

127 Hours Study Notes



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Directed by: Danny Boyle
Certificate: 15
Running time: 94 mins
Release date: 7 January 2011

Synopsis:

Based on a true story, *127 Hours* concerns carefree adventurer Aron Ralston (James Franco), who falls into a crevasse whilst cycling alone through the Moab desert in Utah. As he falls to the bottom of the gap, his right arm is trapped beneath an immovable boulder. With only a bottle of water, an old penknife and a digital camera in his possession, Ralston documents what he believes will be the final precious hours of his life...until he realises there is one way he could escape.

These Study Notes are designed for use with students of Media and Film Studies and related subjects at ages 15-19.

Before viewing: the Danny Boyle touch

When you look at the grim subject matter of most Danny Boyle films, it's difficult to believe his movies are invariably optimistic, positive and joyous. How can you ensure pictures about zombies or life in the slums or even the sun slowly dying are exhilarating experiences? Get Danny Boyle to direct them!

Which of Boyle's films have you seen? As a class write a logline (a one-sentence plot synopsis) next to each of Boyle's films below to remind yourselves.

Shallow Grave (1994)
Trainspotting (1996)
A Life Less Ordinary (1997)
The Beach (2000)
28 Days Later... (2002)
Millions (2004)
Sunshine (2007)
Slumdog Millionaire (2008)

- What filmmaking techniques does Boyle use to keep his films from being depressing or miserable? Consider camerawork, editing and sound.
- How would you describe the endings of each of the films? Do any of the final scenes stand out as memorable?
- What expectations do you have for *127 Hours* based on your exploration of Danny Boyle's previous work?

After viewing: wider contexts

Danny Boyle's films often coincide with the 'cultural zeitgeist', meaning they capture the essence of society or culture at the time. For example, *Trainspotting* encapsulated the Britpop era, *Shallow Grave* heralded a new golden age of British Cinema and *28 Days Later* led to resurgence in both the zombie genre and the possibilities afforded by digital cinema.

- Research the key wider contexts (social, historical, economic, political) of the time when these other films were released. What meanings or metaphors can be attributed to the films in light of your findings?
- How did Boyle's other films, especially *The Beach* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, capture the zeitgeist and become 'trendy'?
- How has *127 Hours* tapped into society and its concerns today?
- How has *127 Hours* been represented and promoted across the media platforms?

Soundtrack

Many of Boyle's films make use of popular songs as much as (or even instead of) a traditional score created specifically for the film. Many artists have become closely associated with the music they have provided for the films above, such as Moby and All Saints (*The Beach*), Ash (*A Life Less Ordinary*), Underworld (*Trainspotting*), John Murphy (*28 Days Later* and *Sunshine*) and A. R. Rahman and M.I.A. (*Slumdog Millionaire*)

- What reasons might a director have for choosing to use popular songs on a film's soundtrack rather than commissioning an original score?
- Which film genres tend to use popular songs most frequently?
- What impact can a soundtrack full of memorable and popular songs and music have on a film's reception? Consider the effect on the tone of the film, as well as marketing synergy across other media platforms.
- Other directors such as Kevin Smith, Martin Scorsese and especially Quentin Tarantino regularly choose sourced songs rather than an original score for their films. What effect has this decision had on the identity of and reception to their films? Give examples.

One-man show

James Franco (Oscar nominated for his role) spends most of the film onscreen alone. Other films that have featured one or two actors in a confined or solitary space include *Silent Running* (1972), *Cast Away* (2000), *World Trade Centre* (2006), *1408* (2007), *Moon* (2009) and *Buried* (2010).

- Once Ralston falls into the crevasse, how does the film change in terms of editing, camerawork, sound and character dynamic?
- What film techniques are deployed to keep the film from becoming boring or monotonous once Ralston is alone? Consider narrative convention, props and creation of tension.
- What techniques do some of the other films listed above use in order to maintain momentum?

A true story

When *127 Hours* was released, the real-life ordeal that Aron Ralston went through became common knowledge and the film swiftly became known as 'that movie where the guy cuts his own arm off'. The reasons why people went to see this film were possibly very different than if it were just another movie.

- The *King's Speech* is a good example of how word of mouth can benefit the critical and commercial success of a film. Can you find any examples where bad word-of-mouth seemed to damage a film's commercial success?
- Do you suspect that *127 Hours* was judged more as an event (people may have gone simply for the morbid thrill of seeing a man amputate his own arm) than as a film experience? Find evidence to back up your opinion.

- How is the infamous scene handled in the film? Is it gratuitous, subtle or realistic?

Activity

Film a sequence in which someone is trapped or isolated. What film techniques will you use to sustain tension, interest and momentum?

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