

## Understand codes and conventions of fictional film production

### *Introduction*

#### *Section 1 – Narrative*

A narrative is the how a story is organised, it is the sequence of events that are organised to make the film flow from beginning to end. The cause and effect model is the most common narrative used in film, it was created by the Bulgarian literary theorist, Tzvetan Todorov. His work was fundamentally revolved around narrative theories during the 1960s. He believed that a story was told in chronological order which has five conventional stages: Equilibrium, Disruption, Recognition, Reparation and finally the Resolution. Todorov suggested that stories begin with an equilibrium where everything is balance, which is then disrupted by an event, the problems are then solved so the equilibrium can be restored. Claude Levi- Strauss was a social anthropologist who studied myths of tribal cultures, he believed that there is conflict between two qualities in media texts and one side is usually identified with the audience to sympathise with, this theory is identified as binary oppositions.

Vladimir Propp was a Russian critic and literary theorist, he primarily analysed Russian fairy tales in the 1920s and proposed a theory that presented defined character roles over a whole range of film genres. The character types that were established were;

- Hero: Seeks something
- Villain: Obstructs the hero
- Princess: Hero's reward
- Father: Give of rewards
- Donor: Provides information and help
- Helper: Helps the hero
- Dispatcher: Sends the hero on a quest
- False hero

Hollywood films will usually follow these narrative structures to appeal to a larger audience who enjoy predictability and effortless storylines that are easy to interpret. For example, Superhero films and TV series will follow the narrative theories outlined above. In the Netflix series, Daredevil, the main character is a modern vigilante/ superhero in a costume that attempts to help lower the city's crime. The Equilibrium starts with a flashback of him as an innocent child, and the disruption is when he is then blinded and inherits superpowers. Conflict drives the narrative, for example crime versus innocence, good versus evil, human versus superhuman. Using Propp's theory, you can identify the "Hero" in Zodiac would be the reporter as he seeks to find out the Zodiac killer and he ends up putting more effort than the police force to discover who the San Francisco serial killer is.

However not all film narratives follow the simple linear structure of: beginning, middle and end, particularly niche or independent productions aimed at a smaller audience. Here, other narrative techniques are used for example: nonlinear narrative, disjointed narrative or disrupted narrative. There are films such as Memento that used a non-linear narrative structure, the use of repetition of scenes from different perspectives and flashbacks makes the narrative very disorganised to sympathise with the protagonist's condition. Another example of a movie that uses non-linear narrative structure is "500 Days of summer", the events in the film are portrayed out

of chronological order. The movie is told from the protagonist's perspective, it jumps from different days in the past or present as the audience follows 500 days that Tom is together with who he believes is his soul mate, Summer.

Another way a narrative can be told is through the Forking-path narrative which presents several possible outcomes as a result of a small change of events, and those small changes usually results in very dissimilar consequences. The dream sequence is another narrative technique which consists of flash forward, a fantasy or a vision. An example is from the horror franchise "Final Destination" that uses flash-forwards or visions to narrate the series of events that are to come. These narrative structures may appeal to a bigger audience as they do not follow the very similar boring narratives that Hollywood Films follow.

The typical characters in crime films are a police inspector or investigators, they attempt to combat and stop the villain. In the film Zodiac, the police force and reporter are trying to stop the Zodiac killer from committing any more murders. Some characters in crime genres can be associated as family or friends with the victim or protagonist, such as in Prisoners where Keller Dover's daughter goes missing and he takes it upon himself to discover her whereabouts as she is assumed dead. In Don't Breathe, the veteran's daughter was killed in a car accident and his settlement money is attempted to be stolen by three teenagers. These characters are included within these movies so the audience can emphasise with the victim's family.

There are also open endings with the audience questioning what will happen next, it gives a horror or crime film a sense of realism as in Zodiac as we never discover the identity of the serial killer at the end and also in The Strangers we never discover who the three masked assailants that murder Kristen are.

## *Section 2 – Visual Storytelling/ Audience*

There are typical conventions used in both home invasion and crime genres. Home invasion films are usually set in a large maze-like house with a confusing layout, usually in a rural or suburban location so they are isolated such as the veteran's house in Don't Breathe or the vacation home in The Strangers. Another convention is crime such as robbery; it's present in Don't Breathe as the protagonists resort to thieving homes to escape poverty, which is also a theme. This theme of rich versus poor is seen in horror films since the 1970s whereby the rich fear the poor overtaking their wealth by entering their homes, this links to the American dream promoting a more capitalist world view where the poor are demonised. The audience can relate to this as no one wants anything they've worked hard for to be stolen or taken away from them and it creates fear and anxiety whilst watching the film.

