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Problems with the gendered POV shot in 'Lilya 4-Ever'

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I made an earlier version of this video for my final project in Form and Meaning, a core film/video class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago meant to give a theoretical understanding of film editing. Kevin B. Lee taught my section of the class and gave us the opportunity to use the audiovisual format rather than the written essay to dissect films. This was a very helpful way to give a sense of grounding to a novice film analyst like myself. We watched films within editing software and were instructed to cut scenes up and reorganise and categorise shots to discover patterns. The exercise of watching films this way made the process of understanding the material much more tangible.

I watched the film *Lilya 4-Ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002) the summer before I took the class. I actually could not finish watching it in one sitting – I was crying too hard. For days afterwards it was on my mind and I felt heart-broken about Lilya's story. Although this video is critical of it, I love the film. I started making this video with a few questions in mind about *Lilya 4-Ever*. How is this imagined/dramatic reenactment of sex trafficking similar to documentary, especially a documentary that is put together after an event, using old photos and film footage? How does *Lilya 4-Ever* use a documentary aesthetic and what strategies does Moodysson use to create verisimilitude, despite the film also having magical elements? How do we absorb what is presented in this film and integrate it into our knowledge about the real world? And in the end, does it matter which parts of the film are true or untrue?

To start tackling these questions I tried to find out which events in *Lilya 4-Ever* were taken directly from the life of Danguolė Rasalaitė, the girl whose experience with sex trafficking inspired the film. There was not a lot to be found about Danguolė and it turned out that Moodysson mostly made up the plot of *Lilya 4-Ever*.^[1] During my research I come across the article *Trafficking in Truth: Media, Sexuality, and Human Rights Evidence* by Jamie Small, which discussed some of the ways the film was used by the Swedish government and distributed to NGOs in other European countries. I became more interested in how this film was used explicitly as an educational resource. This led me to the study of Swedish high school students by Anna Sparrman, which plays a big role in my video.

In the first version of my video, before Kevin encouraged me to revise it, I focused on how the use of POV shots and the rape scene were key to the effect the film was trying to create for the viewer – but I glossed over the student reactions to the rape scene. I felt like the film's methods were effective for me and I did not want the fact that other students laughed at the film to discredit its power, so I avoided discussing it in detail. Kevin encouraged me to spend more time with the student reactions, to explore what those reactions might mean when the film is being used in classrooms and to think about what it would take for the male students to feel empathy for Lilya.

I formerly majored in English and initially I approached this film with the idea to compare it to Victorian social problem novels that dramatised the struggles of the industrial working class. However, because I watched the film in editing software with the intent to make a video essay I paid a lot more attention to the visual elements. It made it impossible to ignore the use of

POV that leads up to the climactic scene. Otherwise I would have been focused on the narrative events in the film rather than how they were represented cinematically. This approach allowed me to think not just about how Lilya's story is presented in the film but how the gendered perspectives of viewers interact with her perspective (and in turn how that contributed to the way the film was received in schools).

Author

Kiera Sandusky is a student working toward her BFA in Studio Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She previously studied English at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

References

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- Sparrman, A. Visual studies: Film as a political and educational device, Vol. 21. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2006: 167-182.

Notes

- [1] Small 2012.