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High and Low Angles in Crime Thrillers

Introduction

There are several key elements involved in crime thriller films. Let's take *Silence of the Lambs* as an example. There's a villain, two actually, Hannibal Lector and Buffalo Bill. There's our protagonist, Clarice, who is a woman trying to overcome her past in a male-dominated profession. The stakes of solving the crime are continually raised as Buffalo Bill claims victims, putting pressure on Clarice and the FBI. There's a race against the clock once a senator's daughter is kidnapped and they believe they only have a few days to find her. Lastly, we have a shocking end or twist when Hannibal Lector kills the guards and escapes via the ambulance. These elements are typical in crime thrillers, but they're often subverted to create a different meaning in the film. Most important of all, these films use techniques to bring the audience into the detective work and have us make conclusions, often without evidence. These techniques can draw off the damaged or panicked psyche of the protagonist, leading us to believe something that isn't true. High and low-angle shots are used in crime thrillers to display power dynamics, morality, and doom. I'm going to look at three different crime thrillers from the recent era: *Zodiac* (2007), *Fight Club* (1999), and *Nightcrawler* (2014).

Zodiac Mis En Scene



Zodiac Basement Scene

Jake Gyllenhaal, playing Robert Graysmith, is a reporter trying to find the Zodiac killer. He visits Bob Vaughn, a man who may give him some valuable insights into the case. He arrives at Vaughn's house. It's nighttime and the scene is dark outside and raining hard before we enter into the house. Graysmith and Vaughn enter the foyer and Vaughn locks the door behind them. The clip begins as the pair begin talking in the kitchen. This scene is shot from what seems to be another seat at the table with Graysmith, encompassing both Graysmith and Vaughn in a comfortable wide-shot. The room feels balanced with Vaughn on the left, a contrasting white refrigerator in the middle of the shot, and Graysmith on the right with his back towards us. The lighting is natural and we can see all of Vaughn's features as he talks to his guest. There's a poster in the background that says "Conquest," which is certainly foreshadowing Graysmith's suspicions and intense fear of Vaughn as the Zodiac killer later in the scene. Even though the shot hasn't yet become tense, Vaughn is standing while Graysmith sits, immediately connoting the power balance between the pair. Graysmith doesn't know this man and has entered his house, which can be dangerous. The frame seems closed and rather tight because of the kitchen table and the island between the camera and Vaughn, which doesn't leave room for a lot of camera movement.

Moving into the dialogue, Vaughn asks Graysmith if he thinks that Rick is the Zodiac killer because of a tip and a film poster. Vaughn dramatically informs Graysmith that he, in fact, draws the posters, after Graysmith tells Vaughn that the handwriting on the poster is the closest match to the handwriting of the Zodiac killer. This moment is where the tension begins ramping up - Graysmith is stunned. The camera switches between the master shot and medium shots for the next few lines of dialogue which heightens the disconnect between the pair. Graysmith has

indirectly accused Vaughn of being the killer and now suspects him. Graysmith's dialogue becomes stiff because he is clearly terrified and Vaughn says he'll go into the basement to find out when the theater played the film advertised on the poster. The camera moves to the front of Graysmith's face, introducing a wide-angle close up with Vaughn in the background behind him. Vaughn flicks the basement light on, further increasing the seeming power that Vaughn holds over Graysmith in this scene. The light goes on in the basement while it seems that a light has been flicked on in Graysmith's head, as well as for the audience. We're beginning to become more uncomfortable and more suspicious of Vaughn. Graysmith's eye movement tells the audience that his heart and thoughts are racing and that he is clearly very nervous. This entire scene is rich with information both in the set design and film techniques. Vaughn descends into the basement; a new shot is introduced from the point of view of the basement stairs which frames Graysmith, seeming to suggest that he has nowhere to go but into the basement with a potential killer. Graysmith descends the narrow and decrepit staircase, which, curiously, has a phone mounted to the wall. Odd that Vaughn has a basement and odder still he has a phone down there, perhaps the phone the Zodiac killer used to call in his crimes. The basement is very poorly lit and the light that is given is very cold, unlike the warm lighting upstairs. Vaughn walks forward into the back of the basement and the camera dollies backward in front of him, pushing the audience back into a corner of the basement. Vaughn is silhouetted by the single light and his features are indistinguishable. We get a significant low-angle shot at this point, at 1:35. Graysmith looks up towards the ceiling and the camera gives us a point of view shot of the ceiling boards. Graysmith asks if Vaughn lives alone and his question goes unanswered, drawing further attention to the ceiling because it seems as if someone is walking upstairs. Furthering the suspicion, Graysmith is given far too much headroom in this shot if we visualize the rule of

thirds. This draws further attention to the ceiling above our protagonist. The camera focuses back on Vaughn and he is standing ominously under the light. The light casts shadows downward onto his face, obscuring his eyes before he steps back into the shadows and poses a terrifying question. Back to Graysmith, there's a sound upstairs and the camera dolly zooms from a low angle into his face, furthering the intensity and claustrophobia of the scene. Graysmith starts walking backward to keep his view on Vaughn as he goes upstairs and Vaughn dramatically turns off the light and casts himself into complete darkness. Graysmith is terrified for his life at this point and practically runs to the door, finding it locked. He violently jiggles the doorknob before Vaughn steps into the scene but through the mirror. Vaughn has his guest seemingly backed up against the door and trapped. The tension is released when Vaughn unlocks the door and Graysmith runs outside.

