Film as a Mass Communication Medium: Unpacking Its Encoding and Decoding Processes

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Abstract

Communication is the art sending and receiving information, idea or messages from one end to another. The medium of communication could take diverse means which could be traditional, formal, informal or even electronic. The content of information to be communicated from a sender ultimately determines the medium or media to be employed by the sender. Film as an electronic medium of communicating ideas passes through stages before reaching the decoder which could be referred to as viewers. The peculiarity of film medium is embedded in its ability to be decoded by all classes of people in the society since it is an audio /visual medium. The codes in filmmaking which the film maker encodes to arrive at the finished film product is decoded by the target audience whom the message is meant for. The decoding of film language transcends from the script conception to the final level which is distribution. Using a comparative analytical method, this paper sees the process of film making as an art of encoding a message both to the film makers and the targeted audience who get to see the film as a finished product. The success of every film is dependent on the ability of all film designers on set to understand codes from the director as the chief interpreter. This paper sees a communication breakdown when the methodology employed by the film maker does not deliver the intended message to the audience via the film crew. It therefore posits that right coding system should be judiciously applied for proper decoding by the viewers.

Introduction

"The need to communicate with our fellow human beings is as

fundamental as the physical basic requirement of food and shelter. This urge for communication is a primal one and, in our contemporary civilization, a necessity for survival" Agee, Ault, and Emery (18). Real concludes that communication could be defined in many different ways after he got different definitions from several persons he asked what communication means. Real summed up some of the definitions when he said:

> Communication does involve the 'transfer of ideas, information, and understanding.' Communication may not be a 'method of teaching,' but it is involved in all forms of teaching. We communicate 'by whatever means is available.' And for communication to take place, we must 'transcend all physical, mental, and emotional blocks.' (4).

Communication over the years has developed from only direct face to face messages between one person to another to one person addressing a mass audience at the same time through media that allow that kind of communication. This act of communicating with many persons at the same time is what Agee et al refer to as mass communication, which is "the process of delivering information, ideology, and attitude to a sizeable and diversified audience through the use of media developed for that purpose" (19).

Communication has its process, and the process has four aspects according to Agee, Ault, and Emery, which are the communicator, the message, the channel, and the audience. Agee et al further explains the process by saying:

> ...the communicator is also known as the encoder; the message – whether words, pictures, or signs – becomes symbol; the channel, in the case of mass communication, is one of the media; the person in the audience is known as the decoder. (20)

Read illustrates the above mentioned communication process when he said:

> The process of communication takes place when someone says something in some way to someone else for a purpose. The someone is the sender; something is the message; some way is the channel; someone else is the receiver; and purpose is the reason for communicating in the first place. (5)

With the above statements from Agee et al and Read, one can agree that communication is the process of transferring information from one person to another or many persons through a channel for a purpose.

This paper intends to look at film as a medium of mass communication, therefore, it will not be out of place to shed light on film and what it means. It is also important to note that film is a product of communication between the film maker and the script, between the film maker and other artistic interpreters.

"Filmmaking is visual storytelling in the form of shots that make up scenes and scenes that eventually make up a complete film" (9). Film is the art of filmmakers, and Stroller reckons that "as a filmmaker, you have the power to affect people's emotions, make them see things differently, help them discover new ideas, or just create an escape for them" (9). Film is the medium filmmakers use to communicate ideas, information, experiences, and understanding to any number of persons that may range from one person to as many persons at the same time. Bordwell & Thompson agree with this when they said, "films communicate information and ideas, and they show us places and ways of life that we might not otherwise know... Film offers us ways of seeing and feeling that we find deeply gratifying" (2). Film uses shots, characters, sound, stories, and images that are recorded live or generated graphically to take the audience through journeys and experiences.

> The experiences are often driven by stories, with characters we come to care about, but a film can also develop and idea or explore visual qualities or sound texture. A film takes us on a journey, offering a patterned experience that engages our minds and emotions. (2)

This paper will discuss the stages of film production from the very beginning – when the idea to make the film was born – to the end – when audience have access to the film, and the way each stage/phase of film production contributes its own part to the communication process of film and the overall message film transmits to the audience. Therefore, it is against the background of the communicative nature of film that this paper seeks the explore the communicative ingredients of film which in turn affects the human sociocultural environment.

