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TV Criticism

Image and Sound Essay: *Treasure Planet*

Treasure Planet (2002, dir. Ron Clements and John Musker) is a Disney animated film. The film follows Jim Hawkins (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), a young teen from the planet Montessor, and John Silver (Brian Murray), the pirating cyborg, as the two travel the stars in search of the legendary Treasure Planet. The particular scene that this essay focuses on occurs on the journey after the crew escapes a black hole. Jim's job was to secure the lifelines of the entire crew as they rushed about, and after being wrongfully told that one the lifelines failed to save a crew member who fell overboard, Jim feels dejected and useless. The scene that follows, and the one that is being examined, is a turning point in the film. Silver approaches Jim as he sits alone on the boat, and in the conversation that follows, Silver aims to change Jim's outlook on the incident and life. The film's usage of lighting, sound, and framing help to further the narrative and emotional change that Jim undergoes in this scene.

Lighting

The first element that helps emphasize the emotional turmoil and journey that Jim undergoes in the particular scene is the contrast of backlighting in the beginning and ending of the scene. In the beginning of the scene, Jim only appears with purples and blues with the additional yellow dabbed in as his backlight and background (see Appendix A). These color choices fit the beginning mood of the scene since cool colors reflect sadness and despair. By having Jim, while he is still saddened by the tragedy of the scene prior, backlit by cool colors, the lighting immediately establishes the emotions of the scene as sad.

Once the mood shifts, and once Silver begins to speak to Jim in an affirming way, the backlighting changes. The backlight becomes yellows and oranges as Silver reminds Jim that his future is, in fact, bright. As Jim listens to Silver's words and begins to believe in himself, the backlight reflects the change in his emotional understanding. As Jim's outlook on the situation brightens, so does the light illuminating him. The final shot of the scene is Jim turning to glance back at Silver before he descends below deck (see Appendix E). The light behind Jim is all bright, and this usage of colors in the backlight helps illustrate that Jim feels more confident about his future.

Sound

This particular scene of *Treasure Planet* utilizes both diegetic and nondiegetic sound in its emotional journey. The diegetic sound, as defined by Jeremy Butler in his 2012 book *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, is sound that is heard by both the viewers of the film and the characters in the film. The scene contains typical diegetic sounds, such as the dialogue between Silver and Jim, footsteps, and other movements of both the characters and props. The dialogue is the most valuable piece playing into the emotion of the scene. Jim initially starts the conversation by expressing his despair as a result of his perceived failure. Silver's motivational words in response to Jim's pain help take the mood from hopeless to hopeful. Without the dialogue, the scene would have no movement.

The nondiegetic sound also plays an extremely important part in establishing the shift of mood in the scene. Butler establishes nondiegetic sound as being sound effects that only viewers can hear, and typically those sounds are music that sets the emotion of the scene (2012). *Treasure Planet* utilizes this strategy. At the commencement of the scene, the background music heard is slow, soft, and sad. It reflects the turmoil that Jim is feeling as he sits on the ropes of the

boat, staring out toward the stars and fiddling with a rope in his hand. The music emphasizes the despair the character on screen is feeling, and it helps the audience experience a similar emotion. The nondiegetic sound is vital for creating that emotional connection between the audience and Jim.

As the scene progresses, Silver reaches out and grabs Jim's shoulder, turning Jim to face him; in that moment, the music changes. While the beat remains slow, the notes pick up and become less melancholy and more hopeful. The music continues to build as Silver's words become more and more impactful. The shift in music helps illustrate to the audience the emotional change that Jim undergoes at Silver's words. By changing the music from sad to hopeful, the score illustrates that Jim is not only hearing Silver's words; he is believing them. At the beginning of the scene, he feels like a failure, but as Silver speaks to him, Jim cannot help but be filled with hope for his future. And as hope fills Jim once again, the music changes from hopeless, to hopeful.

