

How does the film witness show the clash between amish culture and modern america...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Peter Weir used directorial devices to produce a piece of theatrical prominence and importance. This spiritual and social journey of a New York policeman, John Book (Harrison Ford) conveys a strong message of morality, corruption and requests understanding of the often misunderstood Amish lifestyle.

From the offset this film is a significant study of the Amish and modern, urban American cultures' co-existence. The intricate plot exposes the effect of corruption on the life of an Amish child named Samuel Lapp and his mother Rachel. They leave the Amish community in Baltimore and proceed to Philadelphia in order to visit relatives. Whilst awaiting their delayed train Samuel witnesses a significant and vicious murder of a drugs officer, disclosing the corruption of two manipulative police officers (McFee and Paul) with much influence within the system. As the plot develops Samuel and his assigned detective John Book's knowledge finds them submerged in life threatening circumstances.

John Book returns to the Amish community suffering ill-health due to a shoot-out with McFee. He is detained as a consequential member of the Amish. The main theme of the film is the progression of John Book's attitude and position amongst the community's citizens. The Amish sect was founded in 1512 by Swiss reformist Ulrich Zwingli who devised separation from the established church over disagreements concerning such issues as infant baptism and war participation. The Amish faith established itself from 1730-1770, the communities residing in North America.

The Amish speak their inherent tongue of German as a method of respect and a reminder of their roots. The Amish live a very distinctive and idyllic lifestyle. Historically the Amish culture is agriculturally based. All food and drink is produced organically and farmed personally on their land.

Their lifestyle is self-sufficient, with few modern conveniences available. They live very much in accordance with nature. To show as little arrogance and image obsession as possible they wear no garish clothes. They like to believe that they are “ plain people”. Males wear only dark suits, pastel coloured shirts, a straw or black broad-brimmed hat and dark footwear. Women of the community wear uncomplimentary full length dresses with long sleeves and high necks.

Read about Factors you should consider to understand the threat in your environment They wear white caps and aprons in appropriate pastel colours. Any embellishment which appears to be distinctive is seen as vanity. They must not style their hair or use manipulative substances such as make-up, this is seen as an alteration of God’s intention. To show mutual respect, members of the community refer to one another using only their surnames in speech. A member of the community who doesn’t conform to the religion will be shunned because the Amish are a strictly non-violent sect.

The film depicts a group of “ English” intentionally terrorising the travelling Amish. They simply allow the outsiders to intimidate them without resistance. They believe that modern culture forms a threat towards their preserved seventeenth century style rural culture and their tranquillity. For this reason they do not allow marriage outside their culture- the collection of

Amish communities. Formal education above grade eight is strongly discouraged by community elders as it is thought to corrupt the child's mind; instead they teach curriculum which the community believes will be useful for them during their child's life. Most members of the religion are christened between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one.

At sixteen the child is sent to explore the outside world if they so choose to. During this time they cannot be shunned from the community. Peter Weir has selected New York to situate the film because it is an appropriate example of modern America and urban lifestyle. Some areas contain elements of obvious corruption which are important to the film's moral. The use of Harrison Ford to portray the lead role is important; Ford is a very established actor who has been famed for playing masculine roles of the stereotypical hero. He is idolized as a film star and is an obvious representative to symbolize the typical modern American man.

Whilst situated at Grand Central Station, New York (a typical bustling metropolitan area), the child, Samuel sees a graven statue which portrays an interesting angel design. It is the spectator's primary image of the station and it towers high above the customers below. In an Amish community this image would be seen as pagan and vain. Despite this Samuel senses something of the divine amidst the clamour of the station. After he sees this untainted and natural image Samuel is subjected to this especially significant murder. This highlights the impressionable nature and purity of the Amish child contrasted with the obvious corruption and the American culture's "everyday" exposure to horrific events.

When John Book first arrives in the community he has injuries and accidentally collides with a dovecote positioned on the outskirts of the community. This is an important piece of imagery; doves are seen as a symbol of peace and purity. This is suggesting John's disruption of these maintained attributes within the community. In the same way that John is foreseen to disrupt this particular community, the Amish believe American citizens' disrupt and manipulate God's intentions and spiritual wholesomeness; both of these elements are associated with the Amish community.

The policemen refer to the Amish as being "out of touch", as they have chosen to ignore modern conveniences such as telephones. This statement can be taken literally. The Amish use a bell to call members of the community whereas a typical American would use an electronic device such as a telephone to contact colleagues. The use of a bell shows the Amish's openness, as the whole community is made aware of the current situation.

As a contrast, most telephone calls involve a level of secrecy as the conversation is usually maintained between only two individuals. John's presence in the community is seen as inappropriate and a possible source of corruption from the "English"- English speaking American citizens. This nickname has been assigned as the Amish see their choice of language as a lack of respect towards their roots and traditional culture. This thought is represented by the ever-presence of John's handgun.

