emotional filter for the audience, whereby narrative events are perceived in relation to his motivations and behaviours - relating to *Plot* and *Style*. Typical of ‘art cinema’ (see Bordwell, 2012: 151-158), however, Brandon lacks one explicit goal. One exception may be an arc that includes Brandon’s romantic pursuit with co-worker, Marianne, as he attempts to alter his typical shallow indulgences, but this is only one of several embedded stories, exemplary of Parker’s notion of “no single story type” being a result of developing story through character - he considers this and a “confused plot” to be a *“danger”* of this approach (Parker, 2006: 17, emphasis mine). I prefer the term *opportunity*.

*Theme* denotes “the central issue of why any human being [will] be interested/affected by [a] narrative.” (p.18) Unlike stories, being interested in themes works “at the emotional level of being engaged with the narrative as a whole.” (p.19) That is to say that it is a distinct level of engagement beyond the rational level of “understanding characters’ motivations.” (p.19) *Shame*, I argue, explores the themes of feeling guilt and, appropriately, shame. The exploration of hypersexuality and pornography addiction in the digital era is considerably niche but nonetheless pertinent to contemporary society, while a more general (and therefore more widely engaging) theme is that of disharmonious familial relations. The degree to which audiences engage with these themes is a secondary concern to the paramount point that the underlying emotional relatability of *Shame*’s narrative is what “holds an audience to [Brandon’s] narrative and ultimately provides the emotional satisfaction.” (p.19) It is worth noting here that I do not take satisfaction to necessarily denote a ‘happy ending’, rather an appropriate resolution - I shall briefly speak more of resolution in relation to *Benign* later.

Forming “the foundations of any successful screenwork,” the *story and theme* link “is essentially a spectrum of options which run from the narrative based upon a simple story through to… a single theme” in which I would position *Shame*’s narrative within the domain of “story-based themes” (p.16). That is to say the theme of sexual and pornographic addiction, as opposed to Brandon and Sissy’s dramatic actions, may be a dominant emotional investment of an audience. Even in one of the most dramatic scenes featuring Sissy’s attempted suicide, McQueen and Morgan seemingly foreground the thematic consideration of Brandon’s emotionally destructive actions, rather than the drama between the two characters. Another example of the relationship between story and theme may include the ostensibly humanistic depiction of Brandon’s inability to break his habits: The consequential chaos that materialises through different story events is more prominent than motivated goals on Brandon’s behalf, as we do not engage with *Shame* to see a man on a mission for redemption, but rather to witness the devastation resulting from addiction. Thus, the link between Parker’s first two elements is recognised upon assessing the relationship between minimal character motivation and heightened focus on theme.

Recognising the vital consideration a narrative’s construction, Parker turns to *Form* and *Plot* (p.21). Outlining “three distinct parameters… length, structure and time,” Parker outlines form as the “overall shape of [a] narrative.” (p.21) A linear-structured narrative with a length of approx. 101 minutes, whereby events take place chronologically, the shape of *Shame* is not particularly abnormal. Likewise, real time is used to attribute credibility to the narrative events. With *Plot*, McQueen and Morgan employ an ambiguous mode of storytelling. By this, I refer to *Shame*’s stylistic interventions that subtly complicate the first two of Parker’s three key elements of plot: “active questions, engagement and act structures.” (p.29) Its classical three-act structure aside, I would consider the active questions of *Shame* at the rational level of character motivation to pertain to Brandon’s dramatic circumstances; “Will he end his addiction? What will happen between him and Sissy?” At a more emotional level the morality of each character is likely questioned; “Why is there angst between the siblings? What drives Brandon to fulfil his urges?” These *thematic concerns* are a means of *engagement* between the audience and spectator (p.25), and are accentuated by stylistic devices that I shall explore later.

Two other elements of plot engagement are point of view and the definition of protagonists and antagonists (p.26). With the latter, again typical of art cinema, McQueen and Morgan construct two morally questionable characters, neither of whom exhibit any superior nobility over the layperson, thus blurring the distinction between ‘protagonist’ and ‘antagonist’. Concerning point of view, a note on spectatorial alignment may assist the discussion. Murray Smith’s ‘structure of sympathy’ outlines three levels of character engagement; recognition, alignment and allegiance (1995: 81-86). Alignment denotes the placement “of spectators… in relation to the characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel.” (p.83) This placement pertains to *range* and *depth* (Bordwell, 1985: 57-58). Despite omitting a fuller unpacking of Smith and Bordwell’s seminal works in cognitivist narratology, one may still recognise the value of Parker’s comments on point-of-view by loosely tracing these notions over *Shame*, considering the access to Brandon and Sissy that is granted. On occasion, one learns information that Brandon could not; Sissy’s deflated sigh after his reluctance towards her presence; her initial flirtation with David, his boss; her urge to stand on the train platform edge. These moments amplify the emotional consequences of both characters’ actions. The majority of time, however, is spent with Brandon himself; sharing his sexual intimacies, finding Sissy in his shower and, later, his floor; even seeing into one of his fantasies (think of depth). The middle two examples demonstrate how “[revealing] narrative information… only as the protagonist encounters it… enhances the element of surprise.” (Parker, 2006: 26). Again, however, stylistic elements yet to be discussed complicate *Shame*’s engagement, exemplifying the complex and dialectical nature of the creative matrix.