Framing

Arguably, the most important element that plays into the emotion the film is attempting to convey is the framing. While the scene itself is only three minutes long, the shots within the scene, and how those shots illustrate the characters, are extremely important. The first shot to be discussed is the first shot to contain Jim (see Appendix A). The shot is a long shot of Jim as he sits, lofted by the ropes of the ship. Behind him the stars calmly drift by. The long shot is important because it contains both Jim, the character, and a large portion of the background and setting, the stars. By having the shot show Jim sitting quietly as the stars drift passed him, the shot wordlessly illustrates the hopelessness and despair Jim is experiencing as he feels as though he is being merely moved with and by the stars; he is not an active player, or at least not

anymore. A medium shot would not have created such an emotion as it would not have captured the moving stars to the extent that a long shot did.

The second shot that illustrates the emotions of this particular scene is a close-up on Jim's face right after Silver begins his pep talk (see Appendix B). The close-up reveals the tears in Jim's eyes that are not seen in the previous shot, a two shot containing Silver and Jim. The close-up on Jim's face is important because it highlights the turmoil and sadness Jim is experiencing; a further away shot would not have granted the audience the same view of his emotions as the close-up does. Additionally, this close-up shot happens at a slight high angle. This distinction between an eye level shot and a high angle shot is important because high angle shots tend to show the subject as being more vulnerable (Butler, 2012). By closing looking down onto Jim's tearful face, the audience can see the extent to how beat up Jim is about the whole incident.

The third important shot occurs at the climax of Silver's speech (see Appendix C). The shot is an, almost, over the shoulder two shot. In the shot, Silver turns from Jim to gesture to the stars as the camera slowly zooms out to capture more of the stars. This shot is extremely important because the usage of the zoom to include the star background contrasts the earlier usage of the stars. Where earlier the stars were used to emphasize Jim's discouragement in relation to his future, the small zoom in this shot, combined with Silver's encouraging words, include the stars as a part of Jim's future, not the controller of it. This action, matched with the words, prove to Jim that he has the power to take control over his future even when he personally feels as though he has no control.

The final shot to discuss in the last shot of the scene. After Silver's words, Jim begins to walk away toward the stairs leading below deck. Right before he begins his descent (see

appendix D), he pauses and turns, smiling at Silver before walking away (see Appendix E). This wordless shot is important since the alternating long shot and medium close-up highlight the change Jim has undergone emotionally. Both shots occur at a high angle shot. Jim is still vulnerable, but he has embraced his vulnerability in a way that shows he has accepted the mistakes of his past and is working to heal. Jim's acceptance is clearly seen the moment when he turns to smile at Silver. The medium close-up shot shows that he is feeling better. Furthermore, being close to Jim in this moment calls back to an earlier shot in the scene where the camera was close-up on Jim's despair. The similar closeness to the character acts as another addition to the changes Jim has experienced.

Additionally, the shot is a point-of-view shot; the audience is seeing Jim through Silver's eyes. By having a high angle shot as part of the point-of-view shot, the audience understands that Silver sees him as a vulnerable kid. The point-of-view shot gives the audience a deeper understanding of Silver's mindset. It also helps illustrate to the audience the emotional connection Silver has forged with Jim despite his best effort. Everything combined helps illustrate the change the characters have both experienced. The emotions in the final shot are hopeful: Jim feels as though his future is open, the audience realizes the Silver does foster a fatherly affection for Jim, and the emotions are set up to make the betrayal that comes later in the film all the more difficult.

Conclusion

Despite being a film marketed toward children, *Treasure Planet* demonstrates a competent level of understanding in regard to using production techniques to emphasize emotions. Through lighting, sound, and framing changes, this three minute scene takes both the audience and the characters on an emotional journey. The scene is heartwarming, and the

emotions the viewer feels is a direct result of the directing and animation choices; additionally, the emotions of this scene are necessary to continue the emotional toll the view has to pay to truly enjoy this film. It is scenes like this one that makes *Treasure Planet* a beautiful film that deserves to be appreciated to the extent that other, more mainstream, Disney films are.

Works Cited

Butler, J. (2012). *Television: Critical methods and applications*. Taylor & Francis.

Treasure Planet. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, performances by Brian Murray and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Walt Disney, 2002.

Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D



Appendix E

