

## How do the factors of lighting, type of shot and framing construct meaning in John Carpenter's 'Halloween'?

**Halloween: Directed by John Carpenter; 1978**

**Starring: Jamie-Lee Curtis, Donald Pleasance**

It is widely recognised and agreed that the opening 'murder' sequence in John Carpenter's 'Halloween' is one of the greatest horror film opening sequences ever shot, as well as being great as a sequence on its own, of course. In 1978, at the time, this sequence was innovative in that it manipulates the use of the 'SteadyCam' and 'P.O.V' (point of view) camera shots for the simple purposes of immersing the audience into the situation itself. The 'uncanny' lighting is noticeable, as, a house should generally be a place of safety. The use of this building, though, helps to set the tone for the 'Slasher' horror films that would ultimately follow in great number. The framing in this sequence is unique. It sets the eyes of the viewer to be totally within the eyes of the on-screen killer, and increases the natural voyeuristic aspect of the film, a trend that would become the standard. The on-screen camera follows the path of a murderer who, simply, enters a house and murders a young woman. It is Carpenter's pure brilliance as a director that allows this relatively simple concept to come alive. It also helps to build the aura of horror extremely effectively.

The opening frame of Halloween simply shows a single large house, following on from a 'wipe-shot'. The frame itself is very tight, closed and compacted together to make the area surrounding the house become cloaked in pure black - darkness. This cuts off the house and gives the viewer a feeling of isolation and helplessness. This plays on the traditional feeling that a house is supposed to be a place of safety. Through isolating the house, the framing has removed the security that a house in a normal neighbourhood brings, thus adding to the feeling of tension within the viewer.

The way the house is brought into view is a true establishing shot, we are given the time and place of this scene. A 'wipe shot', as aforementioned, is used to make the house appear 'sharply' and rapidly from the darkness, which, again, is another way of setting the tone for the film. Here, we are told that we will encounter surprise shocks as part of its set pieces. We are immediately plunged into a point of view shot, which has the effect of instantly placing us in the eyes of a seeker, or even a hunter, for example. The house itself is lit in spooky blue light, which makes it seem threatening to us as an audience. It also seems to appear, somehow, 'otherworldly'. This shot uses the 'softening' technique, filling light to eliminate shadows that would appear and disrupt the image. 'Backlighting' is used too, to give depth to the shot. The house, through these techniques, seems to be an imposing, inaccessible trap.

As the camera, (and the killer effectively) move further towards and around the house, we can see that Carpenter has employed the use of vertical framing. The use of this, shows not only the house, but also frames the couple on-screen. This enhances the feeling that they are trapped and cut-off. Also, their bodies cast shadows, which foresee trouble for them, as shadows are dark and black. The entire sequence is, from start to finish, taken in one long shot. It is done with the 'SteadyCam'. The length of the take helps to firmly put us into the mind of the killer;

both stalking and even striking his prey. The use of this effect 'ups' the intensity, and helps imagine the viewer is performing the actual killing. The unsteady 'SteadyCam' gives the effect that the person whose P.O.V. that we are looking through is not particularly stable either; perhaps relating some type of mental 'instability' – as is eventually revealed later in the movie. In effect, this is a foretelling.

When the person moves further into the house, we see that the girl's boyfriend leaves. This is within in the entranceway of the house, whilst, in the position of shadow, the killer appears to be hiding. Prior to this, the killer has travelled through a living room in shadow, putting some areas into complete darkness. The excessive use of shadows helps heighten the feeling that it isn't just the victim that is trapped within the house with the killer, but also that the audience is trapped inside the killer's head as well. This increases the voyeuristic, and helpless feeling of the piece, as we feel that the killer shows a natural resemblance to shadows; darkness and the unknown in fact.

The killer ascends the stairway from the hallway that is bright; clean; good. Travelling from light to dark, in turn, is what he is doing. Moral implications then exist; this is exactly what he is doing in life. The killer puts on a mask, which we see through use of a 'matte' shot and which further enhances the stalking effect of the piece; we become entrapped in the camera – we now cannot escape. We linger on the girl in her room for a short while. This is not for sadistic or sexual purposes, as she is naked. This does, however, convey the feeling of a 'hunter' moving in for the kill – on his naked, bare and helpless prey. This is a deep undertone, implied by the use of this 'matte' shot. The use of the P.O.V. shot here makes the sequence voyeuristic, associating the viewer with the girl's death; effectively making us 'guilty'.

The shot of the murder itself does not frame the girl's body. Instead, the killer turns to view the knife that he is committing the crime with. This is detached; cold framing that is convincing us that the physical act of taking human life is not just difficult, but mentally impossible in this instance. The killer is out of control, unable to realise what he is doing. This helps convey thoughts that there is no motive to the killing. The character simply wants to kill.

The killer then descends the stairs after committing the act. The framing in this instance shows the door, as the means of escape that we would expect the victim to use, used by the killer, just like the girl's boyfriend. The killer's mask is then pulled off, as we are shown the final shot of the opening sequence. It appears to be a boy. He is shown between his two parents. His position in the centre of the frame denotes that he is and will remain a main character in the film, and he is trapped between his parents; one on either side. A very symmetrical and vertical frame overall. The lighting in this piece creates a very unnatural shine on the huge knife, carried by the boy. It remains visible even as the shot 'reverse cranes' back into a closed frame shot of the three figures and the house.

The crane shot is very dramatic and sudden as it ends the scene suddenly. It also shows the importance of this revelation. The use of the 'mise-en-scene' within the whole piece allows it to stand on its own as filmmaking genius, exploring many, many sub-themes as a result of the techniques employed.

**Word Count: 1,009**

