

How does the opening sequence of halloween establish genre and build suspense for...



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Halloween was shot in 21 days in the spring of 1978. It became a huge hit and was the highest-grossing independent film ever made at that time, with a budget of only \$300, 00. Halloween was directed by John Carpenter, who at that time was a little known director. This film shot John Carpenter to fame. It's about a psychologically disturbed boy, who kills his sister on Halloween night in 1963.

He then gets taken to a mental hospital where he is studied by Doctor Loomis. In 1978 he escapes from the hospital and comes back to the town where he murdered his sister to commit more violent crimes. Coincidentally this, again, happens on Halloween night. In the opening of a typical horror film, the audience expects to witness a dark, mysterious scene with disturbing music which usually involves a piano and an organ. These play in a series of high and low notes.

In modern horror films, the instruments vary to give a more intense feel. The high striking notes are used to make the audience feel tense and often to make them jump. However, the low notes are a sign of danger and mystery. For example, when a villain comes into contact with the victim, high striking notes/music will be heard to scare the audience and add tension. Whereas, in a scene where the villain is searching for the victim and comes close to contact, lower notes are best to keep suspense and show something horrific is about to occur. The characters in horror films are usually predictable.

The victims are usually high school teenagers; the villain tends to be an outsider who comes to get revenge on something that happened in the past.

The hero is usually a representative of normality and remarkable only for

their innocence and tendency to blunder into danger with a conspicuous lack of caution. In modern horror films, the hero is one of the victims themselves. Point of view shots work exceptionally well in horror films to create more tension and build suspense. This is the reason why most directors nowadays, use this feature in their films.

For example, "The Blair Witch Project" gives a more realistic feel and makes the audience feel as though they are involved. Directors try to keep the opening scene of the film mysterious but effective. They try not to give too much away but still want the audience to be suspicious about the film and eager to watch it. The camera tends to move slowly to create a mystified, secret atmosphere and for the audience to fear the unknown. In the opening sequence of Halloween, John Carpenter has cleverly given us, the audience, clues that this film is going to be horrific.

In the pre-sequence, we witness key iconography. A bright orange pumpkin appears on the left hand side of the screen. This catches the audience's eye because the whole screen is black so makes a powerful contrast. Non-diegetic music is playing.

As in most horror films, the instruments used are a piano and an organ. The tempo of the music increases to create fear for the audience. Cast names begin to appear on the right hand side of the bright, orange pumpkin. These fade from red to yellow and then back to red.

These colours represent evil and danger. This gives a powerful contrast to emphasise the horror. The audience realise that the camera has been

gradually moving in towards the pumpkin's left eye. This could symbolise a <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-the-opening-sequence-of-halloween-establish-genre-and-build-suspense-for-the-audience/>

story based on psychological problems. It also shows that the pumpkin was going to play a key part in the film. The film starts with a clear black screen where we establish the place of the following scene - Haddonfield, Illinois.

This is written in white font for it to clearly stand out. This is then followed by details of the date of the following scene - Halloween night, 1963. This is also written in white font. The audience start to hear non-diegetic sounds of children chanting Halloween rhymes.

This could be seen as eerie, as innocent children are being associated with evilness. The film delivers its first scene. There is hardly any noise; however our eyes are drawn to a brightly lit house. However, the rest of the frame remains very dark. The director used the feature low key lighting to emphasise the importance of the house.

We start to question if this is a point of view shot when we see the camera move at walking pace towards the house and starts to walk around it. It then focuses on bright orange pumpkin which is placed on the porch. The camera then creates a voyeuristic shot when it focuses on a couple inside the house. Once we see the camera quickly moving to the right, pan to the left, look up and down and then straight ahead, we are certain that this is a point of view shot. This gives an effect of urgency.

The silence has not yet been broken. This adds much to the suspense. The camera, again, looks around the house before focusing onto the couple. This teenage couple show the predictable victims in a horror film. The audience may come up with assumptions that there is a stalker who is planning on killing the teenagers. Silence is soon broken when we hear the boyfriend ask, <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-the-opening-sequence-of-halloween-establish-genre-and-build-suspense-for-the-audience/>

" We are alone aren't we? " The girlfriend then replies, " Michael's around someplace.

