

# BACKDRAFT



"Backdraft" tells the story of a group of firefighters, two of whom are brothers. It is a film about firefighting, arson and murder. It is a film about much more than this.

This study guide will look at the ways in which we not only make sense of films, but also the ways in which writers and directors use a basic storyline in order to explore a number of themes. Thus whilst "Backdraft" tells a story about firefighters, it also examines issues related to the characters.

You will be doing a number of exercises which ask you to consider aspects of the film itself and also to predict what can and could happen within the story.

## MAKING MEANINGS IN FILMS

When we read a book we are aware of the words on the page - we have to decipher each one in order follow the story. In a film however, it is easy to think that we simply watch what happens and do not pay too much attention to everything that we see and hear.

We can pick up the story quite easily.

Because it is "easy" to follow a film we are sometimes unaware of what we are actually doing when we watch a film. All of the time we are "reading" the screen, deciding what certain things mean, trying to understand the characters and the events.

But what helps us to understand what is happening? On the next page you will see two stills from the film "Backdraft". In each of the stills, circle the various parts of the image which you think help you understand what is going on. It might be the lighting, the camera angle, the ways in which the characters are dressed. In the end, you should have circled most things in the image because in a film, everything that we see on screen is there for a purpose.

So, for everything that you circle, say what it adds to the meaning of the image and how that meaning is created by that particular part of the image. When you have finished this exercise, you should complete the chart below. In it you should place all of the ideas that you have had about how a film is "read" - what contributes to our understanding of a film?

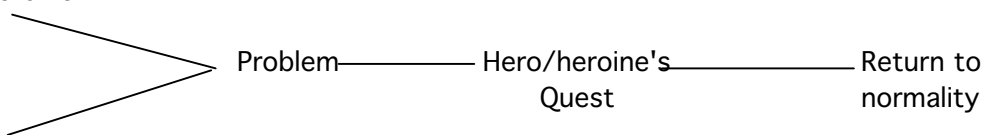
WHAT MAKES MEANINGS IN FILMS
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"Backdraft", as we have said, tells the story of firefighters. Obviously a lot of the action will revolve around fires, but for the story to interest an audience it must create a narrative which will interest the public. Based on the fact that the main characters are firefighters, what other possible stories could be created against the backdrop of the fires?

Most stories that we read or see follow a similar format. We are introduced to a hero/heroine and shown the world in which they live. The normality of this world is disrupted or changed and the hero/heroine has to set out and restore the normality. In diagram form it would look something like this:

A Hero/heroine



B Agent of change

A and B can be two different characters or two different ideas which clash ("the Problem"). At the end of the story, the problem is resolved. Now this does not mean that there has to be only one problem in a film. In fact if there were only one problem, we would find the story rather uninteresting. Quite often we will be shown three or four problems all of which are interrelated.

So, in a film such as 'Backdraft', we know that one of the main stories will revolve around firefighting. But will there be just one fire? Will the fires that we are shown in the film be related in some way or other?



You should firstly write down all of the events that you might expect to see in a film such as 'Backdraft'. When you have done this you will need to consider the types of characters who will appear in the film. In order to make this easier for you we have given a brief description of the major characters who appear in the film. As well as these there is also a team of firefighters (shown on the previous page). When you have read through the descriptions of the characters you will be given some additional information on the film. What you will then have to do is to pull all of this information together in order to create a story which you would expect to see in 'Backdraft'. As well as this you should also think about how you would sell your film, what sort of poster you would design.

**STEPHEN McCAFFREY** The elder of the two brothers, Stephen is a firefighter who is slowly being taken over by the fires that he fights. Beating the fire becomes an obsession with him. He is always at the heart of the fire - the most dangerous place to be.

**DONALD RIMGALE** Rimgale is the fire investigator. He is called in because a number of fires that have occurred have somewhat sinister connections. He is dedicated to his job, an ex-firefighter.

**BRIAN McCAFFREY** Brian is a bit of a drifter who has become a firefighter after a number of other failed careers. He is looked down on by his elder brother who expects him to fail in his newly chosen career.

**RONALD BARTEL** An arsonist who has been imprisoned for a number of years. Ronald can appear very normal on occasions but at the mention of fire his mind becomes obsessed with the idea of the living fire, one that takes over not only buildings but also people's lives. His latest application for bail is turned down during the story.

**MARTIN SWAYZAK**

Swayzak is alderman of the city. He has obvious hopes of being re-elected but has had to make a number of budget cuts both to the fire service and also to other city institutions. The fire service believes that the cuts that he has made are endangering the lives of the firefighters. Many of the firefighters are not slow in letting him know what they think of him and his cuts.

**JOHN ADCOX**

The longest serving of all the firefighters. He served with the McCaffrey's father in the fire service and was an uncle to the two boys when their father died. He takes great pride in his work and has a love of the fire department. Obviously brave, he is the firefighter who 'carries the hose' and attacks the fire head on.

In the film "Backdraft" there are two main female characters:

**JENNIFER**

Jennifer is an ex-girlfriend of Brian and now works in the office of Martin Swayzak, the alderman. Her loyalties are torn between her job with the mayor (who is making financial cuts in the fire service) and Brian who is obviously concerned about the damage that the cuts are doing to the firefighters.

Helen is Stephen's wife. At the beginning of the film the couple are separated - the separation being due, we assume, to Stephen's being dedicated to his job.

From what you know so far of the story of "Backdraft" start thinking about what possible roles these two characters could play in the story.

## THEMES

As well as the characters we ought to think about the other possible themes of the story. Here is what some of the people connected with the film had to say about what they thought the film was about:

"I was interested in doing a heroic film, and I had always wanted to do a film about brothers"

Ron Howard (producer)

"They (the firefighters) are heroes, but they don't do it for the glory. They work very hard. Many of them are hurt and killed every year"

Ron Howard (producer)

"My character wanted to be a fireman from the age of ten. And he's an excellent fireman. Unfortunately, he's not so good on relationships... He's a great fireman but the fire is beginning to warp his view of reality. It becomes everything. The fire is the only place where he can know exactly what to do, and he doesn't really want to leave it."

Kurt Russell (actor playing Stephen McCaffrey)

"I'm trying to get my life together by coming back to the academy, but Stephen thinks I'm a flake who's running out of options"

William Baldwin (actor playing Brian McCaffrey)

"This film is more than just "The Towering Inferno"

Gregory Widen (screenwriter)

"Backdraft" is a love story of a way of life between brothers, but beyond that it is a classic love-hate story. Firemen have a love-hate relationship with their job. The one idea we're trying to communicate is that there is a price - everybody pays a price."

Ron Howard (producer)

So, you now have information about the characters and also about some of the themes of the film. Can you possibly predict what will happen in the story?

Look very closely at the descriptions of all of the characters. There are clues in here as to some of the events. Think carefully about the themes. How will each of the characters fit into these themes?

As well as the information here, you will also need to think about similar films that you have seen, either films from a similar genre or films which deal with similar themes.

From the descriptions given above, what genre do you think "Backdraft" fits into? Having decided this, what sorts of events do you expect to happen in this genre? How could you fit these events into your story?

Now you should go ahead and write your own script for the film.

Good luck!