

Viewer Unease in *Elephant*

~Analysis of Narrative Control over Chaos and Order~

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Elephant by Gus van Sant, as one of the films which challenge the classical Hollywood plot structure features various devices to create entropy for the chaos and conversion into order under the control of narrative. The classical Hollywood style of plot, featuring the existence of protagonist who aims for a single goal, creates clear plot structure that characters are within a hierarchy and the development of sequence is linked by clear cause and effect logic. And as the background and the goals of characters are introduced in the earlier part of the film, audience is provided easy access to the protagonist's subjective state, and quickly identifies with him/her. Thus audience could predict the story of the film by indulging expectation toward further development, and at last gain satisfaction and relief as the conflicts within a film resolve and the story closes along with narrative discourse. The tendency of this conventional plot development becomes one of the bases for audience perception understanding, and evaluation of the film, and with this plot structure, other devices which also connect story and plot are being concealed.

However, films with more than one character aiming for different goals, widely known as ensemble

films, such as *Grand Hotel*, *Magnolia*, and *Nashville*, reject that conventional Hollywood formula. These films in the first place exclude the hierarchy of characters that each characters aims at a different goal and they never interrelate all together. In the absence of the core basis of conventional plot-, character hierarchy and single goal-, audience has to rely on the “narrative” in order to gain access to the story from the plot. Thus in these ensemble piece films, narrative itself plays a more central role in creating audience viewing experience of the individual film. The narrative suppresses the potential of “chaos” which the stereotyped plot development has concealed, and imposes “order” in order to let audience access to the story from the plot. Namely, the close analysis of these ensemble pieces reveals how the narrative effectively controls the entropy and creates unity, which influences the audience viewing experience radically.

Then the analysis of narrative from three principals brought by Kristin Thompson and Bordwell reveals *Elephant* as a radically innovative film to which creates totally different viewing experience by the features of its narrative technique. Unlike other ensemble piece films mentioned, *Elephant* challenged the methods of narrative logic and the linear progression of time that conventional narrative structure upholds. For this overturn of conventional narrative technique, the plot engagement has been stymied, the continuity of time is subverted, and only the continuity of the space is maintained. Thus the treatments of plot and time function as the device to increase the potential for the confusion, and the spatial continuity is the sole element which creates unity of the film. Close analyze of each of the elements, reveals that the highly realistic feature of the film creates unique viewing experience for the narrative control over potential for the confusion, and in the end creates coherence.

Although the viewer is conscious that they are watching the film, the way film approaches the character, the contingency the film preserves, and limited access to the overall plot creates ambiguity and makes the viewing experience realistic as the film is portrayal of their daily life. This unique effect is created by the narrative principles, which are time, space, and narrative logic, controlling the fundamental potential for an entropy and diegetic technique of bringing coherency and order. Therefore, *Elephant's* challenge toward conventional Hollywood narrative has succeeded in building up unique viewing experience of reality. Even the film is played beyond the screen, it leads audience to engage with the space and gives the perception of film as an extension of audience's daily life. This new experience of watching the film, created by the narrative control, is the unease that *Elephant* leaves after and establishes the innovative usage of narrative techniques.