General conventions used in crime genres include the use of weapons such as guns or knives, murder is also present in crime films such as in the Zodiac, who was based on a serial killer whose identity was never discovered, it gives a hint of realism as the case remains unsolved which is also prevalent in the movies. Also in the movie Prisoners, the audience never knows whether Keller Dover is saved at the end. There are failed attempts by the police force on solving the antagonist's identity such as in Zodiac and Prisoners so the protagonist must takes it on their own hands to solve the crime; Robert Graysmith the journalist and Keller Dover the father of the missing girl.

The use of mystery and red herrings are prevalent in the crime and home invasion genres as in The Strangers, the intruders persisted to tease the victims as they broke into their house, as the protagonist attempts to fend for herself the use of dramatic irony as the masked figure lurks in Kristen's proximity. In Zodiac, the investigators and reporters of the case become so time invested and obsessed over the unveiling of the killer's identity that the audience also become interested and with so many suspects and red herrings that the audience is always guessing, keeping the audience in suspense often leading to a twist or surprise ending such as in Prisoners when Mrs. Milland, perceived as an innocent carer of Alex Jones, is revealed to be the kidnapper of two young girls.

The typical technical codes we will see in the 'Home invasion' sub-genre includes; low-key lighting as homes are usually broken into at night and more crimes are committed, it gives a sense of unease within the audience. Different lighting techniques are used such as Chiaroscuro, the contrast of light and dark which has been used

in horror films since the 1920s, for example, *Nosferatu*. Quite often in home invasion genres, electricity is cut off and there is no sense of help for the protagonist. Flickering candle light and crackling fireplaces provide light and also deep shadows obscuring the vision of the audience providing a sense of discomfort.

Long shots are used to depict the isolation of the house. Camera shots are usually from inside the house looking out at the predator creating a POV used to position us in the characters' shoes. Close ups are used to emphasise with the protagonist's fears and to show how close the threat can be for example, feet walking past the bed as the protagonist hides beneath it. Handheld cameras are also commonly used as the shaky and frenetic technique gives a sense of disorientation and panic especially in a large maze-like house.

High angles and low angles are used to show power in home invasion movies, POV low angle shots of the protagonist depicts the villain as more powerful and positions the audience from the protagonist's perspective building fear. Jump scares are created within movies from the quick transition from long shot to close up as an antagonist enters the frame.

Diegetic sounds are used to build tension and fear within an audience for example, creaking doors and floorboards suggesting approaching danger. These Foley sounds are loud in the sound mix and the amplified sounds creates jump scares and anxiety. A chaotic atmosphere can be created within a home invasion film using non-diegetic loud crashing sounds, incidental sounds and sound effects. Repetitive sounds lead to normal things feeling abnormal e.g. the crackling on a record or the repetition of a children's music box. Contrapuntal sounds are also used to juxtapose the image on screen with the sound being played e.g. classical music being played as someone is being murdered, this makes the antagonist look much more evil as there is almost no connection between reality and their actions.

The pace of editing can change throughout a horror film, becoming faster during a climax by using slow editing to build up to the action. Cross-cutting is used to contrast the inside and outside of the house, also to emphasise the time of the day and isolation of the house in the dark.

Symbolic codes used within horror movies can be masked villains, as the antagonists are masked to keep the audience guessing who the villain is. It also informs the audience that anyone could be behind that mask as there are plot twists towards the ending. Villains are also seen with weapons that forebode what the antagonist will use against the protagonists.

Technical codes used within the crime genre include the use of close up shots to make it almost claustrophobic and daunting, the close ups usually show the fear and vulnerability in the victim. The colour scheme used in crime films are desaturated and drained to represent the atmosphere to set the mood for the audience relating to themes of kidnap and murder. Such as in the film *Zodiac* the house which Graysmith explores is set in a low-lit environment. The audience would be uncomfortable as their perspective view is restricted. The use of pathetic fallacy in crime genre films sets a dangerous atmosphere whereby the weather is usually heavy rainfall as seen in the films: *Seven*, *Sin City*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Zodiac*. The typical setting and location conventions in crime films are usually in large cities such as Seattle and Chicago or the suburbs of the cities which enhances the realism that it could happen to anybody.

