An Analysis of the Hollywood Film 12 Angry Men to Explore the Effect the Film Creates on an Audience.

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In this analysis I am going to present my interpretation of the themes and ideas in a classic Hollywood film, 12 Angry Men. The film is a classic Hollywood piece of cinema from 1957 that explores a central theme of one against many, a theme that is common in Hollywood courtroom films such as JFK and Anatomy of a Murder. One of the ground-breaking and most unique things about this film is the fact it takes place in one room apart from about three minutes in the entire movie. These scenes take place in the actual court, the corridors of the court, the toilet and briefly outside the building. The idea of the film is to explore 12 personalities and get them together in a confined space so that their egos clash and out of this come great ideas and the entire jury become like detectives each with a different point of view.

The film is a typical courtroom drama full of the codes and conventions such as tension, storyline twists, sub plots, clever use of lighting using the dark for villains and light for heroes, legal manipulations of evidence and personal insults between lead characters, this time the characters being the jurors. It also includes signifiers of the genre such as the suits, the evidence which in this case is a weapon and a courtroom.

The scene I will be analysing is from 26:00:00 to 30:00:00 in the film. It is perhaps the most famous scene in the film in which the knife is brought into the room and Juror 8 (played by Henry Fonda) contradicts the courts evidence and pulls out a replica of the knife which contradicts with the apparent story in court that this was a one of a kind weapon.
The scene starts where they ask to see the knife as evidence. Even here in the movie the egos of the different Jurors clash as they all argue whether it needs to be seen or not. In the movie the names of the men are not used, they are referred to by jury number (e.g. Juror 1, Juror 2 etc.) and other people are referred to as the boy or the old man. This distances the audience away from the characters and allows the audience identify the characters by personality traits such as the kind wise old man or the morally corrupt sports fan. The idea of this is to explore these personalities and watch them clash with each other with their polar opposite opinions and ideas.

The scene starts with the use of lots of still cameras and if the camera moves it is very slow and methodical. The focus of the movie is on the dialogue which is key to unravelling the narrative. But also the photography and direction of the film is also a key to interpreting the themes being portrayed. In fact, cinematographer Boris Kauffman stated that he started with wide angle lenses but increased the lenses so that the when the film ends everyone with everyone in close ups to create a ‘nearly palpable claustrophobia’. [3]

When the knife is on the table both sides of the argument are debated by different jurors across the table with Juror 8 being the only one in favour of the boys’ story. He then pulls out the duplicate knife and slams it into the table next to the evidence. The camera crash zooms in on the knives at this point as the usually quiet room erupts in noise at this revelation. It throws everything that has been confirmed in court out of the room and makes the testament untrustworthy. It also makes some of the jurors wonder if Juror 8 is correct. This is the very turning point of the entire film. The pivot that swings things from against the boy to for the boy because after this point one by one the jurors all start to change their minds. It shows how remarkably it took Juror 8 just half an hour to add doubts to people’s minds. There is also the question, what if Juror 8 was a different character and they hadn’t given this benefit of the doubt.
Then after this point each of the different Jurors gives their view on this revelation. At this point there is a Close Up on each of the separate Jurors faces as they speak in turn. This allows you to read their faces and interpret the emotion on their face. This also adds to this claustrophobic and enclosed camerawork which creates a feeling entrapment in this closed and compact room. The film makers deliberately make the characters look entrapped so the audience relates to this feeling in my opinion to create empathy towards the boy which the entrapment is a metaphor for because the boy is trapped not only in this crime and mess but in a world and life of poverty and conflict in the slums of America.

During the film there is only diegetic sound on the scene. There is no non-diegetic sound effects and no musical score. This adds to the realism and keeps you closed in the room with the characters and does not distract you from the dialogue. What they are saying is the most important thing. The film is edited at quite a slow pace so it does not need music because it is designed for the viewer to take in mass amounts of information. The film is in black and white but this actually helps the viewer to concentrate on the characters and forces the actors to use their expressions to get ideas and emotions across instead of using colour on their costumes in the mise-én-scene for example.
The film represents an America that is still sexist as there is not a single female cast member. All the cast are well-paid middle class men in nice suits although it does include a character that comes from a slum in Juror 5 who feels real empathy for the boy. The expected audience for this film is probably older males in America. They can all relate to the jury because it is something that they are obliged to do in life and they could very well be in this situation. Nowadays women do jury duty to so it seems sexist and wrong to have no female part in the movie but at the time in America women were rarely allowed to be part of serious court proceedings such as murder so the film seemed totally acceptable.

Also in the film Juror 11 likes to push the idea of a capitalist democratic society. The man is an immigrant and is grateful for the way the American legal system works and that everyone gets a fair say and a chance. He makes this point known during the film whilst arguing with some of the more unforgiving members of the jury. The film also explores themes of racism through the United States legal system and the bigotry still held by some Americans through Juror 10 who in the end is revealed to be a racist through the negative remarks that he makes towards the boy and Juror 11 who is an immigrant to America. However the film positively deals with this issue by portraying the racist juror as a villain and having him attacked and vilified for his views by the rest of the cast which is surprising for a film made in this era of Hollywood cinema.

One of the most important things that make the film work in this way is the actors who play the jurors. They are all extremely talented actors who each play there part perfectly and allow themselves to get into the characters. It is very important for them to be good at this because all of the close up shots on their faces that are meant to gather emotion for the audience to interpret.
The other key to the film is timing. The film takes you on a rollercoaster journey of emotion, building up tension and surprising you with twists and turns in the narrative. Every time there is a vote you are wondering who else is going to change their mind on the verdict. You are always wondering what the next piece of compelling evidence or opinion or story is going to come from. And every time they do reveal something it is something so simple or minute that makes all the difference in a case that decides whether a young boy lives or dies.

To conclude my analysis I will sum up that this is a historically ground breaking piece of Hollywood cinema and one of the most important hence the reason why it has been preserved by the Library of Congress in America. It provides an intimate look into a jury in the American legal system and touches upon many issues including corruption, innocence, humanity, racism, sexism, and morality. It asks the audience to explore some of the deepest topics and to invites them to try and deduce the case along with the jury. It provides them an exciting narrative of typical genre specific twists, turns and bombshells and provides them the classic Hollywood happy ending.

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Footnotes

[1] 12 Angry Men [USA, 1957, Sidney Lumet]


Filmography

- 12 Angry Men [USA, 1957, Sidney Lumet]

Webography

- 12 Angry Men [USA, 1957, Sidney Lumet]
- Peter Horwood, Film Analysis Unit: Twelve Angry Men, at  
- Unknown author, Play House Square 12 Angry Men, at  