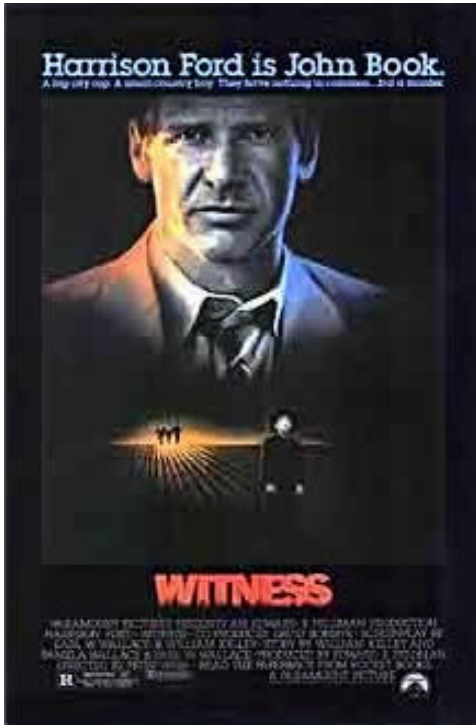


WITNESS



WHAT'S IN A NAME

Most feature films made for a mass audience can be fairly easily categorised within a recognised range of subject matter.

e.g. Westerns Science Fiction Horror Comedy War Thrillers Musicals Romances

Each of these categories will bring to mind various ideas which, through our past viewing of similar film, we have come to associate with each category.

Certain features may be common to more than one kind of film. For example, several of the categories above might be expected to contain some degree of violent action. Comedies often satirise or 'send up' other kinds of film, using the most overworked situations familiar to us all for comic effect. The films of Mel Brooks are a good example of this.

We use these categories, or 'labels' to make selection and understanding easier for ourselves. The film industry also finds it easier to market their product according to readily understood labels.

"Witness" is marketed as a thriller.

- What are the ingredients you expect to see in a thriller film?
- What other films can you name which have provided this, and that you would consider successful thrillers?

After you have seen "Witness" consider how the film conformed to your expectations, and in which ways (if any) it differed from them.

SIMILAR

DIFFERENT

PLOTTING

A dedicated cop discovers high level corruption within the police force he works in. The knowledge puts his life at risk, and he is forced to go into hiding whilst still conducting a cautious investigation. Ultimately his hiding place is discovered by the guilty parties, but in an exciting final confrontation he outwits them and justice prevails.

That may be taken as a brief summary of the plot of "Witness". Does it remind you of any other thrillers you've seen? Can you name any film with a similar basic plot?

Did any part of "Witness" bring to mind any other (non-thriller)- kind of film?

Look back at what you wrote for question (a) on the last page.

Did "Witness" live up to your expectations? In what ways (if any) did it differ from them?

MARKETING THE PRODUCT

Film-making is a hugely expensive business, and to raise the money to make a feature film it is necessary to gain substantial financial backing. The money involved usually runs into millions of pounds - tens of millions for most big Hollywood productions.

Film-makers trying to raise the money for a new production must convince the potential 'backers' that the film is a definite commercial proposition; 'good box office' that is likely to give a good return on their investment.

The presence of a 'star' performer is one obvious way to attract large audiences. Harrison Ford's name was certainly the main selling point in "Witness".

If a star with obvious 'box office' appeal shows interest in a film project, it makes it much easier to gain backing.

(a) what other factors might increase a film's box office potential?

(b) Can you think of any other likely 'selling points' by which "Witness" might be successfully marketed apart from the presence of Harrison Ford?

Some stars are closely linked in the public's mind with one particular kind of film, for example:

John Wayne
Westerns

Charles Bronson
Thrillers

Charlton Heston
Historical Epics

When a star who is generally identified with one kind of film chooses to play a different kind of role, he or she runs the risk that the film-going public will not accept their 'new' character so readily. Harrison Ford became a star through fast paced adventure fantasies like 'Star Wars' and 'Raiders of the Lost Ark'.

(a) Are there any similarities between his character in "Witness" and the previous parts he is best known for? In what ways does his part here differ from the other ones?

(b) Why might stars who are hugely successful in one kind of film risk their careers in a very different and possibly much less 'commercial' parts?

POPULAR CINEMA

The different classifications of film previously discussed can all be put under the heading 'Popular Cinema'. They are areas of film with a wide appeal established since the earliest days of the cinema. The mass popularity of any one type of film may widen or diminish according to periodic changes in popular taste, but they all have a proven audience. The Western, for example, isn't currently a fashionable area, but Science Fiction is enjoying a prolonged revival.

A popular theme will certainly increase the commercial prospects of a film, just as the presence of a popular star will.

Film-makers interested in exploring 'difficult' social issues or ideas which would appear to have limited popular appeal often use popular film types to get their ideas across to a larger audience

A film about a city dweller coming to terms with life in a remote religious community doesn't sound like the formula for big box office success, but make the man a cop on the run from killers and you have a much

Issues which would seem unlikely to attract large audiences if presented in a 'straightforward dramatic manner have often been used in the thriller form with considerable success. Here are three recent examples:

"Defence of the Realm" (GB 1985) Political Corruption "The Morning After" (us 1987) Alcoholism "The China Syndrome" (us 1978) The Nuclear Debate

With films like these the thriller elements of action and suspense might be regarded as the 'icing on the cake' giving a serious theme more attractive surface appeal.

Can you think of any recent T.V. film thriller which used a serious theme in this manner? What was the theme?

It is sometimes argued that serious themes are undermined by such a treatment, and that the important issues take second place in the film-maker's mind to the necessity of supplying the more 'commercial' thriller ingredients. This is often true; with the huge sums of money at risk in film-making producers are often tempted to 'play safe' and let slick action dominate at the expense of intelligent ideas.

