

Analysis of the titles and establishing shots of 'practical magic' essay sample



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Practical magic is a film directed by Griffin Dunne. It was produced by Warner Bros. and is based on a book by Alice Hoffman. The film follows the Owen sisters who are white witches hexed by a centuries old curse. The men that they fall in love with are doomed to die an untimely death. It is a cross-generic film with elements of romance and fantasy interwoven. Generic verisimilitude and suspense of belief are keys to understanding this film. The main twist in the story comes when one of the Owens sisters dates a sadistic 'Jimmy Angelo' and ends up, with her sisters help accidentally killing him.

They then try and cover it however a US Marshall turns up and complicates matters. The film has two major stars in it, Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman as the Owens sisters (although they are played by different actresses in the opening sequence because they are children). The other main actors are Dianne Wiest and Stockard Channing as their two magical aunts and Aiden Quinn and Goran Visnjic who don't appear in the opening sequence. The opening sequences function is to introduce the narrative in a film or other media text.

It usually contains a lot of information and Practical magic is no exception. The opening sequence establishes the time, mood, place, location and the main characters in the narrative. It also establishes a range of narrative possibilities that the text could explore and develop. The narrative possibilities are then set in context by the audience through their knowledge of the rest of the film and of others in the same genre. The genre elements set up a system of expectation for the audience involving both repetition of generic elements and differences from other films.

The repetition makes up the bare framework of the film and it is in this that the audience's expectations are raised. The difference allows the audience to await a few surprises and twists in the film that set it apart from others in its genre. The opening segment is 6mins 10secs long. The film is a closed narrative as is conventional for films and is shot in an unreal time. The first three and a half minutes of the film establishes what has happened in the past of the main characters ancestry.

The aunts are telling a story about the main characters past ancestry and experience to the two main characters as children and we see what happened as she is telling it. It is like listening to a conversation and draws the audience in, in a slightly unconventional way. Instead of having the aunts addressing the audience and narrating the story to us we are hearing it as if it was meant for children and as if they are in the film. It creates a sense that this is really happening and that we are really looking into another world instead of watching a film.

The narration can be split up into three sections. The first is the distant past and the Owens ancestor Maria. It is shot outside using mainly natural light although I think they also used some filler light to make sure it was light enough. The music is very dramatic and plays parallel through this section of the opening segment. It also links in very closely with the shots that are used. To begin with we see two long shots of a seascape/coast that fade into each other helping to set the scene as an island.

The film then cuts and is softened by a sound bridge of tinkling music. Again we have a long shot as the camera sets the scene. The costumes in this

scene are all period and look to be made in a puritan style. As the camera zooms in and pans down slowly to eye level we see what the people are surrounding and looking at - Maria about to be hanged. The camera then zooms in slowly on Maria connoting that she is the important person in this scene. The camera then cuts and is sound bridged (as is the rest of this scene) to an extreme close up of Maria.

She doesn't appear to be upset and the expression on her face is more like annoyance and disbelief that they would wish to hang her. The camera then cuts to an extreme close up of a quite old woman with almost haggard features. She is looking at Maria (or is connoted to be looking at Maria) in disgust. She calls her a witch in a spiteful voice. This is quite clever because at the same time the voice over is still going on and the aunt telling the story also says witch simultaneously. This has the effect of linking the narration and the action closely.

The people shown in these shots seem very stiff and unlikable and this helps the audience to identify with Maria. The music also tells us that she is who we are supposed to identify with because it becomes lighter and has a happier tone when the shot shows a close up of Maria. There are a few more close up's of people watching the hanging and then we cut to a long shot of Maria standing slightly above camera level. I think it is interesting to note that all the shots of Maria are angled slightly below her although it almost isn't noticeable.

Her skin also seems to glow and have an orange light to it that contrasts with the other people who are all pale. These things have the effect of connoting

her as a martyr and someone who we should look up to. We again have a few medium/close ups of the puritans to break up the image of Maria before we have another close up. This close up takes several seconds and is noticeably longer than the other close ups. It connotes she is about to do something and that we are being forced to pause with her whilst she works herself up to do it.

There is then an extreme close up of her foot as she steps off the edge of the hanging platform with the rope around her neck. The shot cuts just as her foot is about to fall and we again see her face. This creates a small feeling of suspense as to whether she will jump. When we see her face she looks down and it does look like she is going to jump. The people watching all gasp and seem shocked which mirrors the audience's reaction. The film then cuts to a long shot behind Maria where we see her jump. At this point the music and the people's shocked faces have built up the tension.

