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Teachers' Introduction

K-19 – The Widowmaker is a study in both collective and individual heroism. All but one of the crew stick by their stricken boat. The rest remain in the vessel, believing that their fate is to die from the growing radiation on-board. Every crew member's loyalty is severely tested. The greatest courage and self-sacrifice is called for when required to expose themselves to fatal levels of radiation attempting to rig up an alternative source of 'coolant' for the on-board reactor when the official system ruptures and fails. Their sacrifice makes for grim but gripping drama. The film also examines the awesome burden carried by the submarine's captain, Alexei Vostokov (played by Harrison Ford), to whom it falls to make a succession of life and death decisions.

These resources focus on the dramatic content of this story and in particular the way that the filmmakers put their craft to work to build suspense and deliver action. K-19 – The Widowmaker is a lesson in the central role of conflict in drama. Creating richly developed characters is one thing but they then need to be placed in intriguing, emotionally heightened situations. Through detailed analysis of a series of sequences from the film, students will be able to explore their narrative function and explore how the actors' performances and the filmmaking combine to create compelling viewing.



The Poster - A Promise of Drama

Activity

Film posters are designed to raise questions about a film in an audience's mind in the hope of attracting them to the cinema.

Study the poster of the film K-19 – The Widowmaker (at the start of this resource) and, working in a group, consider the following questions:

- 1 What can you see in the poster and what immediately attracts your attention?
- 2 The picture shows the submarine at sea on one side and pictures of Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson on the other. What does the submarine symbolise? What does the poster tell us about what the characters might be like?
- 3 What questions does the poster create in your mind? List them and then share them with the class.
- 4 What do Harrison Ford's and Liam Neeson's expression suggest about the film's content or the circumstances they are going to find themselves in?
- 5 Does the condition of the sea contribute to the 'drama' of this image?
- 6 How do you feel the submarine looks: severe; scary; religious; powerful; sinister; vulnerable; homely; secure; threatening etc.?
- 7 What are the dominant colours in this image – what does the blue suggest to you other than the sea? What does the red represent?

Make a photocopy of the poster and then label it up suggesting all the clues it contains about the film and the elements that suggest excitement. What is the effect of having images of people in the poster? Consider the difference in the message about the film if the human faces were absent and all we had was a picture of the submarine.



What is 'Dramatic'?

The word 'dramatic' is very overused. Someone shouting out in class when a wasp flies into the room might be condemned for being 'dramatic' or a person wearing bright clothes might be described as dressing in a 'dramatic fashion'. In these situations what is probably meant is that both people are attracting attention to themselves or behaving in a way that is surprising in an everyday situation.

Films rely heavily on surprise and the unusual but the way in which they generate drama is far more complex. It relies on a close relationship between what happens in the story, the characters placed in these circumstances and the relationship between the audience and the events/characters they are watching.

Activity One - Dramatic Setting

A submarine is highly artificial environment designed to take human beings to the most hostile environments – through freezing Arctic waters, up to 1000 feet beneath the sea or crashing through ice fields. As such it has a significant role to play in the creation of drama – both as a source of challenges and suspense and as a catalyst for conflict. Study the list and then decide how the following elements might contribute to the film's powerful, dramatic moments and why.

A. The crew is forced to live in extremely cramped conditions:

- The ordinary crew members sleep in bunks a few inches from each other and from the submarine hull.
- Officers had more space – their cabins being a place for rare moments of solitude and reflection.
- The meeting room aboard ship is also of very small dimensions.

B. A submarine is really a long tube divided into compartments. In K-19's case there were ten compartments including the forward torpedo area, the command centre and 4th compartment that contained the nuclear missiles. These can be sealed in the case of accident or crisis. In fact, getting them sealed is often essential in the face of fire or flood – though to do so may also entail enclosing members of the crew or require them to be unsealed at some point.

C. The interior of the K-19 submarine was not in the least streamlined. It is a mass of mysterious tubes and pipes and electric cables. The actors required frequent advice from the film's technical advisors about the correct way that they should behave in this environment. In an interview Peter Sarsgaard, who plays the submarine's reactor officer Vadim Radtchenko, recalls having to ask what bits of the set he could get away with sitting on (other than chairs) given that in a real submarine many pipes would have been extremely hot or delicate.

D. The crew relies on a large number of dials to tell them about the condition of the submarine. The mildest fluctuations in temperature and pressure need to be monitored carefully.



E. The submarine K-19 was operating far from home, relying on antenna in the conning tower to relay and receive messages from senior naval commanders on shore.

F. The submarine was carrying an array of highly dangerous weapons – both conventional and non-conventional (nuclear). The source of power for the submarine was also nuclear – with the radioactive core enclosed behind thick layers of shielding – the key requirement of which was to stop radiation reaching the crew.

