

Movie Corpus 1  
Analysis given to: Stéphane Leclerc

Tzvetan Todorov: The narrative structure

in

"A History of Violence"

Directed by David Cronenberg.

Mid-term work

by

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## 1. Introduction

The principle of causality is a logic of the narrative structure, the progression of the story. The narrative structure of David Cronenberg's film is linear at first glance. However, a double narrative process, caused by the progressive circularity of the effects of violence shows us a complex composition, a film with multiple dramatic curves. As part of the analysis of the narrative structure of the film, *A History of Violence* (2005), we will use the theoretical framework of Tzvetan Todorov. According to this theory, the narrative structure of a story has several components, including the logic of cause and effect, lack, excess, motivation, the character's quest, the needs, the desire, the obstacle, the limit moment and state of balance.

## 2. Development

Initially, Joey Cusack lived a life in which he developed abilities for extreme violence and talents for survival. He wants to get away from the excess violence in which he finds himself. A moment of epiphany in the desert made him reject the external violence and repress the inner one. He settles in a small peaceful town to create a new life under the identity of Tom Stall. For the protagonist, it will be a prolonged period of a state of latency, a state of balance. In this reality, Tom is a happy family man and a successful owner. He considers himself lucky and indeed, in his passivity, we can recognize him an ease of mind. Despite the fact that power is unconventionally shared between him and his wife, his home seems stable and united.

Cronenberg's film is particularly interesting on the aspect of the narrative structure, because it deconstructs one by one the points to which the Hollywood cinema made us accustomed to. The character of Tom Stall / Joey Cusack, played by Viggo Mortensen, is a character with many shortcomings and excess, depending on his motives. His son, Jack Stall, needs to avoid paternal influence. His desires are to be better in sports, to be accepted at school, not to suffer violence, to satisfy his instincts of violence to protect himself (0 h 49 min 44 s) and his family.

(0 h 56 min 26 s) and earn the respect of his father (0 h 57 min 20 s). He has as an obstacle with his father who sees him as a child (0 h 7 min 40 s). Symptom of castration of Tom's son who cannot solve his problems by violence like him (0 h 49 min 44 s).

From the introduction of the character of Tom, we can glimpse several flaws, several gaps. For example, his inability to properly reassure his daughter after a nightmare, ironically assuring that "monsters do not exist", while he is the first monster she will meet in her life. Later, in the hospital, in front of his wife, Tom refuses to admit his wrongs, he is unable to take responsibility for his actions and prefers to blame it on another aspect of himself. He is therefore failing as a mature and responsible adult. He acts like a child wanting to avoid punishment by blaming an imaginary friend.

There is another lack in the relationship with his son. Following a battle between him and his bullies, Tom gives Jack a lecture (49:43). He dares to tell him that he does not solve his problems by blows and that just a few days after having killed two men in the restaurant in cold blood. Even worse, when his son returns the truth to his face, Tom, or rather Joey at this time, cannot do anything but slap him, hoping to rule out the problem, causing Jack's escape.

With the revelation of his father's behavior, Jack joins the previous generation in perpetuating the cycle of violence, which refers to his identity quest. The final moments of the progressive circle of violence are felt from the beginning of the film (0 h 21 min 5 s) when the imposing vehicle of the criminals crosses that of Bobby, the small terror which initially threatens the calm of Millbrook. The arrival of two criminals in his restaurant will resurrect the behavior of Joey repressed in the life of Tom with the consequence of seeing his cover exposed to his enemies.

Indeed, Tom Stall expresses the need to be anonymous (0 h 25 min 45 s), not to be noticed and to limit the importance of his extraordinary gestures, in order to keep his secret despite the assertions (0 h 30 min 22 s) and questions (0 h 35 min 50 s) (1 h 6 min 4 s). There is a need to hide what he is, like a superhero

wishing to hide his extraordinary identity under an innocuous appearance (0 h 29 min 48 s).

At this moment, his desire to live away from violence is confronted with his desire to be a protector for his family members and his town, where everyone watches over each one. In this moment of imbalance, the protagonist acts reflexively by showing one of the many facets of the circumstances that led to the acquisition of this rage to act. This event marks a point of no return for the good father and good husband accustomed to live timidly. Joey will re-emerge to express her repressed violence physically and sexually (01:07:57).

The need of the mobsters for justice as they understand it. Carl Fogarty wants revenge for an injury caused by Joey. For Richie Cusack, the need is to bring order to his organization and increase his power. His desire is to make his brother disappear like Cain and Abel, by murderous jealousy. He regards Joey's actions as a lack of respect and appreciation for everything he has endured because of him.