As she does this the narration also pauses. Then in quick succession using cuts we see a shot of Maria's face, people's shocked reactions and then her feet travelling towards the ground. This again builds up tension and the music tempo speeds up. The next shot is a close up of the rope, which breaks as the music pauses before changing to a happier tone. There is a slightly slowed down shot of Maria's feet as they hit the ground and it then cuts to a medium shot of her as she stands up. There are then some close ups of very frightened puritans gasping and huddling together before running off.

There is also a high angled long shot of the puritans running away followed by a medium shot of Maria with the rope still around her neck watching them run. There is then an extreme close up of a bird. In this narrative it is supposed to symbolize freedom as she has just freed herself from being hung and the music supports this. The tone now changes slightly and the narration resumes. There are two location shots of a meadow and a sea where Maria is stood. The narration ties the location that Maria is in to where they are now although we cannot see it yet which also helps to set the scene.

At the same time it tells of Maria's struggles and her story. There is a close up of her looking out to sea waiting for her lover to rescue her and then, to indicate the passage of time we see the structure of a house and as the camera pans backwards we see Maria still looking out to sea. The music changes slightly and so does the atmosphere in the next few shots of Maria where we see her crying because her lover never came. It is now that we learn of the curse and our first expectations as the audience are raised, that at some point in the film the curse will be broken.

The last shot of her crying is from behind and it fades into a shot of the sea. This helps in the next scene to understand that there has been a passage of time and that although they are at the same place everything is different. This is not only shown through the visual aspects (the people have changed) but because of the music as well. The next scene is shorter and begins with a very long shot. To begin with the music is a lot happier to start off with, people are laughing and a man is playing with some children.

To further add to this, the camera starts off as a close up and spins around slowly alternating between close ups and medium shots of them playing. This happy image that has just been built up is then interrupted by a chirping/ticking sound that we are told by the narrator is the death-watch beetle, and as the music changes and the woman in this scene looks around in a concerned way the narrator tells us how it means the one you love is doomed to die. As she says this, the camera (still in the same shot that it started the scene with) pivots around and then zooms into her concerned looking face.

The film then cuts to a close up of a beetle walking on the edge of their blanket. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of the woman and zooms into her face in time with the music till it reaches a close up. Her face then dissolves into a new scene. In this scene the people look as if they could be in the sixties. The light is very bright and natural looking and everyone looks happy and healthy until the disruption because of the beetle. Up until now the mise-en-scene has just been the location shots of the seas and meadows with the only things standing out as the gallows and the house framework.

In the next scene however we begin to build up a better picture of what is happening now because the next, very short scene is them in the not too distant past. This scene has four shots. The first is a long shot of two girls holding hands in front of a house. The music and style of clothes quickly reminds the audience that their parents have just died and the camera is angled slightly below them so it is almost trying to seem as if it is a point of view shot and they are looking up to the house. The film then cuts to a medium shot of the aunts walking down the steps.

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There is another cut and we see a medium/close up shot of the girl's faces looking up providing the connotation they are slightly overwhelmed.

However the music keeps the tone light and still quite happy. There is then a cut to behind the girls as they hug their aunts and are lead into the house. In this scene we get our first glimpse of the aunts and their visual image seems to agree with the image I have built up in my head listening to them. They seem very friendly and the girls seem happy there. This contrasts to the next scene where the girls are bullied and one of the major themes in the play begins.

The next scene begins with a shot of the girls running happily and then the camera cuts to a blurred point of view shot of one of the girls where we see others running on the opposite side of the fence. Here the fence is a physical representation of the barrier separating the two girls from the other children. The scene then continues with a shot of them running and when there is a section of the fence they can see over they stop. Cut to the sister's face as she asks them if they want to play. The camera then shows the kids on the other side of the fence and cuts to a medium shot of the second sister who walks slowly towards the camera.

We then cut back to the people on the other side of the fence and back again to the first sister. Through most of this there has been no speech between the children and tension has been built up. Also the shots of one side of the fence to the other helps build up a distance and division between them already displayed in the fence. As we are looking at the second sister a stone or something being thrown hits her in the face. She falls to the floor and the

second sister goes to help her. She kneels down next to her and the camera cuts to the people on the other side of the fence.

They start chanting “ Witch, witch, you’re a witch” and continue to throw things. The camera zooms in slightly towards them and then cuts to a close up of the first sister lying on the floor. The chanting still continues and the scene then cuts to a medium shot showing both sisters, one lying on the floor and the other knelt over her. That then dissolves into a new scene. In this scene the children are each wearing very different outfits that aren’t fashionable but that reflect their personalities, which becomes more apparent later on in the film.

