

The crucible – film essay sample



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The Crucible; an intensely emotional and dramatic film based on the horrific story of the Salem witch trials. The opening and concluding sequences are of great importance in conjuring the melancholy atmosphere present throughout the story. The director uses various different devices to achieve this.

A variety of camera techniques are used throughout the beginning sequence to enhance the mood and involve the audience. Camera techniques are harmonized with lighting effects to culminate this dramatic scene. I will begin by discussing examples of this.

In the village, many close-ups and long shots are used to enhance facial expression and to set the sombre mood.

Opening on a zoom shot of Abigail's face, an aura of gloom is created by the cold colour scheme and her shadowed expression. The bleak décor of the room shown in this scene is used to further emphasize the gothic theme of the film. The camera tracks then tracks her out into the village, its angle showing the village as she would see it; claustrophobic and dark. This may be used as a visual metaphor implying the repressive, narrow-minded nature of the Salem society.

A zoom shot is used to show the other village girls simultaneously rush from their houses after Abigail, towards the grim-looking forest ahead. This illustrates Abigail as the girls' leader, and the fact that the film opens on her establishes her as a main character.

As the film changes scene, the camera techniques change likewise. Panning and tracking conjure a sense of tension and chaos, and this effect is teamed with austere colour schemes of purple and blue. The camera is in mid-shot position and tracks them as they run through the trees, giving an effect of movement and therefore involving the audience in the action.

Intermittent between tracking shots, the camera is set behind trees or branches as it follows the girls, as if they are being secretly monitored.

When the girls are casting the spell, close-ups and fast paced pan shots are used to conjure a feeling of chaos and frenzy. Intermittent switching between shots further emphasizes this. For example; the camera switches from shots of the dancing girls to the tracking of Parris searching for them. This creates anxiety and prepares the audience for the scene's climax; Abigail's uninhibited violence.

Lighting and sound are another two key factors that can be manipulated to heighten the dramatic value of the scene. With the opening of the first sequence, the musical motif that accompanies Abigail throughout the film begins to play as she is introduced. It follows her emotions, the tempo increasing as she hurries to ready herself and creep out of the house.

As the forest comes into view, the eerie surroundings are complemented by the change in music. Wind instruments accompany drums to create an uncanny aura. The absence of sound effects until the girls reach the forest focuses the attention of the audience on the characters. Sound effects are introduced immediately after they set foot in the forest. This technique

creates a contrast in the girls' mood - previously being sinister and silent, they are now excited as they withdraw into the secrecy of the forest.

The music reflects the pace of the film, quickening into a crescendo as the girls break into a run. Sounds of hurried feet crunching the leaves complement this fast-paced, high-pitched music to emphasize the frenzied atmosphere, creating a sense of wantonness as the girls break free from their puritanical backgrounds.

As the girls come to a halt around the fire, the music ceases, to leave silence. This and the view of the ethereal mist surrounding the girls create a sense of sinister unease. The silence is broken as Tituba begins to chant. The girls' excited laughter and screaming accompanied by the foreign untranslatable chants culminate into a sense of hysteria and confusion, which peaks as Parris discovers them. With this, silence returns once more and the audience is left with the eerie atmosphere of the forest.

Of equal importance to the film is the closing sequence. Similar techniques are used to generate the same high quality drama as the beginning.

Powerful use of the camera is shown; a shot of the roughly hewn tumbrel emerging from the skeletal forest opening the scene. Panning shots and close-ups are again used to create a strong sense of pathos, showing the onlookers mixed emotions of angst and mourning as Proctor is led to the gallows. This sets the mood for the climax of the film - the victims' hanging.

This last scene is filmed between three nooses. This shows the atrocity of the event, and contrasts the idyllic horizon in the background with the sinister, sombre mood that is symbolic of the noose.

The camera looks down on the victims as they are led to their fates. As the nooses are tied round their necks, a close-up is shown of John Proctor's facial expression, implicating his brave and noble nature. After a zoom on each victim, the sequence finishes abruptly with the ending shot showing John's noose vibrating in the wind. He is pushed from the stage, but his final state is not shown. This is effective as it leaves the audience to create an image for themselves, which can prove to be more disturbing.

Lighting and sound - although kept to a minimum - is a technique used in this sequence to highlight a particularly emotional scene. The sombre music accompanies John and his family to the foot of the gallows, and heightens as he steps up onto the stage. There is nothing else but this music, which creates pathos within the audience and - with a certain dignified resonance - reflects John's attitude.

All sound is muted as you see the onlookers mourning and crying. This creates a surreal atmosphere, as if from the victims' point of view. The next scene is very powerful, and shows the victims silhouetted against the bright sky as they recite the Lord's Prayer. From this view, the scene could also be portrayed as reminiscent of the crucifixion of Christ. This effect not only further exaggerates Proctor's nobility, but also gives the audience a sense of his martyrdom.

The raucous clanks of the gallows being prepared are heard through the praying voices. This serves to remind us of the grim reality of the story above the sense of nobility in the characters. John - halfway through prayer -

is silenced as he is pushed from the gallows, the scene ending with the harsh jolt of the rope.

These techniques enable these two scenes to shock, stun and manipulate an audience, dragging them into the drama of the film and sending their emotions back and forth along with the characters. The first sequence is guaranteed to widen an audience's eyes, getting their heartbeat racing as the tension builds. After the audience is put through feelings of anxiety, happiness and awe throughout the middle of the film, the mood is brought back down to a funereal sombreness, as the " favourite" character is brought to an end. But perhaps this scene could be made even more powerful if more focus was put on the battle for John's conscience, instead of the infidelity of the central character?

Also, I think that an alternative end to the finishing sequence could be more effective. When John is hung, this could be shown from his perspective; the onlookers gradually becoming faded as he swung above them. The audience still left to imagine John's final state, this gives a more powerful and enduring image.

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