Activity Two - Forewarnings and Dramatic Tension

K-19 experiences a number of mishaps from early on in the film. In the hands of a good director such as Kathryn Bigelow, these events are carefully introduced so that not only do they create a sense of foreboding in an audience, they also connect directly to later sequences in the film.

Example

The opening sequence shows the K-19 preparing to launch a nuclear missile. Orders are issued in rapid succession, responses from the crew are received, buttons are pushed, levers pulled, codes are checked and confirmed and keys are inserted in locks. In the end the launch fails – a simple piece of electrical equipment is found to be inadequate. The whole sequence is filmed to create tension but in the end the process is proved a run-through. Apart from the disappointment that the test fails the immediate anxieties created by the film are allayed as we realise that the K-19 is still in dry dock and that this is just one of many systems tests it is undergoing ahead of sea trials.

Aspects of this opening test sequence are repeated at least twice in the film. Once when the K-19 has to fire a missile for real and again at a crucial point in the movie where the captain must receive confirmation from all parts of the submarine that the crew is ready to follow him. Thus, in the hands of an intelligent director, one dramatic incident contributes directly to the power of succeeding ones.

Consider the following events, arrange them in an ascending order of significance and seriousness as though you were the director and wanted to build tension in an audience.

- A sailor smuggles a pet rat on board, disobeying orders.
- A young officer is clearly deeply in love. He is shown hugging his girlfriend through the fence of the dockyards before the K-19 sails.
- K-19's previous commander Captain Polenin warns his replacement Vostrikov that the K-19 is not ready for sea trials.
- On his first inspection of the K-19, the new commander Captain Vostrikov discovers that the reactor officer is drunk on duty and immediately dismisses him.
- At the naming ceremony, the bottle of champagne fails to shatter against the hull of the K-19.
- A doctor furious with an incorrect drug supply rushes out to remonstrate with the delivery truck drivers. The truck skids in the ice, running over the doctor and killing him.



- Captain Vostrikov warns the navy officials that K-19 is not ready for the sea trials.
- The assistant reactor officer notices that an important gauge registering the work-rate of a pump feeding coolant into the nuclear core is registering too high. He taps it in the belief that it may merely be stuck.

Once you have decided the order you might introduce these incidents and how much weight you would give them, consider how later in the film you might refer to them again. Can you imagine ways in which these events might acquire greater significance?

Activity Three - The Drama of Time

‘The true story of the K-19 submarine disaster always looked like natural movie material. It had... a built-in ‘ticking clock’ suspense factor of an impending reactor meltdown aboard a nuclear submarine.’

Kathryn Bigelow: *Uncharted Waters – The Genesis of K-19*

K-19 is a film of countdowns. The film begins with a race against the clock as the crew test out the missile launch sequence. The timing of the submarine’s sea trials is a source of contention. Once at sea, the crew is put through a series of gruelling drills each one requiring them to complete safety procedures under severe time constraints.

Study the following sequence. It depicts events as Captain Vostrikov gives orders that will result in the K-19 making a rapid ascent beneath an Arctic ice flow. Vostrikov is convinced that the ice will be thin enough for the submarine to break through. The ascent follows on from a previous demanding trial in which Vostrikov demanded a deep descent that many aboard, including his second-in-command Polenin, felt was very dangerous.

The whole sequence amounts to 58 seconds. There are approximately 38 different cuts in that short space of time. The net effect of this is to inject great urgency into the events. The audience is manipulated into believing that what they are witnessing is a single event rather than a highly constructed sequence made up of numerous set-ups which may have taken days to film and even more time to edit together.

Your task is to use the different shots identified on page 8 and the dialogue in the scene (see script on page 7) to create your own version. The different shots are not in the order that they occur in the sequence but are grouped according to their type. As well as matching to dialogue, you will have to allocate the time each shot deserves.



Script

Vostrikov: The ice is only setting... continue surfacing.

Polenin: I am not sure we can control an ascent this fast captain.

Vostrikov: Neither am I.

Crew member 1: 130 metres... 110 metres.

Polenin: Blow main ballast.

Crew member 2: She's starting to roll...

Polenin: I want permission to hold her at ... (unclear)

Vostrikov: Denied.

Crew member 1: 90 metres.

Crew member 2: It's rolling to port...

Polenin: (Pleading) Abort....

Crew member 2: Change it over to alternate air supply.

Crew member 1: 60 metres.

Polenin: Stop turbines.

Crew Member 3: Stop turbines.

Polenin: Level out, damn it!

Vostrikov: Prepare for impact.