This scene shows one of the major themes of the film and one that the audience expects because of this confrontation. It is also the last scene of the opening sequence that is told through narrative of the aunt. The narrative up until now has not been just the aunt though, both aunts have said some of the narrative and the children asked questions that the audience should know the answer to so that they read the intended meaning of the narrative. Now that we have reached the present moments in the film only the very last titles are being shown and the end of the next scene shows none.

The titles have been superimposed from the very beginning of the opening segment. They are in a white thin font that is clearly noticeable and they are put in carefully so they don’t bridge scenes or obstruct and detract from what is happening on screen. The music that has been playing all the way through also ends in this scene. Since the beginning of the opening segment

the diegetic sound has almost been incorporated into the music. For example the ticking of the beetle was in time and even Maria's cries fit in with the music. This scene begins with a long shot of the house and garden.

It then cuts to a medium shot of the table and people sitting around it, the two aunts and the sisters. The shots in this scene are mainly medium shots that follow who is talking with an occasional shot at one of the two girls to see their reaction to the aunts dialogue. I think that this short scene is just to wrap up the narrative from the first part of the opening segment and that the fact the music and titles stop in this sequence also supports this. It is a very lighthearted scene with some humour and a good sense of happiness of everyone present.

This next scene introduces some of the dark uses of magic into the film and also displays the first major signs of being romantic. It begins with a shot of one of the sisters lighting a candle by blowing it and they are all getting along happily until they hear a tapping and scratching noise. It is obvious from the girl's expressions that they have a good idea of what is going to happen next and there is a sort of tension created in this scene as the aunts leave. The camera then cuts to the aunts walking down the stairs and to the glass window on a door where a woman is tapping and scratching in a desperate way.

There is a few shots of the aunts as they go and get things and then there is a close up of a book. Just after we see the two sisters sneak down some of the stairs so they can see what is happening. There is a point of view shot of the two girls and then the camera cuts between medium/close ups of the

aunts and woman medium close up's of the girls reactions. The woman sticks a pin into a live bird and we see one of the sisters flinch and look away. When they look back the manner of the woman has changed because now the man she loves is going to leave his wife for her.

There is a close up of the object of the womans affection so that we can see who the woman is in love with. The most important part of the scene, and one of the themes is the reaction of the two girls. One says they never want to fall in love whilst the other says they can't wait. This highlights the difference between the sisters and displays a romantic element that the audience gain insight and expectation as to what is to come - the one who said she didn't want to fall in love will. This scene is the only one in the opening segment that doesn't use natural light.

Instead it uses high key lighting and an orangey light to create a warm and cosy atmosphere. There is no music used in this scene. The main theme established in the opening sequence is that of oppression and unacceptance and the film is an ideological exploration of the overthrowing of the dominant ideas in the society that we are watching. The common sense idea in the society where the Owens sisters live is that witches are bad. This is an idea that the audience can see the film does not want the audience to sympathise with or believe in.

To this end we are introduced to the Owen sisters as children, which has the effect of making the audience sympathise with them. They are made to seem outcasts from society and are bullied in the opening sequence, which is something that almost all of the audience can relate to in some way. In a

wider sense the magic that they have is unaccepted because people don't understand it and the film introduces it as a gift that the audience can see the benefit of. It can and I believe is supposed to symbolize any difference between people and the sense of well-being and acceptance that the audience wishes to feel is real life is happening on screen.

The audience can then identify the film's cultural verisimilitude (bullying and unacceptance) and come away feeling happy and entertained. Several other underlying themes are that of sisterhood, possible misuse of power (magic) and a love theme also becomes apparent. The film has a very large audience as the underlying themes and values are relatable to almost everyone however it is aimed mainly at women. The two reasons I believe this are that it displays elements of a romantic genre and also the main characters of the film are female making them easier for an intended female audience to identify with.

The only other people that the film is not aimed at is children under the age of twelve, other than the twelve rating of the film I think that this is something I would draw from the film because the themes might not be fully understood. The audience is left to construct the meaning of the opening segment. Many things contribute to this interpretation. The main elements that raise the expectations of the audience and add to the narrative are production values - technical codes such as sound and lighting, iconography, mise-en-scene, visual imagery and music - representation, genre and ideology.

The expectations are that at some point in the film they will break the curse and the girl who didn't want to fall in love inevitably will. There will be a happy ever after ending and I can leave the film with a sense of well-being. I mainly conclude this of the opening segment because of the generic elements of the film however the production values, representation and ideology in this text also support and integrate themselves into these generic elements.

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