

# Media Assignment 26.1

## Film In Theory

---

By Antonia Green

Over the years there have been many theories associated with films and their production. These theories have been used as a way differentiate between different types of film based on things like the genre, content and the creative styles of the director. These theories have been developed and revolutionized over the years as film production has evolved. There are 7 main theories that movies nowadays are based on:

1. Auteur Theory
2. Feminist Theory
3. Semiotic Theory
4. Structuralism
5. Marxism
6. Queer Theory
7. Psychoanalytic Theory

In this essay I will be focusing on two theories and the way two different directors fit into the categories of these theories.



The first theory I am going to focus on is auteur theory, it was established in the 1940s. Auteur theory focuses on the belief that the director of the film has the most creative influence on the production of the film which gives them the same status of a author of a book. The term auteur is used to describe filmmakers or directors that have an easily identifiable style of production. An example of a director whose films fit in with auteur theory is Tom

Henry Selick, he is a writer, producer and director. Formally trained as an animator, he specializes in stop-motion animation and is most famous for directing *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *James and The Giant Peach* (1996). Selick's production style is not only memorable but also recognizable as they are all mostly made using stop-motion animation. His styles are similar to the style Tim Burton uses in some of his animation films for example the animation version of the *Frankenweenie* movie.

To give a better insight of Selick's style and to link it back to auteur theory I will be doing a close analysis of his last production which was released in 2009 *Coraline*. *Coraline* is a stop-motion animation movie that is based on the 2002 Neil Gaimen dark fantasy children's book.



The genre of the film is animation and fantasy that has a small undertone of gothic horror. It is about an 11-year old girl by the name of Coraline who has just moved into a flat in an old house in the Country. She finds a secret door in her new home and discovers an alternate version of her life. At a first glance she believes that this is a better than her real life, but after the alternate version of her mother ('Other Mother') tells her she can stay based on the condition that she has buttons sewn onto her eyes. She leaves and upon returning she finds out that 'Other mother' has kidnapped her parents so she ventures back through the passageway to save her parents.

The main audience demographic for the film is children aged nine and over and the secondary audience is parents and teenagers. The purpose of this narrative is to teach children a lesson. It is to teach them that you cannot always get what you want in life and sometimes having what you want isn't always best for you. It visualises and encodes the mora concept that 'the grass is not always greener on the other side'. Most people who watch the film will decode the movies meanings and understand that this is the primary purpose of the film. However those who have an oppositional reading of the film may disagree

The main technique of the film is stop-motion animation. This method of production involves the making of clay puppets that are physically manipulated into different movements and poses that are photographed in frames that are then put together. It is then played back on a fast motion setting. This makes the scenes look like they have been shot as on consecutive scene and not frame by frame. Selick uses this method of production in many of his films. It is his trademark which makes his films easily recognisable to the audience.

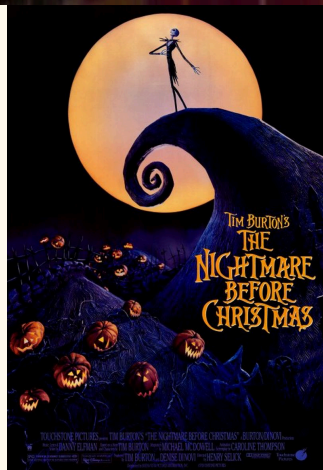


The movie *Coraline* is shot in mainly dark, dingy tones and colors. This highlights the genre of the film as although it is for children it is a gothic horror, fantasy movie. The title frame of the movie shows the name of the film on the lid of a doll making kit. The colours shown in the first scenes are very dark, as the look-alike dolls of the characters are being created by a pair of ghostly looking hands and then thrown out of a window into the night as a way of releasing them into the world. They set the tone for the later part of the movie when things start to take a dark and sinister path. The ghostly needlelike hands are the hands of the 'other mother' which is revealed later in the film when she reveals her true form to Coraline. The spindly hands symbolise the 'other mother' and act as pre-warning to the audience.

Throughout the movie the scenes change in tone and lighting especially when Coraline goes from one dimension to another through the passageway. The settings of the other world and the real world contrast when it comes to colors and lighting tone. The other world having brighter colors and lighter tones, to show it is better than the real world and the real world having darker and duller tones to show that it is not as good as the other world. This gives visual meaning to the saying that the grass isn't always greener on the other side. This is because although the other world was made to be more appealing and desirable to Coraline, it turned out that the real world was where she belonged in the first place.



