

How does the use of mise-en-scene essay



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“ Insomnia”, is crime/drama film, following the story of two detectives sent from Los Angeles to a quiet Alaskan town to solve the murder of a young girl. The sequence in question is at the start of the film when the two detectives (Will Dormer and Hap Eckhart) arrive in the town and are briefed for the case. The sequence begins with an establishing shot of the exterior of a police station, there is a sign to the left in the frame saying “ City of Nightmute Alaska”, this tells the viewer exactly where this scene will be set. As Alaska is well known as a quiet, isolated part of America, the viewer may already have preconceptions of the pace of the film and of some parts of the narrative, this may be that it will be slow-paced, it is likely that there will be few characters involved in the plot and the isolation of the setting may be relevant to the plot.

The bushes surrounding the building and the large mountainside behind it show again that the set is isolated and rural, this strengthens these preconceptions. The camera cuts to a Mid shot of a female detective (Ellie Burr), entering what has the appearance of an office (because filing cabinets, folders and documents can be seen behind her), Venetian blinds can be seen placed directly behind the characters, surrounding them and almost dominating the background, having the appearance of bars, signifying that the characters are trapped. Entrapment is conveyed through another means of mise-en-scene in this sequence: as the characters talk the camera cuts to close up after close up of each of their faces as they take turns to talk, there are only a few occasions where the viewpoint of the camera changes to show more than one person in shot. By positioning the characters alone whilst in shot it shows how separated they are from one another. Actors’

performances also show this: when they talk, eye contact is not held between two of the characters for very long periods.

This vision of detectives in an office with blinds in conjures up visions of classic film noir, of which the use of blinds in the background is common, like in Fritz Lang's 1944 film, *The Woman in The Window*, in particular the prologue to the film, where Edward G. Robinson talks about 'impulses behind homicide'. By using conventions of, and therefore, referencing film noir the audience may expect a grim atmosphere throughout the film. A subtle technique in this scene is the use of a miniature American flag in the background of shots of Detective Nyback, this may reflect the patriotism of the character and gives the audience an idea of the background and personality of the character, as a small-town cop, who could be, in some respects, quite naive in comparison to detectives Dormer and Eckhart, who are homicide detectives from Los Angeles. The difference in character between Burr and Nyback, and Dormer and Eckhart are displayed through the clothes they are wearing and how they are wearing them. The two local officers are wearing their uniforms, which consists of blue polo shirts with Police badges on them.

Burr has a uniform jacket on also, the jacket is quite baggy, suggesting possibly that her role as a police woman is something that she hasn't quite 'grown into', in the sense that she is not fully up to the job. This use of mise-en-scene makes me feel almost sympathetic for her, compared to the other detectives. Unlike the local cops' uniforms, Dormer and Eckhart are wearing a leather trench coat, noir film protagonists would generally wear trench coats also, although traditional ones modern leather ones. This similarity yet

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difference is one of many associations between the film and classic noir. The isolated location of the setting where the two detectives are virtually marooned, is like the isolations noir characters feel from being in a vast, dark metropolis.

The darkness which encompasses the overcrowded cities of traditional noir films is substituted by the constant light (at that time of year) of the small, quiet town in *Insomnia*, additionally, In the second half of the sequence, when the detectives are in the autopsy room, it is clear that it is an autopsy room as the body of the dead girl is lying on a metal bed, also there are other props in the background, such as the pipes, taps and chemical bottles, giving a cold, clinical feeling to the scene. The coroner also has a lab coat on, strengthening the scientific and cold approach towards death. Lighting is one of the aspects of mise-en-scene also, this scene uses overhead lighting. Overhead lighting emphasises the actors' cheekbones The scene uses relatively low key lighting, this creates an atmospheric, sombre mood as well as referring again to film noir, in which low key lighting was an essential component.

Using a low key lighting set up, the colours of objects in frame are dimmed, washed out and emotionless, much like Dormer's detachedness, he feels indifferent, almost disinterested with the incidents and the death of the girl. Yet again, this character trait of the protagonist is a convention of classic noir, where a detective may be 'hard-boiled' and emotionless, also, having less colour than usual, the sterile atmosphere of the autopsy room is conveyed. Another aspect of the lighting in this scene is that it is lit from above, this accentuates the actors' cheekbones and eye sockets, although

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very subtle, this makes their faces look somewhat skeletal, which ties in with themes of death within this scene. On more than one occasion in the scene, Detective Dormer's face is lit in a way that leaves a shadow on one half of his face.

This is called Chiaroscuro lighting, and shows that the detective may be hiding something, or may not be trustworthy. Throughout the sequence (and film) shadows are constantly in shot, this is subtle yet effective as it is yet another connection to noir films. With this use of lighting and shadows, the addition of an eerie soundtrack, and the frequent use of close up camera shots in the scene, a strong atmosphere of curiosity is felt by the audience, and to an extent, fear, as the circumstances of the murder are quite strange. During the autopsy, the detectives are shown the various facts about the dead girl. She has been bruised, has had her hair washed and fingernails clipped.

As the characters discuss how the body has been altered by someone since its death and what she was wearing at the time of the death, flashbacks are used showing close up shots of them happening through the murderers eyes. The shots are almost extreme close ups at points, this gives a limited perspective of who did these things, creating an enigma and building curiosity in the emotions of the viewer. The performance of the actors is an additional aspect of mise-en-scene, the performance side of mise-en-scene refers to the casting, the costume of actors as well as movements. Al Pacino was chosen specifically to play Detective Dormer, this is because Pacino is widely known for his role in Michael Mann's Heat, in which he plays Lieutenant Vincent Hanna, a detective investigating a gang of professional

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criminals, in *Heat*, Pacino's character becomes personally involved with his investigation and the suspect involved, even confronting him at one point.

Pacino's character, stops the man he is after but decides to take him for a coffee, rather than arrest him. They sit together at a cafe and converse about both their ambitions, their lives and their principles, towards the end of the conversation they both say that they have to do what they have to do so if it came to it they would kill one another. Again in the role of Dormer, Pacino becomes overly involved in the investigation personally, then he eventually confronts his suspect, they meet on a boat and detective Dormer tells the suspect (Walter Finch) how he is just like other criminals and will not get away with it. In return, Finch tells Dormer that it looked as if he had killed his partner on purpose and tries to trick him into feeling guilty although it was an accident..

Heat is sometimes seen as a neo-noir film, this goes back to the idea that *Insomnia* is similar in ways to noir films. Watching the film, it feels as though Detective Dormer's character background needs not be explored, as the viewer can assume that it is similar to Lieutenant Hanna's. Another reason his past is not fully explored is because another convention of noir films which is brought into this one is, the mysterious, jaded past of the protagonist.