

Witness

(1985, Peter Weir, USA)

Component 1: Key Developments in US Film

Focus Areas Genre, Narrative & Context

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1

The Amish Way (00:00 – 09:19)

Sequence 2

Gun of the Hand (46:17 – 50:06)

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Sequence 1: Opening shot: LS of green corn rippling in the wind, out of which people begin to emerge in what appears to be period costume. They appear as if they are a part of the landscape and this suggests their lifestyle follows natural rhythms.
- Some shots are framed to look similar to Dutch painters (like Bruegel). This formal composition emphasises the strict rules by which the Amish live, but also suggest a balance and quiet peace.
- Later shots, in the town, place the horse and cart in the centre and surround them with the congested imagery of the modern world: trucks, big cars, road signs, burger adverts. Whereas there is space and balance in the shots in the Amish settlements, the 'outer' world is crammed with visual distractions.
- Sequence 2: There are numerous CUs of the gun by itself, establishing it almost as a character in these two scenes. The gun becomes – when accompanied by Book or Eli's words – a potent symbol for their differing world views. When Book explains about the gun, the camera cuts away to Samuel. When Eli gives his view, he and Samuel are shot in MS with, the gun foreground

but separate to them, on the table. As Eli speaks, the camera moves to an extended CU two shot, suggesting a far closer bond between the elder and the boy that eclipses that with Book and his curiosity about the gun. The scene also suggests that Book is a man of violence who will not be able to fit into their community.

- One significant scene is a long, group shot of John Book, Rachel and Samuel. The latter have their heads bent in prayer for the hot dog lunch they're about to eat and we can see their devout posture. Their black, modest clothes (Rachel wears a bonnet) emphasise this and also create a contrast both with the costume of Book, and with the busy bustling metropolis outside the window. The suggestion is that their prayer has created a tiny space of calm in the city and reinforces the notion of the Amish characters as being pure and virtuous compared to more 'modern', urban lifestyles.

Mise-en-Scène

- Sequence 1: The fields, horses and traps, white farmhouse and barn, plus 'plain' black clothes all suggest the film is set in the 18th or 19th century. This is in contrast with the 'modern' USA of giant trucks and trains, road signs and adverts that clutter the frame in later scenes. The prop of the toy horse that Daniel gives Samuel is symbolic of both their rural lifestyle and of the handmade crafts that show their connection to the land.
- Sequence 2: The gun prop becomes the focus for this sequence: a symbol of a necessary evil in a world of 'bad men' (as seen in the shootout before Book flees the city) but also of all the evil of the outside world to the Amish. Costume: in the first scene, Book is topless and draped in a towel. This contrasts with Rachel's 'plain' and modest clothing... but also begins to add to the sexual chemistry between them.

Editing

- Sequence 1: The caption 'Pennsylvania 1984' is a shock after seeing images that suggest a much

earlier time period. The cutting rate is slow and languid during the scenes at the funeral, often replacing match-on-action with tracking shots that makes us feel like we are being welcomed into the house and community. This builds an intimacy with the Amish (whose ways might seem alien or archaic to the audience). The scenes in the houses are followed by more 'romantic landscape' shots of fields, bales of hay, the sun setting. These create a peaceful, harmonious atmosphere (that Books' later arrival disrupts).

- Sequence 2: The juxtaposition of these two scenes illustrate the differences between Book and the Amish, and the possible impact of the cop and weapon being allowed into their community. During the scene between Samuel and Book, the editing cuts between the two characters and the gun, making the prop seem like a character in its own right. In the scene between Eli and Samuel, the camera focuses on their conversation and occasionally cuts away to the gun in a CU of its own, establishing the weapon as something separate, 'an unclean thing'.

Sound

- Sequence 1: Maurice Jarre's music mixes folk instrumentation with blasts of majestic electronic horns, creating the sense we are witnessing scenes that are human and intimate but which are connected to something larger and more powerful – the Amish's beliefs. During the wake, there is no music but lots of ambient sound of whispers, hushed voices and the creak of floorboards to immerse us in this environment. The joke about the horse with "one good ball" indicates that these people are not entirely pious, and humanises them. By contrast, the ambient sound of the town and train station reflects the visual clamour and contrasts with the peaceful atmosphere of settlements.
- Sequence 2: The dialogue about the gun becomes emblematic of Book and Eli's rival worldviews (and their opposing influences on Rachel). Book sees the gun as a functional object that is "safe to handle" when the bullets are removed. For Eli, the gun is a symbol of death and murder, and of the moral confusion of the outside world ("And would you be able to tell those bad men by sight?... See into their hearts?") Eli's speech also shows that he is not an inflexible authoritarian figure; he is taking the time to explain complex beliefs to Samuel rather than outright forbidding him from touching the gun.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Representation of urban and rural America: the film seems to reinforce a belief that city environments are rife with vice, corruption and violence (which makes a sensitive guy like Book isolated and lonely), whilst the countryside is seen as peaceful, harmonious and idyllic. Two good scenes to compare these representations are when Book takes Rachel and Samuel to find suspects (in a rain-drenched, neon-lit hellhole) – and when Book joins in the 'barn-raising', which is a triumph of community and cooperation (in bright, honeyed sunshine). Some criticised the representation of the Amish as being a personification of this vision of the countryside; others praised the sympathetic portrayal of these communities. This dichotomy between the 'two Americas' – violence vs peace/religion is symbolised in this shot of the two statues in the police station.