Development Stage

The development stage is also known as the preparation stage, it is the very first stage of film production. Here, the story idea is created, a treatment is drawn up, characters are developed, and eventually a script is born. Consultations and negotiations with production outfits/studios and distributors are made, rights and or permissions to story materials, if the story is gotten from an existing work, are sought for and gotten, and contracts of all kinds are signed in this stage. Not all projects in development stage eventually get made due to many factors such as financing and profit prospect. A good script is needed to get financial backing for a film in development stage. Cones agrees with this when he says "the script must be sufficiently detailed to provide the production company and others participating in the financing of the motion picture to estimate the cost of producing the motion picture" (xxiv). In other words, in this phase "the idea of the film is developed and a screen play is written. The filmmakers also acquire financial support for the project" (Bordwell & Thompson, (15). For this stage, we will look at how the scriptwriter/screenwriter, through film script/screenplay, contributes to the communication process of film.

According to Bordwell & Thompson, "the chief task of the screenwriter is to prepare a screenplay [or script]" (16), and the screenplay should be in a screenplay format because, according to Brown, screenplay format makes identifying each location, knowing if it is day or night scene, and knowing who is in the scene easier to spot, highlight, and track, and it also helps the screenplay to communicate the character's internal thoughts through external means to the audience. The

screenplay begins the communication process of the film idea to the audience, and a good screenplay should communicate idea to the audience, evoke emotions from the audience, and should entice and carry the reading and viewing audiences along. In order for a screenplay to do these, Hauge suggest the following rules and guidelines: you must create a movie in the mind of the reader; nothing goes on the page that doesn't go on the screen; there are three uses of a screenplay – proposal, blueprint, and record; there must be nothing in the script that you know can be improved; and improper format reduces the reader's emotional involvement. In communicating his idea to the other filmmakers and eventually the audience, the following are some elements the screenwriter uses:

–   **Scene Heading**: this is how the screen writer tells his readers – the people turning the screenplay to film and anyone that picks the script up to read – whether each scene takes place inside or outside, the location of each scene, and the time of the day of each scene.

–   **Description**: Screenwriters use vivid and colourful explanation of a character, location, item etc to help evoke appropriate emotions in the audience. "The element common to all good descriptive writing is detail. The particulars of appearance, attire, décor, attitude, and manner that convey the essence and the uniqueness of a character and settings are the ones to employ" Hauge, (143).

–   **Action:** According to Hauge, clarity is the screenwriter's primary goal when writing actions in a screenplay. The screenwriter uses action to "convey to the reader exactly what is happening on screen, so that there is no confusion, misunderstanding, or need for the reader to reread the passage" Hauge (145).

–   **Character**: this is the vehicle with which the screenwriter drives his messages and ideas to the audience. It is the main element the screenwriter uses to evoke emotion from the audience. Ross believes that one cannot overstate the importance of character, and that the main thing that compels people to watch a show, even after many years, is the character, therefore the characters must be original and emotionally

involving for the screenwriter's communication to his audience through his/her characters to breakthrough.

−   **Dialogue**: the words the characters speak. The screenwriter uses this to reveal the emotional states and actions of the characters in the screenplay, and it is also used to get the audience to know more about the characters. For the screenwriter, the "primary goal is for the dialogue to contribute to the overall thrust of the story and to the desired character development" Hauge, (154).

In all, the script is the blueprint and foundation for whatever idea or emotion or message that the filmmakers intend to communicate to the audience.