Skillfully, Cronenberg shows us the division of a being by a typical symptom of alienation, paranoia. Objectively, Tom shows us that the black car (0 h 39 min 10 s), which represents the evil that prowls, is not from his imagination, but of the narrative phenomena acting as a leitmotiv to the installation of the plot and to the increase of the tension. Tom will have many obstacles to overcome. The surname Stall refers to a stoppage in the face of an unpleasant event. On the psychological side, he must repress and keep his identity of Joey separate from that of Tom. He buried what he was to become someone more gentle and conciliatory. He is selfish in wanting a new life for himself without informing his old and his new family. In the case of physical obstacles, there are the many criminals who are on his way (0 h 24 min 14 s). Bandits are an obstacle, as in a video game with a "boss" at each level of difficulty. (0 h 24 min 20 s) (0 h 55 min 25 s) (1 h 24 min 15 s). Being injured on multiple occasions, his own body becomes a limit to his actions. There is a geographic barrier of distance between Tom's life and that of Joey. The family obstacle is for Tom the most difficult to manage while his family is aware of his secret.

For the viewer, an identification subversion occurs; Tom also belongs to a world of violence, it becomes difficult to identify if he acts in the name of good. The sympathetic hero gradually becomes an evil force similar to the mobsters he faces. For the scenario, there is a narrative imbalance with the viewer who identifies with the evil gradually with Tom and Jack both passive in the beginning to then assert their identity and survive. Tom remains the archetype of the exemplary and benevolent father.

In the broad sense, for Tom's family, evil is the doubt. It is a state that threatens the family links. So, how to restore order? By using violence to ensure the Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest best suited to the situation. His brother Ritchie forces him to move away from his family to settle their differences, to reconstruct the past and their undeniable family bond. Ritchie does not really give Tom a choice. The threat of his arrival poses a potential danger to Tom's family and they both know it. He wants Tom on his territory to have the advantage. Tom is of the opinion that it is better to go to evil before he comes to him (1 h 11 min) so he leaves to join his brother in Philadelphia.

Eddie Stall needs to seduce her husband (6:15:40), understand what's going on and find out the truth about Joey (0:58:20). For the protagonist, this is a time limit, because he knows that he will have to include his wife in the secret if he wants to protect her and not to widen the abyss in her romantic relationship. She shares this desire to protect her husband and family (1 hr 6 min), she has a sexual desire for Joey's violence (1 hr 7 min 56 s). As an obstacle, she faces the secrets of her husband and the threats of criminals.

Ultimately, in the last act, when Tom embraces his darkness and allows Joey to take full control of the situation, there is a state of equilibrium that precedes the storm or in this context the carnage. There is a state of balance between Tom and his son, at the time (0 h 56 min 49 s) where Jack relies on relaxation to save his father. This reunification with violence marks for Tom the

possibility of getting out of this impasse, of this chaotic state. It is a regression necessary for the realization of the plan of the protagonist.

The realization of the protagonist goes through an awareness; this is the father and so will the son. Tom Stall wants to relegate his past to a history that does not exist. He wants to get rid of Joey Cusack to fully enjoy his American dream with Edie, Jack and Sarah. Paradoxically, Tom will have to let Joey re-emerge from him by returning one last time in his habits, in his violence, in order to better reject him. To succeed, he must fight and defeat his enemies as Joey, as if he was fighting "fire by fire."

When under the influence of Joey, Cronenberg's anti-hero reacts with excessive, violent behavior. There are, of course, the three great battles (the aggression at the restaurant, the death of Fogarty and the death of his brother Richie), where violence breaks out in the faces of everyone without anything holding Joey. This way of exploding, of bringing violence to its climax testifies to its past bathed in darkness. Joey Cusack does not do anything by half, when he attacks, he kills (with the exception of Fogarty "[he] should have cooled [him] in Philadelphia" [0 h 56 min 15 s] .These excesses also explain Tom's difficulty in getting rid of Joey for good Joey is a being as strong as his deeds, he cannot cohabit with another in the same body, let alone with Tom who opposes him in any sense. To be separated from him definitely will be just as violent for Tom as Joey's actions are.

In Philadelphia, the end of the wave of violence of the third act [in a classical structure], shows Joey at a limiting moment, a pivotal moment, when the protagonist confronts the antagonist, in a mortal struggle to ensure his survival. So, Joey shows his true nature, he is at the peak of his form, in a state of ultimate enjoyment. At the end of this carnage, he will have to give way to Tom who will symbolically expiate his sins on his knees at the lake. By removing his bloody shirt that represents his identity Joey, he washed his hands to remove the violence that covers it is a new state of balance. He is the being who has reached

transcendence, his moral sacrifices find their justifications succumbing to the order for a noble reason.

### 3. Conclusion:

In terms of dramatic resolution, Tom's return to his family is ambiguous, his children accept it, but the direction of the knife facing him on the table suggests the prerequisite to see Joey commit some kind of seppuku, a suicide symbolic that would only let Tom come back. Edie remains silent while Tom waits for the ultimate answer. Todorov shows us that although the narrative structure is solved by a return to equilibrium, the initial state can never be restored to its original state.