Shot List

- two shot: Harrison Ford facing Liam Neeson
- two shot: Liam Neeson facing Harrison Ford
- medium close-up: Harrison Ford
- medium close-up: Liam Neeson
- long shot: Harrison Ford bracing himself
- long shot: view of several crew members bracing themselves for impact
- close-up: crew man 1
- close-up: crew man 2
- close-up: crew man 3
- extreme close-up: dial reading 110 metres
- extreme close-up: dial reading 17 metres
- extreme close-up: crew man's hand turning a series of controls
- medium shot: crew man 2 spinning wheel
- close-up: glass of tea showing the incline of the submarine, about to tip over
- close-up: Harrison Ford's hand catching tea just before it tips over
- close-up: In galley – food on tray starts to slide
- medium long shot: the cook on ground, catching tray of food as it falls
- exterior shot of submarine rising upwards at steep incline, bubbles erupting from side
- exterior shot of submarine's rear portion rising – ice clearly visible above it
- medium long shot of command compartment – camera shaking indicating impact of K-19 with ice

There are 21 different kinds of shots used in the scene but over 38 cuts occur.

Please duplicate any of the shots above in order to tell the story of this scene. Run the script alongside the images.

View Clip 1 Select clip 1 from the CD-Rom's K-19 – The Widowmaker menu: 'Breaking through ice'. How did your telling of the scene differ from the original version?



Activity Four - The Drama of Conflict

The film sets up a classic conflict on board a vessel under pressure. The submarine's original commander Yenin (Polyenin in the film) was effectively demoted to make way for Nikolai Zateyev (Vostrikov in the film). Yenin was apparently much liked by his crew.

In K-19 – The Widowmaker the opposition between the two men is deliberately emphasised. Look at the following shots of Polyenin – the second in command. What do they reveal about him?

View Images Select 'images' 1-3 from the CD-Rom's K-19 – The Widowmaker menu. They are all of Polyenin (Liam Neeson).

View Trailer Now consider the Harrison Ford character – Vostrikov. Select 'trailer' from the CD-Rom's K-19 – The Widowmaker menu and discuss the kind of person it reveals Vostrikov to be. Does the trailer suggest that there will be conflict between Vostrikov and Polyenin?



Filming Conflict

Activity

Read through the following script extract. It shows an argument between Vostrikov and Polyenin after Polyenin has walked away from the command compartment following a diving exercise that almost destroyed the K-19. Ford seeks out Polyenin. The scene starts with Vostrikov (Ford) pulling open the door of Polyenin's (Neeson) cabin.

Study the dialogue below and consider how you would film it. Would you give one person the majority of screen time? Or would you suggest that this is a pretty evenly matched battle? Would you film it at any point from one person's point of view and when would you cut to a reaction close-up so as to register a character's emotions? Storyboard your version of the scene.

Script

Vostrikov pulls open the door to Polyenin's cabin. Polyenin is seated.

Vostrikov: You will be in my report for leaving your post.

Polyenin: And you will be in mine. You needlessly endangered this boat and its crew. 200 million Soviet citizens are depending on us Captain Vostrikov to save them from nuclear attack – you risked them as well.

Vostrikov: I took this boat and these men to the edge because we need to know where it is. These 120 men are a crew now because they achieved something together which they did not think they could do. Next time when it is not a drill, they will go to the edge and pass it and die if necessary but that is what their duty demands of them.

View Clip 2 After you have come up with your own version of this scene, look at the actual clip. It will tell you a lot about the way in which the filmmakers choose to represent the power-struggle between the two characters at this point.

Select clip 1 from the CD-Rom's K-19 – The Widowmaker menu: 'You will be in my report.'

- Which character has the upper hand of the two and why?
- How does the body language contribute to the relative strength of the characters? Would the scene have been very different if Polyenin had remained seated throughout? What is the effect of his interrupting Vostrikov's dramatic exit?
- Which character will get the last word in this conversation? It continues for a few more lines of dialogue in the full screen version. Write them yourself and then compare them to the lines in the full scene.



The Stars

The key promise associated with the poster that we have already studied is that it will star Harrison Ford. K-19 – The Widowmaker is his thirty-sixth film. There is a huge amount of information about him at his fan site online <http://www.harrisonfordweb.com>. The home page carries details of every one of the films in which he has been associated. There is also a link on the homepage to a series of interviews in which Ford discusses his role in K-19 – The Widowmaker.

Research this website and try to find out the answers to the following questions:

- What attracted him to the role?
- What did he find most challenging about the role?

Write a report on your findings as if you were writing for a newspaper.

You can repeat the exercise for Liam Neeson, who stars opposite Harrison Ford by using the information and links off http://www.thespiannet.com/actors/N/neeson_liam/index.shtml

What do you expect from a film that has both these big-hitting stars on-board? Can you think of other actors that would have less dramatic clout?