Pre-Production
This is the second phase of film production, and the activities here are pretty much larger than that of the first phase – development stage. "During preproduction, a lot of things are happening at the same time under the supervision of the director and producer" Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, (17). Here, crew members are employed, auditions are done, actors are being cast for roles, locations are locked in, budget is drawn up, storyboard is ready, script is finally locked in, shoot schedule is prepared, props and costumes for shoot are acquired, gears for shoot are booked, shot list is done, floor plans are drawn, sets are constructed if needed, shooting script is locked in, location recce for all locked in locations are done, script discussion and rehearsals with actors are done, contracts are signed, and permits are gotten by the producer, etc. Although the producer and director take central role in activities of this stage, all heads of departments (and crew members that are already on board of the project) also work hard to make this phase a success. This is the stage where almost every aspect of the film process is put in place. Now is the time to "build in all the elements instrumental to the foundation of your project, to design what it should look like, and to explore all of the variables needed to create a successful production" Rea & Irving, (25). Do not be scared to spend as much time as possible in this stage because the better you organize the film production at this stage the easier the next stages will be. "The first thing you should do when beginning preproduction is set aside a drawer in your side cabinet to centralize all the information you collect" Rahmel, (14).

Now that we have an idea of things that are done at this stage of film production, we will look at how the producer and director contribute to the communication process of film to the audience in this stage. In order to be able to communicate the scriptwriter's idea effectively, the filmmaking team should be right for the job, and it is the duty of the producer to hire the right crew, crew that "must be in mutual liking of both the producer and the director" Rea & Irving, (xxiii). This is to make sure that all parties work together peacefully so as to achieve a successful communication of ideas and emotions to the audience at the end. The director, together with the producer (and a casting director, if the production can afford any) audition actors to cast for each role putting into consideration the talent of the actors to be able to interpret the roles of their characters the appropriate way, the actor's availability for the shoot and rehearsal, and what the actors will cost the production. Rea and Irving agree with this when they say:

> Just as important as finding the right actors to flesh out the story in front of the camera is the search for the right support group behind the camera. The crew represents the nuts and bolts of the production machine. The success of the project lies in their ability to collectively carry out the director's vision of the script. The actors are the words with which you will tell your story. They allow the audience to enter the world of your drama by bringing to life the scripted characters. (95)

Cohen believes that audition is the opportunity for actors to show to the director and producer (and casting director, if there's any) that he or she is the best for the role being sought, and the director on the other hand will generally look for, in the actor(s) auditioning, "the actor's ease at handling the role; naturalness of delivery; physical, vocal, and emotional suitability for the part; and spontaneity, power, and charm" (365). The director rehearses with the actors that have been cast so that they can understand the characters they are playing through investigating the overall world the film intends to capture through the script, the character's biography and or profile, aim and objectives of the character, the subtext

of the film, etc., and also understand the director and screenwriter's overall idea so as to help them communicate the ideas, emotions and information the appropriate way.

> The director almost certainly will lead discussions, offer opinions, and issues directives with respect to some or all of these matters [investigated]; the director may also provide reading materials, pictures, and music to aid the actor in his research. (365)

Choosing the cast and crew that are most fit for the production is usually a huge step in the right direction of successfully encoding information, ideas, emotions etc. that the filmmakers will eventually transmit to the audience through the film to decode.

Production
"Although the term 'production' refers to the entire process of making a film, Hollywood filmmakers also use it to refer to the shooting phase" Bordwell & Thompson, (17). This phase is the third stage of film production, and it is also known as the principal photography stage. This is the phase of filmmaking where the story that has been written on paper is told or re-written physically. The stage where the film is shot. According to Travis.

> The production process is the second telling of the story... and in this second telling we suddenly have living human beings in real sets and real locations, having genuine interaction with each other. Very different from the words typed on the page. (239)

This is the stage where the film itself is shot either on location or on set. In this stage the director takes the centre stage, "it is the director who controls the film's form and content" (148). Though the director is the general overseer in this phase but, according to Bordwell & Thompson (2008), there are different units of specialized labour in this phase, and each unit is supervised by its head of department. In this phase we will

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look at how the director of photography and actors contribute to the overall process of film as a communication medium.