" At this moment, the audience realise that the village is not bewildered and that a boy named Michael is somewhere to be found. This adds mystery to the film. The couple then run up the stairs. The ' stalker' takes his chance to enter the house.

He walks into the kitchen and turns on the light so that the room is brightly lit. Suspense and fear is heightened when a close up of a hand, whilst still maintaining a point of view shot, is seen reaching out to take a knife from the right hand side of the frame. This shot directly involves the audience as it gives the effect that we ourselves were taking the knife. We are still kept in suspense as to the identity of the ' stalker' but our fears and suspicions that something terrible is about to happen increase.

A rush of anxiety runs through the audience as the high key on the piano is played. This symbolises fear and danger. The audience suspect something horrific is about to happen. The boyfriend soon exits the house unaware that the ' stalker' has his eyes locked on his every movement.

Suspense heightens when the ' stalker' slowly walks upstairs in to darkness. The high key on the piano is still being held down to maintain an atmosphere of terror. The camera looks down to focus on a mask. With the high note still playing, a hand reaches out and clutches the colourful clown mask. This turns into an extreme point of view shot when the ' stalker' wears the mask. This gives the impression that the audience is the ' stalker' and we are the ones wearing the mask, thus involving us in the film.

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Fear increases as the 'stalker' enters the darkened room which contains only the semi-naked girlfriend. This scene uses low-key lighting to focus the girl who is sitting beside a dressing table humming. The camera zooms into the girl to close in the scene. The audience is posed an enigma when the girlfriend turns around and shrieks, " Michael, Michael.

This is the moment we find out the true identity of the 'stalker'. Suspense is dramatically heightened when Michael pulls out the knife which gets caught by the light to create a threatening position. As the knife stabs into the semi-naked girl, the camera focuses on the knife. Whilst the high note is still being played on the piano, the camera zooms into the girl covered in bright red blood to create a close up frame of a horrific incident. As Michael runs down the stairs, the chords played on the piano get deeper whilst the tempo decreases. We can hear heavy breathing which shows anxiety, fright and perhaps guilt.

He opens the door and diageitic sounds of a car and two people are heard. This scene uses the films first edit. This is the first time the audience get the opportunity see Michael and his true identity - a little boy dressed in a clown outfit, holding a bloody knife. This shocks the audience as we assumed that the 'stalker' would be a teenage boy or a man, and creates a brilliant twist.

The effect given of having only one edit is that it decreases the pace of the film and adds tension. It also draws us into the action and keeps us involved whilst the identity of the 'stalker' is unknown and remains hidden. Once the parents establish what Michael has done, the camera slowly pulls out to show the parents, frozen in disbelief, standing either side of him creating a

frame shot. The camera continues to zoom out into a high angle on the house. In conclusion, many features of this film reveal it to be of the horror genre.

For example, the use of typical colours associated with horror, such as red, black, orange and yellow. Also, in Halloween, the director has used predictable teenage victims. However, Halloween was one of the first horror films to create such a dramatic twist of the villain being a young boy. Many directors have taken ideas from Halloween and adapted on them in their own films. This film successfully keeps the audience in suspense by concealing the identity of the stalker and also creating a twist to shock the audience.

The lighting in this film plays a key part in establishing the genre. A few examples to show this are that only the house was lit whilst everything else in the frame was left in darkness. Another example is when Michael walks up to his sister's room where the only light is the one on the dressing table which illuminates her. Light is used to symbolise danger.

Technology has much improved over the years so I would say modern horror films are a lot scarier compared to older horror films because they look more realistic. However, the narratives have probably been influenced and adapted from Halloween. For example, The Blair Witch Project's use of point of view shot shows this influence. In addition, Halloween is referenced by other more recent films.

For example, Scream makes intertextual references to Halloween when the victim has to answer questions on horror films.