

AS Media Studies: Foundation Production

Evaluation of Thriller Production

The brief of the thriller production which my group had to successfully meet was to devise, prepare, shoot and edit the opening two minutes of a new thriller including the titles.

From our previous study of the thriller genre we were aware that to create an effective opening sequence there must be substantial enigmas. This is highlighted by Roland Barthes' theory on action and enigma codes. He believed that to create suspense in narrative, there must be unanswered questions which will compel the viewer to anticipate action with a resolution. For our opening sequence we wanted to create a narrative structure that would encourage the viewer to continue watching the rest of the film and that would leave areas in which the film could develop. Before any ideas were drawn up we wanted to consider closely the target audience we were aiming our film towards. We chose a wide target audience of both males and females aged 15-35. This age range is more likely to attend the cinema to see a film, particularly a film within the thriller genre.

For our research we looked at other opening scenes to thrillers. This not only helped give stimulus for our own sequence, but helped us realise that to create a feeling of authenticity it was important to include the specific conventions normally associated with the thriller genre. A film which provided us with clear examples of narrative theories was Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). This is a classic Hitchcock thriller, which incorporates narrative conventions often associated with the thriller genre. The enigma seen throughout the film is 'who is George Kaplan?' Combined with the pursuits and the quest of a man trying to prove his innocence it gave us clear examples of what is typical of a thriller. Although there is a fairly simple opening sequence in *North by Northwest* the film visibly displays Todorov's theory of equilibrium. In the start of the film we see the protagonist carry out his day to day routine giving the audience an initial equilibrium. Then there's a crisis point when the protagonist gets kidnapped, at the end we see a resolution and a new found equilibrium. David Fincher's 1995 film, *Seven* showed us a very different opening sequence. The opening sequence is composed of just credits displaying actor's names in stark lettering. This shows how simple attributes like music, colour and typography could establish a mood for a film and how relevant simple things can become. Another thriller which I found particularly interesting was Bryan Singers (1995) *The Usual Suspects*, unlike many of the other films we had watched this one showed the resolution at the very start of the film. This then raised the enigma of 'How and why did that happen?' rather than a more conventional 'What is going to happen?'. We see *The Usual Suspects* as not fitting into the codes and conventions normally associated with Charles Derry's (1988) six major sub-types of suspense thrillers, unlike Alfred Hitchcock's *North By Northwest* which fits neatly into the innocent-on-the-run thriller. We quite liked the idea of creating a thriller that fitted into the sub-type involving moral confrontation. We chose not to use the 'resolution at the start' as seen in *The Usual Suspects* in our own opening sequence but we took into account the way the film immediately establishes Dean Keaton as the protagonist.

When thinking up ideas for the opening sequence to our thriller we immediately came up with male actor in a darkened room surrounded by newspaper clippings. We discussed how this very powerful and sinister image could be further developed. To make our ideas clearer we started to create a storyboard. This gave us inspiration for other shots and made us consider in depth the composition of each shot and the importance each shot would have in creating an effective opening sequence. We chose not to decide on the credits at this stage of production but decided to wait until the editing stage where we could get a more accurate 'feel' of which actors and director would suit the film. To continue a feel of authenticity in our sequence we wanted to use actors and a director who had recently been involved in and associated with thriller productions.

We wanted the name of our vulnerable character seen as an image from a newspaper and whose name was written on a notepad to connote the fact that this person is innocent. By using the name Angela which is a name of Greek origin meaning angelic, we signified that this female character is or will become an innocent victim. Another signifying idea that we used was to use quick shots at the start of the sequence of his eye, ear and mouth. This could be seen as a visual representation of the proverb of "see no evil hear no evil speak no evil" its purpose was to bring a sinister and unsettling feel for the viewer. This can be seen as adding to an enigma where you know he is going to do something 'evil' and want to know what. Also present are binary opposites of good vs. evil highlighted by Levi-Strauss. In Levi-Strauss' book "The Raw and the Cooked" he also goes on to explain how in each binary pair there is one that is favoured by society. In real life when good versus evil, good is favoured but because of human nature audiences want to explore the evil side through watching the film. This may help to explain the popularity of the thriller genre.

To ensure that our sequence was effective we wanted to find a location to film that gave the visual codes we were looking for. We went on a recce and discovered that an old Scout Hut not far from our own college fitted in perfectly with the overall feel we were looking for. It had an old musty look with wooden floor boards that made it feel as though it was somewhere remote and private. Now a location had been established and our storyboards complete, we filled out the paperwork in compliance with professional industry practice. Most important was the hazard assessment form. As we were using an open candle flame we needed to ensure that there was always a bucket of water nearby.

We then also wrote up a prop list where we allocated each person to bring in certain props. This meant that we all relied on each other. Mise-en-scene was a very key part to the creation of our sequence, the colour of a costume in a thriller is an extremely important code. We wanted the male character (Ruben) to be dressed in a dark colour coat so that he would look more intimidating. When writing our shooting schedule it seemed fairly straightforward as all our filming would be done in one location. We simply allocated the days in accordance to what was seen on the story boards.