## Section 3 – Textual Analysis

**Don't Breathe Scene Analysis**

In this essay I will be analysing a scene from the horror film “Don't Breathe”. The movie follows three friends located in the deprived area of Detroit who break into wealthy people's houses to financially support themselves and their families. Rumours spread around town that a blind veteran won a large cash settlement of \$300,000. Believing he is an easy target, they decide to invade the veteran's house. This links to themes of the horror genre as we all fear our possessions being robbed from us (especially the rich), everything that we work hard for all for it to be taken by a couple of thieves.

The scene begins with Alex and Money navigating to locate another entrance to break in; there is a low key lighting throughout this whole scene with one source of lighting coming from an overhead lamp. The green/yellow filter is emitted from the overhead lighting shows a sense of unease and danger as they break in. The lack of lighting and the ambient sound of birds chirping signifies that its early hours of the morning, the contrapuntal sounds adds suspense and also isolates the protagonists as

there is no one else around in the abandoned neighbourhood.

The invaders are all dressed in casual black to blend into the night, wearing leather gloves to refrain from leaving fingerprints behind linking them back to the heist and backpacks to export the cash out the house. The initial representation of the intruders is that they are working class and financially struggling and are willing to risk their freedom to steal from a helpless blind man's house.

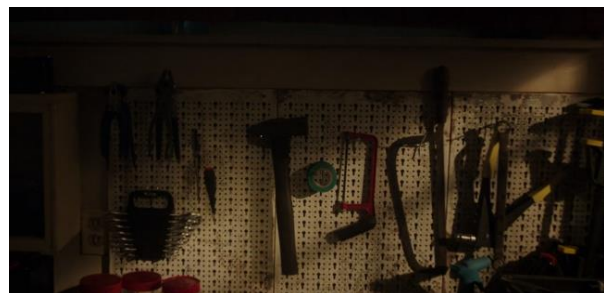


The worm eye view looking up at Money arguing with Alex emphasises Money as the dominant character as he is positioned uncomfortably higher above the audience, he fills in most the frame and obscures the view of Alex to display his superiority over him. His dialogue towards Alex is also filled with aggressive and foul language and projected with a menacing tone.

When Money and Alex in after being let in by Rocky, the atmosphere changes to a more sinister tone, the low humming diegetic ambient sound gets louder and more violent as it grows into a non-diegetic screeching of a violin, this puts the audience at unease and discomfort as they anticipate what's to come. All three of them start to explore each room of the veteran's house in pursue of the large sum of hidden cash.

A smooth floating camera technique with a Steadicam is used to record one continuous shot as the teenagers intrude into the blind man's house, the dolly movements' snakes throughout the house to exhibit the substantial size of the house, with so many rooms it resembles a maze with how disoriented everything is.

The camera, whilst tracking through the house, zooms into specific props such as the mallet, the glass and the bells. There is a sense of dramatic irony as the characters dismiss these props and are unaware of the significance that they will have later in the movie.



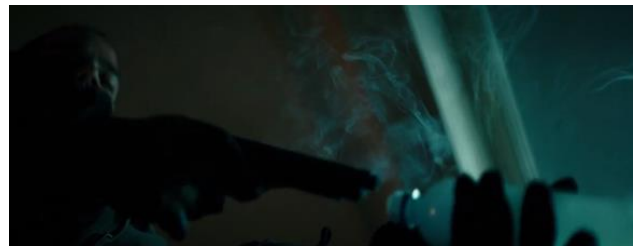


The smooth floating camera technique is still being used when entering the veteran's bedroom. Upon entering the bedroom there is diegetic sound coming from the girl displayed on the television who could be the veteran's daughter who was killed in a car accident. There are also a lot of family photos including ones on him whilst he was in service, the visuals of his daughter make the audience emphasise with the victim of the burglary. The camera slowly

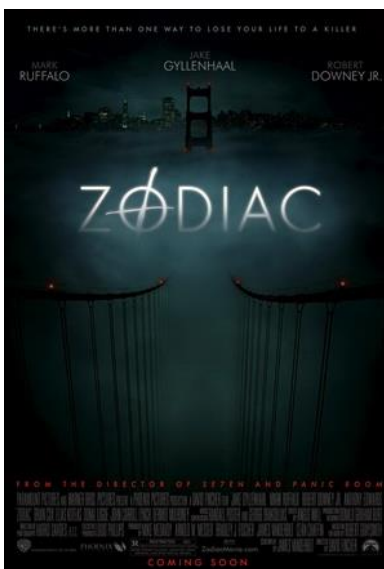
travels underneath the veteran's bed discovering a hand gun, this could foreshadow future use of this weapon in the movie just like the other props shown before.

