Back to the Future Analysis

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Table of contents.

- List of Illustrations
- Abstract
- Introduction
- The Opening Scene
  o Framing and Composition
  o Introduction of Protagonists
  o Mise en Scene
  o Comedic Build-Up
  o Music and Sound
- The Clock Tower Climax
  o Framing and Composition
  o The Jocular Tone
  o Music and Tension
- Compare and Contrast
- Conclusion
- References
- Bibliography

List of illustrations.

Fig 1: Back to the Future Movie Poster (Universal Pictures, 1985)
Fig 2: Doc Brown’s clocks screenshot (Back to the Future, 1985)
Fig 3: Marty’s introduction movie screenshot (Back to the Future, 1985)
Fig 4: The plutonium reveal screenshot (Back to the Future, 1985)
Fig 5: Einstein’s overflowing food bowl screenshot (Back to the Future, 1985)
Fig 6: The TV report of missing plutonium screenshot (Back to the Future, 1985)
Fig 7: Close-up screenshot of Marty during good-bye moment (Back to the Future, 1985)
Fig 8: Doc breaking the fourth wall (Back to the Future, 1985)
Abstract

This essay will analyse 1985’s *Back to the Future* by discussing and comparing two pivotal scenes within the movie: The opening, and the climax. It will cover the types of shots used, the mise en scene, the characters, uses of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, how the mood and tone of the film and potential meaning within the shots. The conclusion will cover the points discussed along with the initial concept for the film.

Introduction

*Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, R. 1985. See Figure 1.), written by Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale is a science-fiction adventure-comedy which follows a teenage best friend of a scientist. The teenager is accidently sent back in time after trying to escape a terrorist group. He unwittingly disrupts the meeting of his parents. With the help of the younger version of his friend, the teenager must make his parents fall in love before he vanishes from reality, while also trying to find a way to return to his own timeline.

This analysis will explore two of the most important sequences in any film; the opening sequence, and the climax. Their relationship to one another will also be explored through themes, characters, set-ups and pay offs among other similarities. Director Robert Zemeckis uses the tone, shots, lighting and the music to create a world where the viewer is not pulled out of their suspension of disbelief despite the lack of real-world logic.

*Figure 1: Back to the Future* (1985) poster
The Opening Scene

Framing and Composition

The scene opens with a tracking of the entire room, with close-ups of some of the most important objects found within (Figure 2). After the dog food close-up, the camera moves from the mechanical arm to reveal Marty walking into the room and towards the camera. We follow his trainers and lower legs in a wide-shot as we watch him kick his skateboard away, and hit the plutonium case.

We get a series of close-ups and extreme close-ups as Marty sets the amplifier up. The camera moves out from Marty with his guitar into a master-shot showing the large-scale of the amplifier, and how small Marty seems in comparison. We get out first close-up of Marty’s face shortly after he is blown away by the force of the blast. Marty answers the phone and walks towards the camera from a wide-shot to a mid-shot.

Figure 2: Doc Brown’s clocks

Introduction of protagonists

The opening sequence introduces us to Marty, our protagonist (Figure 3). For the first minute or so, we are unable to see his face. This was a conscious decision filmmaking wise as the audience, being human, would naturally hone in on the face of the character, specifically the eyes, and seldom venture anywhere else. Not having that opportunity, we instead get clues to Marty’s personality and his abilities: skateboards, wears trendy 80s clothing brands and plays guitar. We finally get to see his face in a close-up reveal shot only after his character has been established.

Although he is currently off-screen, the scene tactfully introduces us to an additional character; Doctor Emmett Brown. Though, the fact that we see Marty’s face first tells us we will experience the movie from his perspective. Marty’s entrance gives us everything we need to know about their relationship: Marty knows where the spare key is hidden, seems quite comfortable letting himself in and makes himself at home.

Figure 3: Marty’s introduction
Our assumptions are proven correct when the phone starts ringing, and Marty answers to Doc. He sounded unsurprised to find the teenager answering his own phone, in fact, it sounded more like he was expecting him to be there.