It is a sign of entering evil in an untouched community. The gun provokes issues for and against pacifism. Eli uses the gun to explain to Samuel the Amish moral position on violence. Samuel retorts- "I would only kill a bad

man” Eli believes that, “ Having seen a bad man you become one,” “ Keep ye separate and touch not the unholy thing” During this interchange Eli concludes that- “ What you take into head, you take into heart. ” This whole exchange implicates the spiritually uneducated and the modern cultures’ focus on and acceptance of violence. The barn raising scene demonstrates the gender and age divisions in the Amish community.

The scene shows how effectively the Amish work co-operatively using mutual aid. They maintain a happy aura by singing and laughing throughout their labours. The music is uplifting and reflective of the atmosphere created by the body language of all of the characters in the scene. In coherence to all services and tasks in the community the men set about achieving the fatiguing manual work, whilst the women prepare a meal and drinks for the men. The children also make an effort to participate in the eventual success of the occasion without complaint.

This scene presents the thought of community working together to achieve and progress, a moral that many American citizens choose to ignore. The work is achieved at a leisurely pace unlike the monotonous, frantic movement of the modern world and its system. The Amish pass objects to each other and endeavour to share all their building implements, showing their natural affinity and harmony. The building of the frame is almost like a routine shown in a flowing movement.

Peter Weir presents an obvious clash of culture in an Amish travelling scene. It shows the traditional slow paced Amish method of transport, the horse and carriage travelling in a densely populated urban area. A group of typical

American youths confront the Amish citizens. They mock the Amish lifestyle by suggesting that they are powerless to prevent their threats of violence.

This shows these young American's arrogant attitudes and their social values. They attempt to intimidate the Amish by using ice cream to paint their faces. John Book is angered by this and feels provoked to take action against the youths, Eli (Rachel's father and community elder) pre-empts John's action and mentions that- " It is not our way", John replies, " Yes, but it's my way. " as he lifts himself from the carriage and strikes the opposing youth. This scene demonstrates John's lack of understanding and respect for the Amish religion.

It also demonstrates the American attitude towards confrontation and the need to respond aggressively. The Amish are dedicated to religious conservation. The clothing they choose to wear is no exception. They wear similar clothes to the founders of the Amish faith and they have no wish to identify with fashion and styles. The potential for personal vanity and pride is diminished by the Amish's plain, simplistic style of natural clothing. The Bible warns that for women to flaunt themselves is a request for men to sin.

It is seen to be of consequence. Rachel's removes her traditional hat and embraces John, she could be said to be setting aside her religious inhibitions which command the modesty of women, she is violating these constraints in order to embrace John's method of living. Rachel offers John Book her deceased husband's clothing, John reluctantly accepts. This could show the deepening of John and Rachel's relationship and John's assuming of her ex-

husband's position in her heart. John and Rachel share a joke over the inadequate size of the clothes on John's body.

This could pre-empt John's incapability to fully accept and appreciate the Amish way of life. He could be using the clothing because of his own desire for change; he may be aspiring to the Amish method of life. This scene presents a strong literal statement. It could be said that it shows his inability to ever totally "fit in" to the Amish lifestyle. The director Peter Weir uses sound to promote the idyllic image of the Amish; he also uses sound to create a more in depth picture of modern American culture.

In the New York police confederates department there is a synchronized and frantic feel, there is a lot of chaos in this primarily automated environment (telephones ring, typing, electric heaters etc). This shows us the wonders of the modern world contributing to a disorderly and irritating location, in contrast to the serene Amish scenes. The monotonous sounds subside when an ignorant modern man working behind one of the typewriters momentarily stares in disbelief at this odd sight, Samuel. Another man, a criminal, grins happily at Samuel (who acknowledges this) then he reveals his true agenda - he wishes Samuel to free him, shaking his handcuffs vigorously creating a penetrating sound.

Both the thought and the sound reflect that of a modern worker shackled and restrained by materialism, Samuel is frightened by the duplicity of the man's intentions, which also reflects the wider society. In accordance with their nature when participating in speech, the Amish appear to be very honest. They do not attempt to lie, humiliate, be derogatory or use sarcasm

as in modern communication. They attempt to respect each other, using their full names only. At moment's John refers to Samuel Lapp (his name given at baptism, considered his only name by the Amish) as " Sam".

This could be seen as another way in which the modern culture's attempt to manipulate things for their benefit. This could be said to be John (representative of all modern citizens) opting for laziness over respect or he could be implying familiarly, again regardless of the Amish's honest conceptions. As the horse and cart travel into an urban area we can hear faint, ambient music that reflects the calm and measured life of the Amish. When crossing a motorway it is abruptly halted by the sequencing of many lorries' deafening, unmelodic horns. This presents the Amish's fear of American citizens intervening in their affairs and ending their serenity and sustained peace, possibly pre-empting the films ending.