The first cut after the floating camera is when there is a shot-reverse-shot between Money and the blind man as he abruptly wakes up from his sleep, the camerawork and sound makes the interaction tense as the veteran is oblivious to the fact that he is staring right at a burglar. The sound mix of the non-diegetic violin also rises in volume when the camera cuts to the blind man upright in his bed, it gives the audience a sense of unease as Money attempts to make minimal noise.

A low angle mid shot of the teenagers displays them facing a locked door within the house that they assume has the large sum of cash behind it. With the crowbar not having any use dismantling the lock, Money resorts to using a hand gun to pop open the lock. Even though not all characters were comfortable with using a firearm as Alex flees the scene, Money as the more dominant character goes ahead and uses it to aid him unlocking the door.



### Zodiac Scene Analysis



In this essay, I will be analysing a scene from the thriller film "Zodiac". This movie is set in the 1960s and 1970s, it trails an infamous serial killer who names himself the Zodiac. The investigators and reporters of the case become obsessed on unveiling the killer's identity whilst the Zodiac claims victims' lives in San Francisco whilst also taunting the authorities along the way with cryptic messages that he transmits through letters and phone calls.

The Zodiac Scene I am analysing starts with Vaughn and Graysmith exiting the vehicle and entering Vaughn's house. It's set in the dark with diegetic ambient sound of heavy rain, it makes the mood very uncomfortable and tense as the heavy rain is quite violent. When entering Vaughn's household the mirror only presents Vaughn's reflection and not Graysmith's, this already forebodes that Vaughn should not be trusted from the beginning.

Robert Graysmith explains his suspicion with Rick Martial being the prime suspect as the Zodiac but then learns that the posters were done by Bob Vaughn and his handwriting is the closest match to the Zodiac's handwriting; the scene then becomes silent and focuses on the heavy rainfall outside, this conveys a sense of doom on Robert as he fears that Bob Vaughn is the Zodiac killer and fears for his life. The conversation between both characters remains as a mid-shot, presenting the entire room providing a sense of safety as both characters are insight of the audience, however the shot-reverse-shots disrupts the

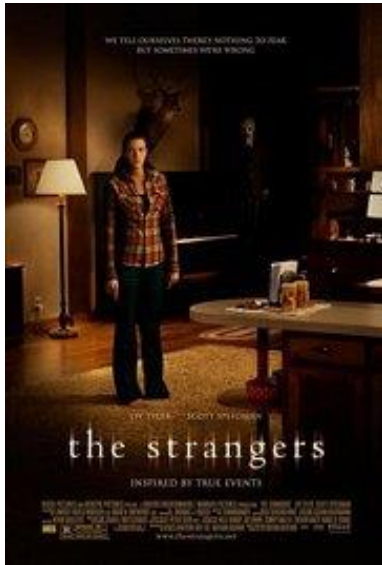
atmosphere and builds further conflict between both characters. As the poster's handwriting was the reporter's and investigators main lead to finding out the serial killer was, Robert becomes petrified and scared for his life as Bob Vaugh remains worryingly calm.

A close up of Graysmith's face shows his fear and vulnerability as Vaughn invites him to his basement, The camerawork presents Vaughn is lingering over Graysmith's shoulder with the lighting technique Chiaroscuro which is the extreme contrast of light and dark on Vaughn's face. It makes him appear untrustworthy and sketchy as he lingers in the dark. When descending into the basement, there is a telephone at the bottom of the basement which could also signify Vaughn as the Zodiac; the killer made phone calls to the police throughout his existence and this could have been the device. The camerawork revolving around Graysmith in the basement is more hesitant as he slowly navigates through the basement behind Vaughn with precaution, this magnifies his fear and positions the audience in his perspective.

There's a POV shot and close up of Graysmith in the basement as he notices a noise coming from upstairs makes him more anxious of his surroundings as Vaughn reassures him twice that there is no one upstairs. Another low angle shot of Graysmith still looking at the basement ceiling which emphasises his fear. The lighting in the basement is very low key with only a few small bulbs as sources of light, the overhead lighting on Vaughn makes it hard to see some of his facial features making him look demonic; when Vaughn becomes hidden amongst the shadows in an unmoved frame, it emphasise that his identity is hidden and that Graysmith is under his mercy in this scene. Another diegetic sound of the floorboards creaking upstairs makes Graysmith very paranoid of his safety and whether he will come out alive or not as he questions anyone else's presence.