This picture shows the contrasts between what the real world in the movie looks like and what the other world looks like. In the top photo the colors are very grey and dull which creates a sad, boring tone for the setting. In the photo below the colors are bolder and brighter which creates a more appealing and desirable tone. The differences in Coraline's bedroom decoration also show how different the two worlds are. Her bedroom in the real world are grey and there is less furniture where as her bedroom in the other world has color on the walls and more furniture



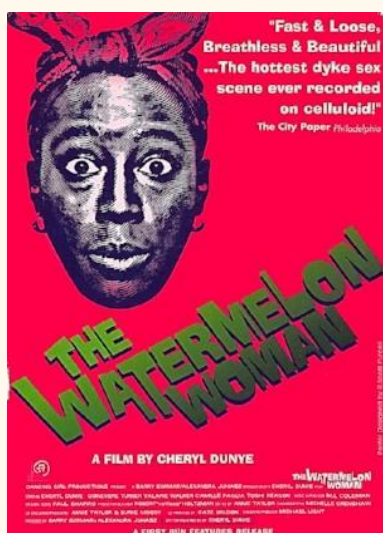
These techniques used and method of film production in this film and other films directed by Harry Selick are all of the little things that add up to create his creative signature, that has become memorable and easily recognisable over the years. Other films he has made for example The Nightmare before Christmas although for children also have a dark and gothic feel and are also shot in very dark tones and lighting.



The other theory I have chosen to analyse is the Feminism film theory. Feminist film theory is based on feminist views and challenges the roles and views of women in the film industry and other areas of media. It criticises and analyses how women are portrayed in movies, TV shows. Music videos etc. It looks at the foundations and elements of film from a female point of view, this is because most media productions are made from the male gaze or point of view. The feminist director I am going to focus on is Cheryl Dunye. Born 13th may 1966 in Liberia and raised in Philadelphia. She is a film writer, producer, director and actor. As well being a feminist filmmaker she also comes under the category of a queer



theory director as she is a lesbian. the queer theory focuses on any identity or behaviour that falls outside of normal mainstream or can be considered as other/ deviant. It studies and examines non-narrative expressions of gender, sexuality and identity. She emerged as one of 1990's "new wave queer film makers". Her work usually focuses on the themes of racism, sexuality and gender equality.



Dunye's most famous film is *The Watermelon woman*, released in 1997. Starring her, it is the story of her struggles with sexuality as a young black lesbian. It follows her journey as she makes a documentary about Fae Richards, a 1930's actress also known as "The Watermelon Woman", who is one of her creative inspirations. As she looks into Fae's life and looks for its meaning it invites chaos and discomfort into her own life as her interaction with the gay community and black communities are constantly under the scrutiny and criticism of her best friend Tamara. This film was awarded the Teddy award at Berlinale in 1996.



This picture shows the Cheryl and her soon to be love interest in the video store they work in. Cheryl uses the stereotypical view of a lesbian to base the looks of her characters on. The butch boyish look comes from the stereotype that lesbians are typically very boyish in the way the dress. This is a contrast to Diana who later in the movie becomes her lover. As she dresses in a more feminine mainstream way.



As the movie goes on Cheryl goes on to discover that like her Fae Richards was also a young black lesbian who just wanted to make history. The similarities between Fae and herself allows her to compare their lives and eventually find herself. Down to the fact that both of them have white lovers. The movie is a perfect example

of queer theory as it follows themes of identity, sexuality and also racism. It covers a lot of uncomfortable topics that not a lot of filmmakers would even think about including in one film.



As the film is about filmmaking there are many scenes that are shot to look like they are being filmed. An example of is when Cheryl is filming her documentary within the film. This makes the movie a film within a film and. It is clearly shown that she is filming because of the quality of the scene. The scenes that she is filming her documentary in have a lower quality than the other scenes around these scenes.



At the end of the film as Cheryl the character finds her identity. Cheryl the director takes over and reveals that the actor that she had spent so much time looking into and the life and the movies that she starred in were all fiction. She does this using the final credits in the film. By using a black screen with a quote from herself that reads “Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction”. This is because Miss Dunye couldn’t

find someone in history like her that actually existed. It creates a historical statement and shows that a movie like this was way overdue.

Dunye’s imagination and creativeness behind this film is what makes her such an inspiring filmmaker as she used one film to cover a lot of difficult issues and make history for black filmmakers queer or not.