Historical

- The film – in style and plot – is almost the opposite of the typical 80s crime thriller like *Lethal Weapon* (1987) or *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984). Those films are full of snappy one-liners, macho posturing and thrilling violence. By comparison, *Witness* has a physically vulnerable and emotionally sensitive hero, and though it does have bursts of violence there is the sense that we – like the Amish – should shrink from this rather than cheer it on.
- The film was controversial in its depiction of the Lancaster County communities. Many experts on Amish culture said the script was littered with inaccuracies, from the language spoken to Kelly McGillis' costume – and whether they would realistically hide an injured policeman. Others argued that despite some inaccuracies, the portrayal is sympathetic and respectful. One of the reasons for popularity amongst audiences wasn't just its star – this was Harrison Ford's first 'straight' dramatic role and a very different side to Indy or Hans Solo – but also the attractiveness of a lifestyle that spurned the technology and consumerism of early 80s America.

Institutional

- *Witness* was a project developed by the producer Edward S. Feldman. It was turned down by his contractor 20th Century Fox as 'too rural' and Feldman took it on as an independent producer.

It took him several months to put together a 'package' of star and director that a studio (Paramount in this case) was willing to finance.

- Peter Weir had become internationally known as part of the 'New Australian Cinema' of the 1970s with films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Last Wave* (1977), *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). He had gained a reputation for films with unusual settings and sometimes fantasy elements but had also shown he could handle large scale productions. He was one of several Australian directors to be welcomed by Hollywood at this time.
- Weir described the attraction of the film project as 'the chance to make a classic Hollywood film'. He felt as if he was being commissioned by a studio in the 1930s and had to find out about the Amish community which he didn't know as an Australian – but then, neither did most Americans.
- By the early 1980s Harrison Ford was established as the biggest box office star in the world through his lead roles in both the Star Wars and Indiana Jones film series. However in more serious dramatic roles he still had to prove himself as a lead. *Witness* must have been a very attractive role for him.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - GENRE, NARRATIVE & CONTEXT

- *Witness* is an excellent example of a mixed-genre movie. The film is part romance and part of a cycle of police corruption films common in the 1970s and 1980s (and at various other times in Hollywood history).
- The film is distinguished by its narrative involving 'culture clash'. John Book is a 'stranger in a strange land' (in a narrative that has links to science fiction with an 'alien' placed in a community) – the opposite is experienced by the Amish mother and child in Philadelphia.
- In terms of style and 'feel' *Witness* is a Western, signified at the start of the final section with three men carrying shotguns approaching the farmhouse.
- The main Amish characters are introduced and up to the point of the murder it is primarily Rachel and Samuel's story.
- The narrative 'drive' switches to John Book once Harrison Ford appears on screen – his actions dictate how the narrative will develop – though once he is established in the Amish community, he mainly reacts to events rather than initiating them.
- It is possible to distinguish three 'acts' – the opening (up to the murder), John Book's protection of Rachel and Samuel and subsequent 'escape and hiding' in the Amish community and the final act, the arrival of the three corrupt police officers. A similar structure could be defined by the romance narrative – but viewed from Rachel's perspective.
- The narrative is 'open-ended' in that we don't know if Rachel will marry Daniel or if she or Samuel will ever see John Book again.
- The first act is a tense crime thriller, with traditional plot of an honest cop and innocent child threatened by a criminal conspiracy. In act two, once Book flees to Lancaster County, the film shifts genre to become a tender romance. There is still tension but instead of being about the protagonist's survival, it now becomes a sexual tension between Book and Rachel. Here they play typical 'culture clash' romantic roles: one tough and from the big city, the other a rural innocent. More generic elements of the love story are: a romantic rival (Daniel), risks of family disapproval and the sense that their love – if consummated – will not survive the differences between them. The second part of the film feels almost entirely different to the first, but the characters – their conflicts and their attraction – are consistent and believable.
- In the third act, the genre shifts to that of the Western. Book's actions in the town, where he punches a bully, have alerted the forces of corruption to his location, and they arrive on the farm ready for a traditional showdown. This shot of the armed villains walking towards the peaceful homestead could easily be from many Westerns of the 50s. This should come as no surprise at the screenwriters, William Kelley and Earl W Wallace, were veterans of writing TV Western shows like *Gunsmoke*. Book also resembles a conventional Western character: a man of violence who has renounced his ways, but must take up the gun once more to protect those who refuse to fight. *Shane* (1953) is a good example of this. Though audiences at the time may have found the lifestyle of the Amish in the film to be idyllic and an escape from 80s consumerism, they still cheered when Ford's character says 'But it's *my way*' before standing up to the town bully. Similar

to many of these heroes in Westerns, he knows he cannot stay in the peaceful community and rides (or drives!) off into the sunset.