The camera then ominously follows Graysmith as he slowly backs away whilst the camera moves away from Vaughn, with the chiaroscuro lighting still present on his face. When Graysmith decides he cannot bare his fears any longer, the camera cuts become much faster and chaotic as Graysmith flees the scene, the very fast camera cuts shows how urgent Graysmith is to get out of the house. During his exit the diegetic whistling kettle grows in volume eventually growing into a head-piercing scream. It builds tension and chaos and it fits in with the fast camera cuts. When Graysmith does get to the door and realises it's locked, the shot is framed to present the audience to see Vaughn ominously appearing behind him in the mirror. The over-the-shoulder shot shows Graysmith defenceless and unable to escape, giving Vaughn all the power in this situation. Bob then opens the lock of his door to free Graysmith as he bolts to his car as fast as he can. The last dialogue in this scene is from Bob as he shouts "Goodnight Mr Graysmith" with juxtaposing body language and facial expressions compared to Robert. It seems as if Bob was not really the Zodiac but was only attempting to taunt Robert for his amusement, this is another example of a red herring used in this movie to keep the audience guessing the true identity of the serial killer on the loose.

## The Strangers Scene Analysis



In this essay, I will be analysing a scene from the thriller film “The Strangers”. It follows a couple who stay at an isolated family vacation home for a weekend, three masked assailants attempt to use violence to terrorize the couple as they struggle to survive. The scene starts within a big and isolated vacation home, which is a typical convention for home invasion films. A large house makes it seem that the invaders could be anywhere in the household, also the suburban isolated setting means the protagonists have no escape and attempt to defend themselves as the intruders endeavour to get into the family vacation home. The movie explores the fears of the audience as it signifies that no one is safe, even in our own home where we are meant to feel the most safe and comfortable.

The lighting within the house is low key with limited sources of light coming from a fireplace, lamp and candles; this tells us that it’s set at the night which is a typical convention within house invasion films. It creates a sinister atmosphere for the audience as the criminals remain hidden with anonymity within the night. The crackling fireplace sound lasts for a long period of time throughout this scene in the background to create discomfort in the audience as more diegetic and non-diegetic sounds play over it during the course of this scene.

The camera movement used within this scene is a handheld camera to emulate the fears of the protagonist within the audience. Using a handheld camera is important as it adds fear to the audience as they are positioned to be in the same environment as the protagonist. The camera changes from a medium shot of Kristen to a long shot of Kristen as she is shown isolated roaming around her living room and kitchen. In this scene, medium shots and long shots are prevalent to emphasise that she is alone within the house. However it is evident that she is not alone as a masked figure appears from the shadows behind Kristen as she is oblivious of his presence. The use of dramatic irony in this scene attracts sympathy towards Kristen as the audience anticipate what’s next to happen.

The shot changes from a medium shot of Kristen to a high angle shot of Kristen, the use of the high angle shot makes the protagonist seem more vulnerable and the intruder is longer visible at this angle. As the shot changes back to the medium shot, the masked figure abruptly vanishes which further plays on the fear of the audience as they recognise that the intruder can be anywhere within the confines of the vacation home without her knowledge. As Kristen hears the sound of the door the shot changes to the high angle shot of Kristen the camera then slowly moves back to show the protagonist calling out “James”. When she doesn’t hear a response she panics and looks for a knife to defend herself with. The audience is positioned to feel empathy towards Kristen as she is alone in a remote house with no escape. She slowly walks towards the door as a fast paced pan POV shot of the woman looking towards the door as the source of the loud banging diegetic sound comes from the door.

The only time the camera shots change is when the fear and emotions of the protagonist are being emphasised through the use of close ups of her facial expressions; it helps the audience see the protagonist’s distress as she goes to her telephone only to find out the wires were cut out, presumably by the intruders. This then worries the protagonist as she has no way of contacting for help. It is also a common technical code as the electricity is cut out and the protagonist is left stranded in a low-key lit house.

Kristen slowly approaches the curtains with a kitchen knife suspecting the intruder is behind there, the hand held camera with the shaky technique makes it much more uncomfortable for the audience, also the non-diegetic sounds are used as she is walking towards the curtains to cause discomfort within the audience as they anticipate what’s to happen in suspense. The sound gets progressively louder and louder as she approaches the curtains giving the perception that she is getting closer and closer to danger.

As she opens the curtain in suspense, it's followed by a scream as she discovers that the masked intruder is so close to her, the intruders taunt Kristen as they lurk around the house with plenty of opportunities to murder her yet choose to torture her with fear. A loud non-diegetic bang is also heard as the protagonist opens the curtains followed with a continuous on-loop vinyl, the disorientation in sound is reflected onto the scene as Kristen screams and panics as there is no escape from her inevitable death.