

Participant's report

Workshop: Arista Specials: Thrillers
Presented by: Stephen Cleary and Alan Harris
Organized by: Arista Development
Presented by: Alan Harris
Date: Weds 14th & Thurs 15th March 2007
Venue: The Writers Guild of Great Britain, London, United Kingdom
Participant: Viktor Vokjan

The first information about Arista Development came to me from Mediadesk CR when there was a seminar about genres held in Famu in, I believe 2006. It was a two-day course and was dedicated to the genres in general. I thought of it that was very interesting and it was something that I did miss during my studies in FAMU. It was not entirely new to me but I had find it useful. In late 2006 and winter 2007, I was involved with a colleague screenwriter in writing a synopsis for a film that was meant to be very much genre piece and it was close to the thriller genre. Being on the Arista mailing list from the previous seminar I was aware of the existence of the set of courses in genres So, I have decided to apply to the thriller workshop with a help of Mediadesk CR.

The seminar it self was dedicated to the thriller genre but in it's widest sense and included an overview on history of the genre from a gothic novel through detective and crime novels, throughout the film history to the present day. An important part of the seminar was dedicated to the financing and presenting a film project (not just thriller but a film project in general). This part I had found particularly interesting and useful.

The workshop took place in the building of The Writers Guild of Great Britain, venue adequate for some 25 predominantly British attendees and among them majority from BBC (approximately 10 people).

Here I would like to give a brief overview of the subject of the course. Beginning of the lecture, held by Stephen Cleary, was dedicated to the history of the genre and its main characteristics.

He emphasized that you can trace the evolution of the thriller as a genre back through a number of lines: the gothic novels, where the unknown terrifies and transfixes the mortal protagonist, who quakes in the contemplation of the unknowable and often comes under the influence of forces in themselves they barely understand, or encounter characters who have an unearthly strength and power over them. In the age of Romanticism these characters that are larger than the protagonist are usually metaphors for sexuality and the power of the poetic imagination. The stories are all about the protagonist falling into a world

they don't understand, whose rules are not immediately clear. When the fog does lift it becomes plain that the rules of this world are very different, exist on a different moral plane than the rules of the world the protagonist was used to and that if the protagonist is to survive they will have to take strong, decisive and unusual – for them – action to get through. In the process they will undergo an ordeal that will mark them forever.

Another strand which is central to the thriller and unique to it is the investigator at the center of the story. All thrillers are in one sense or another, investigations by the protagonists and the audience into the nature of things. This brings us to the widely popular detective novels. What isn't as quickly recognized is how much of the way thrillers work, in a most fundamental way, was determined over fifty to a hundred years ago. What began as a literary genre of detective fiction has grown into the sprawling thriller genre we have today, but it is possible and reasonable to argue that the thriller today is essentially the detective story with variations and hybrids grown off it along the way. It is certainly possible to view nearly all kinds of thriller protagonist as variations on one or other kind of detective-investigator.

After this introduction a question what is thriller was a main topic. Here are some of the possible answers. It is difficult to define the thriller in a quick and easy way. It is difficult to define "thriller" in the same way it is difficult to define "comedy". Both words, "thriller" and "comedy" do not describe the form of the story in any useful or informative way. Both words essentially describe the effect a story of this type has on the audience: a comedy makes you laugh, a thriller is, well, thrilling.

"...a story..in which the possibility of violent action, even death, is close all the time."

As our starting point, what are the implications of that principle? Well, Highsmith said a thriller can be:

- a story with a threat of violent action and danger

OR

- a story of actual violent action and danger

And because so much of the story was concerned with either the threat or the effect of violent action:

- The story worked on a fundamentally superficial level

BUT

- A good thriller can contain moments of profundity

So from this general principle, we can start to get real clues as to the shape of our thriller stories:

- A good thriller puts the hero in danger early and never lets up.
- A good thriller uses a variety of techniques to impart and sustain

"intensity" for the audience:

1. frequent unexpected plot turns: suspense and surprise
2. exciting physical action

3. characters who twist into unexpected shapes

- A good thriller ends in a way which, within the context of the range of devices already utilised to create intensity, is surprising, and even more exciting than anything which has gone before.
- A good thriller will have a faster pace than the average film.
- A good thriller will increase the resonance of the plot twists as it unfolds.

So a conventional definition of the thriller will run as follows:

Thriller = a story that starts with a serious problem for our protagonist who tries to solve the problem only to find that it gets worse and worse and worse. The plot rises to a dramatic confrontation with the antagonist, usually on the antagonists' territory, and ends with a short denouement.

After defining it as "The indestructible genre" the lecturer Mr. Cleary gave Ten reasons why the thriller will never die!

1. Because the audience loves the compulsive narrative of the thriller.
2. Because the audience roots for the protagonist more strongly than they expected, for reasons that are to do with more than just the story.
3. Thrillers reassure us that death isn't the terrible, blunt annihilation we fear it is.
4. Thrillers reassure us, full stop
5. Thrillers are addictive.
6. The thriller allows us to be what we are, not what we pretend.
7. Because the protagonists are so free, and so scared, like us.
8. Because the Antagonists are so dangerous.
9. Because we never know quite where we are.
10. In the middle of it all is a puzzle.

Although, some of these theses are very disputable in my opinion lecturer used many examples to make his point clear and interesting.

Day two started with Mr. Alan Harris and his market analysis. Mr. Harris's lecture was interesting and practically useful but him and Mr. Cleary were not entirely in "sync" about their definition of what the thriller is and how successful this genre is. Nevertheless, Mr. Harris had opened some topics from a point of view of a producer giving some very good advices and tips about presentation of the projects to the producers and sales agents.

In the afternoon Mr. Cleary continued with the creative analysis of what makes a good thriller good and generally what makes a good film good. He had also analyzed what subgenres of thrillers can be identified.

Those are: Rollercoaster, Puzzle, Human frailty, Order/chaos.

In the end of this report I would like to evaluate the course as a whole. I was well and professionally organized. Content was presented clearly with a lot of examples and lecturers were open to questions and discussion. Minor flaws could be find in the lecturer's sense of timing. The topics presented at the end of

the day were taken quite hastily and without much depth and it was obvious that lecturer was running out of time. Unfortunately this fact had spoiled overall brilliant impression of the seminar. Maybe it would be worth considering a three-day course for the future.

I would like to thank the Media Programme, that I was given the opportunity to take part in this seminar.

Viktor Vokjan