The final grouping is *Genre* and *Style*. Acknowledging the dubious nature of both terms, Parker first looks to “provide a clear definition” of genre as a “set of patterns… [used] in interpreting the screenwork.” (p.29). It is here that I consider Parker’s writing to be most inadequate as a theoretical supplement for aspiring screenwriters. Genre is a contentious philosophical issue, yet it is not perceived as such here. Recognising the varied range of genre possibilities, Parker considers *primary* and *secondary* elements (p.29) without demonstrating a methodology for recognising these elements independently, instead depositing two examples of primary and six subsequent secondary genres. To mend the resulting disparity, I believe further reference to Bordwell clarifies *Shame*’sposition as an art film and allows one to recognise “art cinema as a mode of practise… *[lacking]... familiar genres*…” (2012: 151, 154. Emphasis mine). Here then I must finally unpack the stylistic elements of *Shame*’s screenplay that determine its tragic tone, emphasise its emotional thematic concerns, and complicate its point of view.

Recognising that *Style* is “an area of screenwriting [that] has all too often been seen as exclusively the director’s territory,” nine “style tools” are outlined (Parker, 2006: 35-36). I shall reflect on five of these; *Location*; *Sound*; *Characterisation*; *Dialogue*; *Editing* (pp.36-37) - the remaining four either hold little salience to my analysis or are too insufficient in their definition for any pragmatic application. The *location* of *Shame* is New York City. This is not explicitly mentioned until page 49 in the screenplay - possibly because McQueen was to direct the film, and so was aware of the chosen setting. Or, perhaps, establishing a modern affluent setting was all that was required to evoke concerns toward the narrative’s contemporary theme of addiction to pornography and casual sex. This contrasts *sound*, as McQueen and Morgan immediately detail the “PEEP PEEP PEEP of an alarm clock… MUFFLED PAD of FOOTSTEPS… The SOUND of his feet… The MURMUR of an answer phone…” [sic] This focus on sound highlights the humanistic *dialogue* throughout *Shame*, as extended conversational moments, including time spent at a bar with friends, an argument with Sissy, and his first date this Marianne, are contrasted with scenes featuring little-to-no dialogue. In the date scene, Brandon’s cold and apathetic temperament is replaced with a more nervous and vulnerable behaviour. This pertains to the *characterisation* of the two lead characters, how they “[express] emotions and the range of emotions… within the narrative.” (p.36) Appropriately, in this realist art film, dialogue is a prominent vehicle for characterisation and exposition, for example either explaining or deliberately leaving ambiguous the siblings’ history.

The final tool, *editing*, plays a large role in the formation of the film’s tone, thematic concern and character alignment. Consider the following edit: After his impotence with Marianne, some time is spent observing his humiliated silent isolation before cutting to a climactic moment with a prostitute some hours later. This ellipsis distances the audience from the main character in the narrative, despite the aforementioned *depth* of the narration. Analysing McQueen’s earlier film, *Hunger* (2008), Jennie Carlsten says “The use of ellipsis can add to the ambiguity of meaning, working against the principles of clarity and comprehension to foster intentional ambiguity around events, motivation, or causality.” (2015: 48) A stylistic trait of McQueen then, ellipsis in *Shame* heightens the focus on emotional thematic concerns, blurs the character alignment and disrupts the plot, punctuating moments of dialogue and action with spatio-temporal jumps that disposition the viewer to a point of alienation congruent with Brandon’s own circumstance. These complications demonstrate to integral nature of the six elements of Parker’s matrix.

My short screenplay, *Benign*, follows teenager Joe, who begins suffering from crippling headaches. He fearfully keeps the problem to himself before his girlfriend, Georgia learns of his worries and helps him seek help. This story, like *Shame*, features no definitive goal for its main character, instead emphasising themes including fear of the unknown, of death, of illness and the surrounding social pressures. I would thus likewise label my approach as developing a story-based theme through character, highlighted by a similar open ending that foregrounds the emotional state of *Joe*, rather than the dramatic events that surround him. Thus, like *Shame*, *Benign* relies on defined characterisation to forge sympathy for these characters. The plot and style grants fluctuating level of access to characters’ emotions - exemplified by a scene which follows Georgia as she frantically retrieves Joe a drink, for once departing from Joe during a moment of pain. An assessment of *Shame*’s form is difficult to cleanly translate to *Benign*, due to the formal differences between short and feature films, as Parker says: “The medium short… is a narrative which can support… a series of episodic moments and requires dramatic development...” (Parker, 2006, p.71) Prompting emotional questions like “What is the cause of his migraines? What consequences will he face for his inaction? Why will he not seek help?” the narrative evokes notions of isolation and ‘fearing the worst’, both relatively relatable themes that, by Parker’s logic, hold an audience to the narrative (p.19) . As with *Shame*’s categorisation as an art film, *Benign*, too thus lacks any familiar genre traits, favouring a more impressionistic style. By this, I refer to elliptical editing (spatio-temporal cuts) and minimalistic dialogue, with a heavy reliance on naturalistic soundscapes and isolated locations.

Regrettably, any extended discussion regarding my concerns with the pedagogical value Parker’s creative matrix must be omitted here. Nonetheless, one can recognise its value in understanding the fundamental elements of screenwriting, whilst still accommodating “the particular… experience which the screenwriter puts into creating the unique screenplay only they can write.” (p.12) It is hoped that the reader may also recognise the parallels drawn between *Shame* and *Benign*, and how these comparisons were efficiently made with the assistance of Parker’s model.

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