**Mise en scene**

The opening tracking shot is important as the viewer would not be able to get the full effect of the room if there were several cuts. It is often said that what your bedroom looks like says a lot about you as a person psychologically. The tracking shot around Doc’s room aids to emphasise the chaotic mess of Doc’s living space, and helps the viewer to sink in the vast amount of visual information for Doc Brown’s personality. Additionally, the sheer volume of clocks in the opening shot emphasises that clocks and time are going to be very important in this movie.

Doc is introduced with: an unexplained obsession with clocks, many indications of his scientific interest and living in a small home where he once owned a mansion. We are additionally given a hint towards a morally grey trait: the TV news reporter tells us of missing plutonium, which presents the plutonium association with the colour yellow. The only other yellow object in the otherwise quite muted room is the plutonium case under the bed (Figure 4).

**Comedic build-up**

The opening builds up a comedic tone from a couple of moments: Marty being thrown, unharmed, across the room as the amplifier explodes. The pay-off is given just a moment afterwards when Doc warns Marty comedically too late that there is a possibility of an overload. There is also a moment when we see dog food splatter wetly on-top of more dog food. Marty enters shortly afterwards and reacts as the audience might have a moment before, muttering that it is disgusting. This comedic build-up is small, but it helps to create a mood that would be useful come the climax of the movie. In an interview, Kevin Pike, the Special Effects Supervisor for the movie, said:

"We literally had a torch underneath, heating up the cans, so that the dog food would pour out and flop into the bowl in the comedic fashion that Bob designed." (Pike, 2014)
Music and sound

Although the scene ends with the opening blast of a pop-rock song, the entire sequence is void of any music. Due to this, the audience can pay closer attention to the diegetic sounds throughout the scene. One of these sounds is the radio broadcast that grounds us in the date this movie starts in: 1985. Another is the TV news reporter informing the audience that a case of plutonium has gone missing and that terrorists may be involved. However, the first sound within the scene is the ticking of the many clocks cluttering nearly every surface.

Figure 6: The TV report of missing plutonium

The Clock Tower Climax

Framing and composition

The scene opens with Doc stepping into a low-angle shot. The camera follows him into a mid-shot, and then into a medium close-up. When Doc and Marty are discussing the events at the Dance, they are framed in a two-shot, and then after a close-up of Marty’s photograph, we cut back into an over-the-shoulder shot. We get a lot of two-shots and over-the-shoulder shots as Marty and Doc interact throughout the first half of the scene.

Marty gets an emotional close-up shot after the Doc in this timeline unwittingly triggers the memory of the shot and likely murdered Doc in Marty’s timeline (Figure 7). Shortly after this, a lightning bolt strikes a tree and unplugs the connection. When Doc gets up to the clock face, the interaction shots become mainly high-angle shots from Marty’s perspective and low-angle shots from Doc’s. The low angle shots can be suggesting that Marty is starting to feel smaller and smaller as he is forced to decide between trying to tell his friend that he will be murdered in 30 years, and taking his only trip back home.

On the other hand, you could argue that the cameras are forced to shoot in this way as the story demands that Doc be on the tower, and Marty below it. Steven, D Katz says:

“Camera angles are strongly dependant on narrative as well as other graphic and staging strategies.” (Katz, 1991)
The scene ends on a match cut of the clock tower 30 years later. It is a simple transition that shows the difference 30 years can make, if any. This use of a simple transition is important to note as Zemeckis decided to use few visual effects, using only 32 while 1977’s Star Wars used around 360.

A decision like this can greatly change the outcome of a movie, and what framing it uses. One of Zemeckis’s other movies, The Polar Express (2004), framed some shots to utilise the 3D technology. Common uses of this includes extreme close-ups of moving objects. Practical effects, on the other hand, can require more creativity with shots. 1975’s Jaws, for example, had such an unrealistic looking shark that director Steven Spielberg was forced to carefully consider the shots in the scenes, including showing the shark only sparingly.