During the lavatory murder scene the music is intense, fast and the beat is steady and repetitive. This emphasises Samuel's fear and possibly the rate of his heart beat. The director uses different lighting styles to disassociate the two cultures. Lighting is important to allow the audience to perceive the desired impression of characters and events. On entrance to the Amish funeral scene, it is dark.

This reflects the atmosphere of the community and tells the audience about the unhappiness of this event. The only light in the scene subtly enters through the windows. Of course it is natural light and it is not harsh to the eye. Throughout the film the use of lighting in Amish scenes appears a lot

more natural, pure and less pretentious than the modern use of electrical powered lighting.

The colours highlighted by the light in Amish scenes are always very mellow and muted. Lighting typical to a modern American scene can be seen as the Amish duo (Samuel and Rachel) travel in the police car with John and his partner. They travel at fast pace so they only witness artificial neon colours in a vacant haze. The rain reflects the headlights colours which simply blend with the town's bright glare. Scenes of this nature often work to create a superimposed, artificial outlook of modern American life and lifestyles which is in total contrast to that of the Amish, with their pure, pastel coloured lifestyle.

As John recovers from his gunshot wounds, Rachel sits quietly beside the bed and sensually touches his arm to soothe him from his disturbed dreams. Her gentle Amish love could be said to be curing him of the evils of the modern world- the bullets. Her purity is established by her actions but is heightened by her closeness to the natural light that she holds, while John lies in darkness. When she enters the room the light of Rachel's candle exposes John, this could show her shedding of light (the Amish goodness) onto him. When we see interior scenes it is possible to contrast the lighting and the camera use.

The Amish scenes are often presented as more relaxed, with a soft focus and less vibrant colours- highlighted by only natural lighting. The image is often more vivid, sharper and eye piercing in American scenes. This emphasises the modern lust for attention and difference. The framing of Samuel's leaving

the community shot is important. He leaves the community using public transport- the train.

He is perplexed by the presence of a hot air balloon as it drifts in the blue sky. The whole shot including Samuel's grinning face is framed within the window of the train, encapsulating a powerful portrait of Samuel leaving his spiritual life behind. There is an interesting use of framing in the scene where Daniel and Rachel sit together on the swinging couch close to Eli's residence. John Book is working manually behind them. This framing shows Daniel's mentality.

As he relaxes with Rachel, Daniel does not see John Book as a threat on his relationship with her and John is literally a small presence in the backdrop. A close up of Daniel's glass of lemonade shows the audience the unhurried, relaxed manner in which he drinks his beverages. This contrasts heavily with an earlier scene in which John downs his drink in one gulp; this highlights once again the varying approaches to life of the Amish and the modern citizen. As the corrupt officials arrive at the Amish community the framing creates a dangerous and pre-emptive effect. They walk in a synchronized motion and they are positioned so the housing area is directly parallel to them. It is positioned in a mist which provokes a sinister and dangerous feeling.

The final image of John is of him driving back into the "real world" again past the dovecote that he has now fully repaired. This use of the camera informs us that the modern American, Book's departure returns the community to its former tranquillity and routine. By the end of the film both

John and Rachel have resolved that because of their cultural backgrounds living in coherence to one another would be impossible. Because of this they have no words to speak. Eli mentions- " Be careful amongst those English" although there is a small truth in what Eli is saying, this is a humorous acknowledgement of John's spiritual progress. This non-stereotypical ending again symbolizes the great difference between the two cultures.

Witness is a unique high-budget film which encapsulates both an enthralling tale of unattainable romance/police drama and an impressive profile of Amish existence. The film allows the religion to be perceived in an unbiased light for possibly the first time for many observers (with today's often sceptical and pessimistic views of religion). The director has worked extremely hard to portray the film's moral in a successful way. The strategies used are shown in my above observations. He has presented the film without judgement, just using images he has compiled through the events of John and Rachel's relationship.

Weir makes the comparison clear and very comprehensible to audiences by presenting the gulf so vividly. In almost every scene they are examples of the purity and the simplicity of the Amish, in comparison to the corruption and hostile attitudes of the modern man of which we are consistently reminded. Without the use of this theme the film would be unimportant and mediocre. The other theme of the piece is quite basic and typical of the modern American film industry, made for watching pleasure rather than contemplation. This film has both these elements. If I was to criticise this motion picture in any respect, it would be to comment on the stereotypical distinction and generalisation of the two cultures.

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The scripter has obviously decided what he wishes to show in the duration of this piece, the film highlights only the goodness of the Amish and the corrupt side of American lifestyles. Although it is left to the viewer to decide which of the philosophies is preferable, the choice is tainted by the lack of showing the “ other sides” of each culture.