TWO WORLDS

The action in "Witness" takes place in two sharply contrasting communities; the bustling city of Philadelphia and the Amish settlement in the Pennsylvania countryside. though they are geographically very close, in other ways they are worlds apart, with the Amish people living a 'time warp' existence where twentieth century attitudes and technology are deliberately shunned.

The chain of events which bring policeman John Book into the Amish community begins with the murder at the train station witnessed by the eight year old Amish boy. It is the event which gives the film its title.

Until that point, all the action has been seen through the eyes of the boy. When the murder investigation begins, we see the events mostly from John Book's viewpoint.

(a) What are the differences in the way (i) the boy (ii) his mother react to the police investigation they are obliged to take part in?

(b) What are our first impressions of John Book?

The Philadelphia section of the film presents a world of gaudy bars, cramped police stations and frayed tempers - a world familiar to us from T.V. and film thrillers. The Amish people are aliens in this world, for it is a world they have deliberately turned their backs on.

When John Book is forced to take refuge in the Amish settlement he, too, becomes an alien. To keep peace with the Amish people - and to stay in hiding - he has to adapt to their rules. He assumes the Amish identity.

If you were in his position, what would be the things you would miss most? Remember that the Amish have none of the gadgetry or technology of the twentieth century?

A BRIEF CHANGE OF SCENE

"He likes being a policeman because he thinks he's right about everything"

This, apparently, is what John Book's sister thinks about him. After we have heard this quote, though, life changes drastically and unexpectedly for Book. He is forced to go into hiding, leading a life very different on almost every level from the one he is used to. He is suddenly deprived of most of the things he has taken for granted in his everyday life, and the experience might lead him to question both the kind of life he has (temporarily) left behind and the very different values of the people he finds himself living among.

When he leaves the Amish community at the end of the film to return to the city life he is used to, might his attitudes have changed in any significant way, or was he 'right about everything' after all?

(a) What; do you think, are the most crucial ways in which Book's attitudes to life differ from those of the Amish people, Try to think of at least three points, and list them in order of importance.

(b) Do you think his attitude to the Amish people and their beliefs stays constant during his stay, or do you think it changes in any way? Can you think of any scenes in the film to support your answer?

(c) When we have the chance to get away from the everyday routine of our lives for a while -which for most of us means a holiday break - the change of scene and pace may allow us to reflect upon the kind of routine we have left behind for a while. Though it is hardly a holiday for him, John Book's experiences away from the city might well give him cause to consider afresh those aspects of life he has taken for granted before. After his 'spell in the country' what fresh thoughts might he have about

- i. City Life
- ii. His work as a detective
- iii. Family Life

"I'M GOOD AT WHACKING!"

As a policeman, John Book confronts violence as a part of his job and as a fact of everyday life in a violent city. The Amish people are pacifist. That is, they believe that all wars and all violence is wrong, and they refuse to fight in wars because of their beliefs.

We expect a certain level of violence in a thriller film, and many thrillers (and many other kinds of film) achieve popularity because of their violent content.

(a) Would you consider "Witness" more or less violent than other film thrillers?

Is there any difference between the way violence is depicted in "Witness" and in, say, the Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone thrillers?

Each scene of violence in "Witness" has significant consequences in terms of the overall plot. This is the most obvious with the murder in the lavatory which sets the plot in motion and brings the central character of John Book into the story.

A key scene shows how John Book reacts when louts from the local town intimidate the Amish people, knowing that they are sworn to a code of non-violence. This scene demonstrates quite sharply the difference in outlook between Book and his hosts with regard to violence, though we are already aware of the differences and could probably predict the outcome of the scene.

(b) How do we react to the Amish people's failure to respond to the provocation of the thugs? Do we

What are the consequences of this brief upsurge of violence? Does it have any bearing on later events in the film?

When the guilty parties finally track Book down to the Amish settlement he is forced to resort to violence to save himself and the boy who witnessed the initial murder. This prolonged scene delivers some effective suspense and conventional violence. When he has dispatched two of the three armed intruders and is confronted, weaponless, by their ringleader, he resorts to impassioned argument to disarm him.

(c) Can you summarise in one or two sentences his argument or plea to this man?

Does Book's attitude at this point suggest he has learned anything from the Amish people's views, or is his attitude essentially unchanged from when he joined them?

FURTHER WORK

1. In "Witness" the hero becomes the target of ruthless men whose positions of authority make it possible for them to 'manufacture' false evidence to make him appear to be a criminal, thus taking the blame for their own criminal actions.

Find a recent news story about crime, and make up your own version of it - using all the given information - which shows off the supposed 'guilty' party.

2. Take a topic of recent importance from the media - or from 'current affairs' discussions in school, and construct a scenario for a thriller film around the subject. The story might begin with an innocent bystander witnessing a crime, or quite by chance finding important documents which others are eager to get their hands on. Remember that a movie plot can usually be summarised in five hundred words.

3. Use a tape recorder and make a radio advertisement for "Witness". Consider which aspect of the film are likely to have the greatest appeal for a general audience, and how you might describe them for maximum effectiveness. What sound effects might you use? This exercise could be used for several voices.

4. Though "Witness" was generally well received by the press, there were some less than enthusiastic reviews. The Guardian's correspondent for the Cannes Film Festival, Richard Roud, hated it, but their London critic Derek Malcolm was full of enthusiasm. Divisions within the ranks of 'established' critics like this over a particular film are quite common. Pick a new release and find at least three reviews from the national press, comparing the attitudes expressed.

Write your own review of "Witness" or of the most recent film you have seen in a cinema.