The actor has three tools – voice, body, and mind/imagination – she/he uses to communicate the director and the screenwriter's idea and message to the audience. According to Frakes, the actor uses body language [which is] a form of non-verbal communication to pass messages to the audience. Those body languages include: gesticulations, body position, body movements, spatial relationship between actors and objects, facial expressions, other movements such as running, walking, etc. The actors body can be used to communicate various information such as weather, emotion, environment, time, season, era, location. Frakes also note that actor uses his whole body to communicate and express character, ideas, and experiences, and that the actor uses his body to show but not tell. The voice is the tool that the actor uses to tell. To the actor, "Voice means sound, breath, diction, speech, and communication skills" . The way the actor tells the audience messages defer based on the emotion the actor is trying to get across to and get from the audience. This is done with change in sound and tone, and Frakes mentions quality, pitch, volume, and pace as the four ways to change sound and tone.

> Quality is the sound or tone of the individual voice. Pitch is the relative highness or lowness of the sound. Volume is the relative strength, force or intensity of the sound. The rate, pace, time or tempo is the basic speed, or rhythm, in which you speak. (48)

"Theory of mind is the ability to understand what others are thinking, feeling, believing, and desiring" The mind is the tool the actor uses to interpret her role, understand the words on the pages of the screenplay, understand and explore the subtext in and intentions of each line on the screenplay, to decide on how to interpret and deliver the lines using the voice and the body, and to think about and understand her character.

> Actors are in charge of creating a character from the words on a page. To do this, first the actors have to

> figure out what the character wants—the goals and objectives that must be achieved within the context of the play, or movie, or 30-minute sitcom. Often a script is only the bare bones of the character's objectives—just the lines the character will say, and the lines that others will say in response. From these bones the actor creates a nuanced portrait. (12).

For the actor to effectively do the afore stated by Goldstein, which will make him communicate the screenwriter's message and the director's idea effectively to the audience, the actor needs to use his mind effectively.

The director of photography also known as D.O.P or cinematographer is the film crew that, in collaboration with the director, establishes the visual look and feel of the film. He is in-charge of directing the camera to tell the story the screenwriter and director intends to tell visually. The D.O.P uses camera shots, shot composition, camera setup, and shooting style to visually interpret the words written in the script and the director's vision, and to also enhance the performance of the actors in order to effectively communicate the appropriate idea, emotion, message, and information of the film to the audience. The cinematographer may use handheld shooting style to create tension and visually express the emotional struggles of a character. One of the things the D.O.P uses shot composition for, according to Mercado, is to ensure that the subject(s) in shot has enough looking room, which will make the shot not look static and also gives it visual tension if/when needed. Camera setup is used to get shots from different angles and may be in static or moving form. The moving form of camera setup "helps to add energy to the film, but only in a manner that enhances the story, or at least does not detract from it" (10). The cinematographer uses different types of camera shots such as close up shot, medium shot, long shot etc to tell visual stories. Camera shots are more effective in telling stories when put together because each shot serves different purposes. For example,

> The extreme close up allows you to concentrate the audience's attention on a tiny detail of a character or on

> small objects. While the close up lets the audience see
> nuances of performance that would normally be lost in
> wider shots, the extreme close up can effectively isolate
> even smaller, single visual details from the rest of the
> scene. (29).

This phase of film production ends when the director says 'its a wrap!'.

Post-Production

This is the fourth stage of film production, it starts after the principal photography phase is finished, and it takes longer time than the filming phase. This is where the film is polished and put to its final shape. "During postproduction, pictures and sound that have been recorded are shaped to tell your story. It is the time to create the 'final draft' of the script: the draft that is pieced together with film of tape" Rea & Irving, (217). The activities done during this stage include: editing – picture and sound, sound design and sound mix, colour grading, special effects – including CGI and animations if required, opening and end credits are added, musics/songs are composed and added, etc. "These activities often require technically sophisticated editing, sound and effects work" Cones, (.xxiv). The editor, often supervised by the director, plays the major role in this stage, he cuts the shots together, and he produces a picture edit using the best takes of the shots filmed. "During the editing process you [editor and director] are making your final selections in terms of performance, rhythm, pacing, continuity, and structure" (269). Bordwell & Thompson also state that:

> Once the shots are arranged in something approaching
> final form, the sound editor takes charge of building up
> the sound track. The director, the composer, the picture
> editor, and the sound editor view the film and agree on
> where music and effects will be placed, a process known
> as spotting. (23)

Here, we will discuss how the editor's work contributes to the communication process of the film. The editor assembles the shots that

the cinematographer took during the principal photography stage to create the final look of the film. The goals of the editor, according to Dancyger, are to edit for narrative clarity, edit for dramatic emphasis, edit for subtext, and edit for aesthetics.

> The challenge with editor begins with the articulation of premise. Whether narrative is complex or simple, the first task of the editor is to reveal the premise and to make sure that it resonates emotionally in every scene and that its prime carrier is the main character.(243)

The editor also has the challenges of keeping the plot moving, editing for clear and logical performance of the actors, selection of shots to put together so as to create emphasis where and when necessary, knowing the exact pace to use for each scene and the film in general, etc.

> Editors and their directors use dramatic emphasis to point out to their audience that what they are now experiencing – image and sound – is more important to them than what has preceded it and, possibly, what is to follow. (255).

The editor does the final telling of the story, and he helps the screenwriter, director, D.O.P, actors, and producer to shape the story, message, idea, and emotion they have all been trying to communicate to the audience. This stage marks the end of the creation of the film.

It is good and necessary to understand that "The phases [of filmmaking] can overlap. Filmmakers may be scrambling for funds while shooting and assembling the film, and some assembly is usually taking place during filming" Bordwell & Thompson, (15).

Films these days are made more for commercial values than they are made for artistic values. The foreseen commercial success of a film makes film studios or and executive producers invest their money and

time on making a film. Donahue (1987) emphasized this point when she said:

> Motion pictures today are too expensive to produce without consideration of how they will reach and be received by the public. Because of high cost of distribution, the studios find it unprofitable to distribute a film with a gross rental potential of less than $10 million. (1)

If Donahue could say this in 1987 one can imagine why film studios have now sky-rocketed their gross rental potentials to hundreds of millions of dollars considering that they spend millions of dollars for production and distribution. This will lead me to the next phase, which is film distribution.

Film Distribution

Film distribution deals with making a finished film available for people to watch. The aim of film distributor is to get the finished film out to as much audience as possible to watch. According to Screen Australia.

> Feature film distribution traditionally begins with domestic theatrical release – an exclusive run in cinemas. The film will then move to the home entertainment market – DVD, Blu-ray, download-to-own and online rental – followed by subscription television and, finally, a screening on free-to-air television. A film might skip a theatrical release if the distributor feels the potential cinema audience is not large enough to sustain the expense, or if the film is better suited to the home entertainment market. (7)

The film distributor does his job through promotion and marketing. Film promotion has to do with advertising or any other way of spreading the news about the film, its release, and where to see it after it's been released, to as many people as possible. This helps to build high interest in the film before and after being released. Marketing, in general, is the act of promoting, as well as, selling goods and services. It is also

"...the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfies individual and organizational goals. The twofold goal of marketing is to attract new customers by promising superior value and keep and grow current customers by delivering satisfaction" Kotler, (4).

These meanings and goal of marketing are applicable to whatever product one wishes to market, including film.

For film, according to Cones, marketing is:
The combined activity of the sales and advertising department of the film distributor. The sales department books pictures into theatres, determines when a film will open, what the release pattern will be, and upon what terms the film will be exhibited. The advertising and publicity departments seek to increase the awareness of a film among prospective movie goers and their interest in seeing a film. (294)

Mingant, Tirtaine, and Augros believe that identifying target audience through what they call film marketing mix, which are: director, actors, script, genre, age classification, is the first step of film marketing. The marketer also maps out what they call SWOT – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats. This will help the marketers focus the film on the right audience so that the film's intended communication will break through. Mingant, Tirtaine, and Augros continued by stating that "once the target audience is identified, the [marketing] team determines the film's positioning by setting its identity and defining where it stands in relation to other films in the market and the audiences' minds" (2). Fisher is of the opinion that marketing can determine if a film will eventually be made or not, if it will get the financial support it needs to be a hit or not, and that marketing overshadows the actual process of making a film. In marketing a film, the distribution company uses several strategies such as advertising and promotion to create awareness and interest in seeing the

film amongst audiences.