Back to the Future, rather than focusing on the visual effects, chooses to focus more on the character’s reactions as there are more mid-shots and close-ups in comparison to a later movie such as 1999’s visual-effect heavy The Matrix.

**The jocular tone**

At the start of the scene, an overdramatic Doc steps into the camera. He checks multiple timepieces on his person as the music pitch rises and suddenly stops for Doc’s dialogue cue. He then turns to the camera for a brief second with a bug-eyed expression (Figure 6). Unlike in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off released in 1986, Doc does not completely break the fourth wall. Instead Robert Zemeckis utilises the comedic tone established in the opening sequence to create an understanding with the viewer; real-life logic does not apply.

In the opening sequence, the amplifier blows Marty clean off his feet unharmed, here they are trying to send a car into the future using lightning. It isn’t too far of a stretch to forget the impossibility. Zemeckis ensures the viewer understands that it will be a bit over the top and ridiculous. Therefore, the boring details of how exactly the time machine works are easily overlooked and not treated as a serious detail.

Despite being an impressive invention, when the time machine stops working, Marty only manages to fix this problem by thumping his head on the steering wheel in frustration. This kind of thing may happen to any normal person with a car, hitting the top of your TV, or banging the remote in your hand. This type of reaction is relatable by any viewer as it seems to be a natural reaction. There is even a term for it: Percussive maintenance. It means to humorously knock or shake a malfunctioning device in attempt to make it work. For not the jocular nature of the movie, this kind of resolution would have seemed too coincidental. Instead, it taps into something which the audience can relate to, and the humour of this is aided by Marty’s incredulous look.
Music and tension

Unlike the opening sequence, the climax has music that gets increasingly more dramatic, punctured by the occasional quiet moment to heighten the tension. The composer, Alan Sylvestri, worked with Zemeckis on another film: Romancing the Stone (1984). This time, however, Zemeckis wanted something more classical rather than contemporary as many other films were going with synthesizers (Figure 8).

Several aspects heighten the tension in this scene: Marty trying to warn Doc of his future, the car stops working, the plugs keep on getting pulled apart etc. Despite the science-fiction premise, these obstacles are highly relatable to the average viewer. Therefore, the viewer is likely to feel frustrated on the character’s behalf.

Compare and Contrast

The opening scene, and the climax scene are two of the most important scenes in every movie. The opening sets up the clock and time theme and symbolism that is carried throughout the movie, the climax especially. However, it isn’t the only thing that the opening sets up to be paid off during the climax: the opening setting up a jocular tone to the movie, one that is pivotal for the climax to work. The humorous tone is extremely important to hide the real scientific inaccuracies or coincidental moments. Driving a car into the future powered by lightning isn’t that far of a stretch from a character being comedically knocked clean across the room, unharmed, among other foolhardy decisions.

Additionally, both scenes heavily feature the two most important characters in the movie, even if one isn’t even present during one of the scenes. Both scenes also have two very clear uses of time imagery that is vital for the story. One of the major differences between both scenes is the way each was edited: the climax required faster cuts and more close-ups as it is a quick-paced tension-filled scene, while the opening has that one long tracking shot around the room, much slower, but filled with a lot of character and context. Another difference is the music, or lack thereof for the opening scene. The opening wants the audience to notice the diegetic sounds, so no music was added, while the climax needed tension, and one of the most effective ways of building tension is by using dramatic music.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Zemeckis does an excellent job in masking the logical inaccuracies in favour of a movie that is more humorous in tone than serious. Despite its science-fiction premise, writers Zemeckis and Gale written in obstacles that the average viewer can relate to, successfully heightening the tension. What is interesting about the movie is the initial plot. Time travel is a scenario most people have wondered about, and the question of how one might react upon experiencing time travel is a question that has been answered by many works of fiction since the ancient times.
References


Bibliography


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