The first set of shots we filmed was the close ups of Ruben's face. As said in The Media Students Book "the single most important element in a film or video is light". Light plays an extremely important part in our sequence as it aims to set the mood for the rest of the film. These shots turned out extremely well. This was due to the composition of the shot using flickering candle light and the sinister look of Ruben's face in this light. The shots created a menacing side to Ruben's character, the contrast of light and dark connotes the dark side of his personality. In most of the shots the candle light was placed below the face. In the shot of just his head, shadows were cast on his face which meant that there were areas hidden from view. This connotes the hidden attributes of his twisted mind. For the midshots of Ruben we started off just using the light of the candle. However we realised that there was not enough light being cast onto the table and therefore opened a door to his left hand side and placed a lamp in the other room. This then meant that there was enough light and also that it cast amazing shadows from the jars and bottles.

There are many enigmas through the opening sequence. Among them are: 'who is Angela?' and 'who is this guy and what is he going to do to Angela?' Also the viewer will be wondering 'what has happened to all the other people on the list?' According to Roland Barthes, meaning is made by the audience, film makers produce only intended meaning. What an audience bring to a text determines the real meaning. We wanted there to be a real element of suspicion but wanted the audience to try to come up with their own ideas of how the film could be resolved.

Although we stuck closely to the story boards we did do some experimental shots. These shots were done so that there was no chance of running out of material when it came to editing. One of the experimental shots I found particularly effective was a bird's eye view shot. We repeated the

action that had been recorded from a behind the shoulder angle but filmed from above. This gives an unsettling feel for the viewer and also made Ruben appear in inevitable trouble. Other shots we took involved extreme close ups of Ruben's facial reactions, in particular shots where his eye reflected the candle light beautifully.

I feel that the editing was an extremely important part in creating a thriller that could be seen as professional and effective. The editing needed to be fairly fast paced, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats. One example is the cuts between the pictures and the names on a notepad. When we drew up our storyboards we wanted there to be a shot where we see an unknown person outside the location stepping on the ground. However, when including this in the editing stage there was much too much of a contrast between the darkness and the light. We therefore only used the shot of an unknown person outside a door. This raised one of Barthes hermeneutic codes of 'who is outside?' but didn't give it too much relevance so that there was a balance between the actions of Ruben.

When editing, sound plays a key role as discovered through our research of previous opening sequences like *Seven* (David Fincher 1995). The non diegetic sound is extremely important when setting the overall mood of the film. The choice of this track came from my own research of other thrillers. The music in this film was extremely effective and seemed to fit our desired mood. We also kept some diegetic sound with the shot of the door outside; this was because there was an interesting sound of the wind blowing and gave quite a dramatic and unsettling notion to our sequence.

When the decision came of what director and actors to put into our credits, we chose to use Danny Boyle. His previous work includes *Trainspotting* (1996), *The Beach* (2000), *28 Days Later* (2002) Many of the films he's directed are thrillers or have elements of thrillers. I also chose to use him as our director because he is British and directs many British films; this makes our opening sequence seem more plausible. I also used DNA Films as our production company it was founded in the UK in February 1997 and releases many British thrillers. When it came to the choice of actors the choice was made to keep in Ruben Ireland's name in the credits as he was our main actor in our opening sequence and it also seemed a fairly credible name. Other actors we included were Cillian Murphy (*28 Days Later*) and Milla Jovovich (*Resident Evil*). When including the credits I wanted to make sure that the typeface matched the overall feel of the sequence. In the end we used Papyrus as it has a rough and slightly handwritten feel. These credits were interspersed equally in the sequence and were placed over the action at differing corners of the screen without obstructing the action.

The use of fire in our opening sequence and the apparent resentment the actor portrayed meant that we chose to title our film *Fire:Fury*. The use of alliteration in this title means it is catchy to say and would make the audience remember the name. We used this title at the end of the sequence. If a full length film the main action would come after this. To make our sequence appear professional and effective I included CGI of flames bursting behind the title and then diminishing to smoke. I found that this took our sequence to a level where the viewer would be impressed and intrigued to continue watching.

The outcome of our final sequence was quite close to the original ideas. There were alterations along the way but we managed to create a sequence that not only met the criteria set but I personally feel in many ways exceeded them. Shots like the bird's eye view ones proved extremely effective. I feel our opening thriller sequence produced an effective foundation for a film where enigmas like 'what's going to happen to Angela?' can be resolved for an interesting conclusion to a film.

Teacher assessment:

This 2000-word evaluation is part of the OCR AS Media Studies Foundation Production. The students were working to one of the set briefs to devise and produce a two-minute video for a film in the thriller genre.

This evaluation is extremely fluent and makes a successful attempt to justify production decisions taken. Reference is made to the composition of a number of shots and how the formal elements of composition are designed to produce meaning. The process of signification is considered at a practical level and in relation to theory. The references to theorists, which are inevitably simplified, are made relevant and are appropriate for AS level.

Comparison with other media texts is made and there is effective reference to a range of research on the genre and an effective understanding of the relevant conventions. Reference is made to audience, target audience and the institutional context in which this fictional film is to be placed. Some discussion of the practical and professional elements involved in video production.

Fluent and well informed, this evaluation would meet A grade criteria. The video which was produced by a group of four students, demonstrates a range of production and post production skills at a high level. Use of the technology available is imaginative, particularly the lighting and use of digital effects. Whilst some of the iconography could be seen to reflect elements of the horror genre, the evaluation makes a sufficiently strong case for the piece to be regarded as a thriller. It could be argued that the variety of material is fairly limited and that the amount of diegetic sound is slight. However, there is a range of angle and shot, and parallels for this sequence are identified amongst existing media texts in this genre. For the video piece alone, a grade B would be appropriate.