Source Code
Study Notes

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Directed by: Duncan Jones

Certificate: 12A

Running time: 93 mins

Release date: 1 April 2011

Synopsis:

Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) is a military pilot who inexplicably wakes up in the body of a man on a train headed for Chicago. Eight minutes later, a bomb goes off and the train explodes...and Colter wakes up in his own body. He is told that he is involved in a high-tech, dimension-hopping mission to find the identity of the train bomber and that he will continually relive the last eight minutes of the train journey until he finds enough clues to complete the mission. As Colter frantically tries to solve the mystery, he starts to fall for the woman opposite him on the train, Christina (Michelle Monaghan) and begins to discover some startling facts about his own existence...

These Study Notes are intended for use with Film and Media Studies and related subjects at GCSE, AS/A2 and equivalent.

Before viewing:
The 'difficult' second movie

Director Duncan Jones had a surprise hit with his debut movie *Moon* (2009). When a filmmaker has a successful debut, they can often be given bigger budgets, stars and resources for their second film. This is the chance for the director to prove themself. Just like bands and their 'difficult second album', for a movie director their second film can be 'make or break' for their career.

- Audiences have been divided about Duncan Jones' involvement with *Source Code*. Some feel he has 'sold out' and become a 'hack' (a director for hire) while others feel he has brought invention, complexity and intelligence to an otherwise mainstream action thriller. Find reviews online or in print that support both of these conclusions. What is your opinion?
- If you have seen *Moon*, how is *Source Code* different or similar both in terms of production conditions and textual/narrative motifs?
- Why might Duncan Jones have been drawn to the story of *Source Code*?

Activity

On the following page is a table of directors and their debut movies. Identify and write down each director's 'sophomore' (second) film. How are they different in terms of production conditions/budget? Was the film a hit or a critical/commercial failure? What effect did the second film have on their career? You may be surprised by some findings!

After viewing: time and memory in film

Source Code's unusual narrative demands that some scenes are presented in 'real time'– this means that a minute of screen time in the story takes a minute to watch for the viewer. Entire films have adopted this storytelling method including *Rope* (1948), *12 Angry Men* (1957), *United 93* (2006) and *88 minutes* (2008). The most famous example of a TV series using real time is *24*.

Source Code also uses a time loop device, where sequences of the film are repeated, often with minor variations. Other films that do this include the *Back To The Future* trilogy (1985-90), *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Calendar* (1993), *Virtuosity* (1995), *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Deja Vu* (2006) and *Triangle* (2009).

- Does every eight-minute train segment of the film actually last eight minutes or

Director	Debut	Impact of debut	Second film	Impact of second film	Similarities / Differences
Quentin Tarantino	Reservoir Dogs				
Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck	The Lives of Others				
Steven Soderbergh	Sex, Lies and Videotape				
Kevin Smith	Clerks				
Michael Cimino	Thunderbolt and Lightfoot				
The Wachowski Brothers	Bound				
Dennis Hooper	Easy Rider				
Jean-Luc Godard	À bout de souffle				
Sam Raimi	The Evil Dead				
Terrence Malick	Badlands				
Charles Laughton	The Night of the Hunter				

- Does every eight-minute train segment of the film actually last eight minutes or can you think of examples of segments that were longer or shorter than that? Could you suggest possible reasons for this variation?
- What narrative or visual differences are there every time the train segments are repeated? Does the repetition become tedious or does it successfully sustain tension?
- Think back to some of the films listed on page 3 that you have seen. How successful are the deployment of real time and/or time looping in their narrative structure? Can you think of any other films that use these devices?

Representation

Colter suspects all the passengers around him of being the bomber at some point. The passengers represent a broad array of ethnicities, ages and classes.

- Look at the cast of characters and actors in *Sight & Sound* or on IMDB. What is interesting about the way the passengers are all listed?
- Are there any social groups that are noticeably absent on the train?
- Does the film exploit the audience's wariness and fear of terrorists?
- Who did you suspect of being the bomber? Was there anything unexpected, unconventional or challenging about the actual identity of the bomber?
- Is there anything stereotypical about the way the military (leaders and soldiers) is represented in the film?

The ending

'Too nice'. 'Too ambiguous'. 'Too depressing'. 'What was that about?' 'Cool!' 'I don't get it!' are just some of the phrases that have been used to describe *Source Code*'s controversial ending. While in conventional terms you could describe the ending as a happy one, the ethical and metaphysical implications of the conclusion begin to make it much more challenging.

- What compromises or changes has Colter had to make in order to continue his 'existence'?
- How does the film present the ending as a positive or 'happy' one? Consider music, camera movement, editing and performances.
- Does the ending make a socio-political comment on the effects of war and terrorism?
- Visit the discussion board for *Source Code* at the IMDB (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0945513/board). How have others responded to the ending?

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Activity

On your own, write down a paragraph that sums up the film's ending. Join a group of four and read your paragraphs out one at a time. How similar or different are all of your interpretations of the climax of *Source Code*? How has the whole class responded?

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