This is the stage where the audience's interest and attention are drawn to the ideas and messages the screenwriter, producer, director, D.O.P, actor, editor etc. are trying to communicate to the audience, what avenues the audience can see and hear the idea and message through, and what it will cost them to see and hear the idea and message.

Film Exhibition

Film exhibition is the public display of film. This public display of film can be in cinema/movie theatre, town hall, film festivals, academic screening, etc. Film exhibition could be theatrical or non-theatrical. Theatrical exhibitions are done in the cinemas while non-theatrical exhibitions are screenings done in a place other than the cinema. Before we go further, I'll like to trace the evolution of film exhibition. According to Totaro.

> The first public screenings of moving pictures were in 1893 with Edison's Kinetoscope's, where a single person would put a coin into a stand-up wooden cabinet to view a 30 second film in a peephole viewfinder. Films then moved to a variety of 'public' locations (vaudeville theatres, amusement parks, carnivals, etc.) where the film was just one of several entertainment acts on a program, then to the first dedicated (mainly storefront) cinema houses during the Nickelodeon era (1905-1913), before the period of the movie palaces in the 1920s, which would proof the mainstay of the industry for decades (1).

For the history of commercial exhibition of film, it is most popularly believed that:

> The world's first screening of a motion picture to a paying audience took place at the Grand Cafe in Paris on 28 December 1895; it was a programme of short films by

> Louis Lumiere, who with his brother Auguste ran a photography firm in Lyon, Powrie & Reader, (3).

Although film exhibitions are mostly done for the purpose of making profit, there are still some exhibitions that are done for non-profit making reasons, such as promoting the love of cinema/film culture amongst people.

Film exhibition is the duty of film exhibitors, which mostly use to be Cinemas and film festivals but now includes online video streaming applications and websites such as YouTube, Vimeo, Stan, Netflix etc., and also DVDs and Blurays. Exhibitors can be said to be those who sell the film experience to the public or audience. This is the last phase of film as a medium of communication. In this phase, whatever information, ideas, emotions, messages, experiences, and understanding that have been encoded by the screenwriter, director, producer, D.O.P, actors, editors, and other filmmakers in the film will be transmitted to the audience to decode. In other words, this is the stage where the audience get to watch the film that the filmmakers have spent time to make, get whatever the filmmakers are trying to communicate to them, then interpret it to their own understanding. The audience no longer need to go to cinemas or film festivals to see a film. They can be in the comfort of their homes and exhibit a film on the mobile phones, pads, and laptop computers.

In conclusion, In filmmaking, encoding can be said to be the process of putting the scriptwriter's script, the director's vision, the actors' performances and or acting, the cinematographer's shots, the editor's cuts, the composer's music, the sound recordists' sounds, and all other roles performed by filmmakers into a specialized format – film – for transmission to the audience, while decoding on the other hand is the process of the audience watching, and interpreting and understanding the film that has been encoded by the filmmakers then transmitted to them. So it will not be out of place to say that filmmakers are the encoders of information while the audiences are the decoders of information, and that the process of filmmaking can be said to be the encoding process of information while the viewing by the audience is the decoding process.

Finally, film, through whatever form, is a very effective channel for communicating ideas and messages to the twenty first century

audience because of the popularity and easy access to internet; mobile mediums of exhibition such as mobile phones, pads, and laptop computers that can be carried around; and download-to-own websites, online rental websites, subscription television such as stan, Netflix, YouTube red etc.; and websites that allow the audience or people to stream videos for free such as YouTube, vimeo, Facebook etc. audiences can now watch films wherever and whenever they want to.

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