FILM 2332 — Understanding Film, Discussion 7

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Question

To what extent do documentaries employ the Kuleshov effect to communicate ideas about their subject over their narration? In other words, would documentaries lose their meaning without narration? For example, in nature documentaries like *Planet Earth*, the shots cutting between various animals such as the stereotypical shot of a cheetah and a gazelle allow the audience to derive the message that the cheetah is hungry, although they are assisted by the narrator describing the cheetah's actions.

Commentary

The narrative style which Morris employs in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is a variation in soviet montage's treatment of continuity between shots. While Morris does employ actual dialogue via the testimony given by the various characters rather than just montage, there is a still a sense of uncertainty of the events of the shooting. This is present not only in the question of who committed the crime, but also in the location of the surviving cop, what she was holding, the car, and the other small details of the case. Rather than seeing the entire scene of the shooting at once, we are given several disconnected videos and short clips which give the impression of a shooting, similar to soviet montage. Removing the moments where individuals recount the events of the shooting, the film is a collection of images which are connected into a story by the sequence in which they are shown. Thus the images serve to give impressions of meaning.

While the musical genre itself has its own tropes, the stories portrayed are generally more distinct from one another than Altman's example of westerns. Instead, musicals, especially those from the Golden Age, rely on the stereotyped qualities of the characters which it portrays. The films of the Golden Era focus on a clear good-versus-evil narrative. *Singin' In the Rain* (Donen and Kelly, 1952) is considered a more standard musical due to its liberal use of both syntactic and semantic elements of film. It has rich use of color and movement, like in the ladder scene. Even though it is done self-awarely, the expansive use of the purple color of the sunset in the background and the wind created by the fan are particular qualities of musicals from this era. The narrative of Lockwood and Selden's love versus Lamont's meddling additionally paints the same picture of good versus evil, as expected of a "real musical".