At this point, the audience is left to wonder how much of the tension was caused by Graysmith's overreaction. These film techniques led us to draw conclusions and form suspicions about Vaughn without any evidence. The high and low angles in the scene heightened the dramatic power imbalance that Graysmith felt as he felt himself becoming trapped in the house of a potential serial killer. These techniques subverted audience expectations for the climax of the scene - the scene reaches its height when Graysmith runs out unharmed. The end of this movie strays from the conventions of crime thrillers with the ending. The real Zodiac killer case hasn't been solved and thus the movie's ending is inconclusive. Graysmith thinks he finds the killer but there isn't enough evidence to convict him. Graysmith's obsessive hunting for the killer ruined several relationships and damaged his reputation, a more realistic outcome than can be expected in most crime thrillers.

Fight Club



[Fight Club Chemical Burn](#)

Fight Club doesn't follow the typical conventions of a crime thriller. The typical flawed protagonist and villain are melded into two different characters. The morality of these two is very questionable - Tyler's philosophy seems just but his means of accomplishing it are highly objectionable. The stakes of stopping Tyler are raised as more and more members are recruited into the club and there's a race against time as the narrator tries to defuse the explosions rigged under a skyscraper. However, the shock ending comes when we learn that the narrator and Tyler are the same person; they're just different sides of the narrator's personality. This scene illustrates a transition of power between the narrator, on the left, and Tyler Durden, on the right. In this film, the main character has split personality disorder and the Tyler side of himself is becoming more powerful. The audience doesn't know this until much later in the film, however. Starting out at 0:50, Tyler is seated with the narrator standing over him. The room is lit by several spotlights, which create dramatic shadows and low-key lighting. The camera is placed decently far back and the two characters are in a wide two-shot. The camera is at about the same

height as Tyler when he sits, placing the narrator dominantly on the left side of the scene. He doesn't have much headroom, despite the very high ceilings in the room. There are lots of chemical bottles scattered around the room because this is where Tyler makes soap in their abandoned house. The characters are standing a conversational distance apart because they're still on good terms with each other and there isn't tension between them. I would consider the form open and loose because there's a lot of room in this scene for the camera to move around. The camera and by extension, the audience, doesn't feel confined to this spot in the scene. At this point in the film, the narrator and Tyler have roughly the same status. Tyler asks for the narrator's hand and then licks his lips and kisses the hand. Kissing someone's hand is usually a sign of submission but Tyler subverts this nice gesture by pouring lye on the narrator's hand, as seen above. The narrator immediately sinks down to the ground, placing him lower than Tyler in the frame as he struggles and tries to block out the pain using the coping methods he learned at support groups. Tyler goes off into a speech about weakness and enlightenment, slapping the narrator several times. During this conversation, the camera switches between over-the-shoulder shots from both of them, emphasizing the narrator's burning hand in the center. At 2:03, Tyler stands up a little taller and gets closer to the narrator and further above him. Tyler is forcing the narrator into submission in this scene and he's telling him that it's for his own good. The narrator is wrestling between these two sides of himself and he's choosing to let Tyler win. This marks a significant change in the film as this influences the rest of the action as Tyler's newfound status above the narrator leads to conflict. The narrator says to Tyler: "You don't know how this feels," as his body is being racked with the pain of the burn. The camera gives us a close-up shot of Tyler as he shows the narrator the scar on his hand from the same type of burn. The narrator seems to come to terms with the pain and Tyler releases his arm. Tyler now becomes both the

inflictor and reliever of pain as he pulls out a jug of vinegar to neutralize the burn. The camera gives us a high-angle shot of both characters as the narrator collapses to the floor and Tyler looks down on him. It then switches to a low-angle point-of-view shot of Tyler looking down on the camera and the narrator. Tyler has become higher both positionally and in importance in the psyche of the narrator.

Nightcrawler



[Rick's Death Scene](#)

Nightcrawler is about a man who gathers video footage on local crimes for the news. While not explicitly stated, it's pretty clear that the main character, Lou Bloom, is a sociopath. He has no regard for the feelings of others and can't empathize with anyone. Lou shifts from only gathering crime footage to tampering with crime scenes to increase the drama and value of the situation. Eventually, he starts creating crime scenes to record by indirectly killing other people so that he can be the first on the scene. This film doesn't follow the conventions of a typical crime thriller because the main character isn't just slightly flawed, he has no redeeming qualities. There also isn't a real antagonist in the film. Lou occupies both the space of the

protagonist and the villain in this film. This scene is about the death of Lou's assistant, Rick. Lou hired Rick to help him with driving directions and filming on the crime scenes. Rick is alarmed when Lou withholds evidence from the police and he demands half of the money from the current story that they're tracking. There's a car chase between the police and a man who robbed a home in a wealthy neighborhood. Lou and Rick follow the chase until the fleeing criminal crashes his van. Lou gets out to investigate and this is where the clip begins. Lou sees the man in the flipped van and yells to Rick that he's dead and to get out of the car to film, even though he can almost certainly see that the man isn't dead and has a gun. Rick comes over, films the man, and is shot four times. At 1:39 Lou films Rick as he's dying. This scene is a close-up and low-angle shot of Lou's face from Rick's point of view. Lou is looking down on Rick and for the first time in the film, Lou seems to experience emotion. His voice breaks the slightest bit as he tells his dying assistant that "I can't jeopardize my company's success to retain a non-trustworthy employee." However, Lou ends this statement with a smile, returning to his previous sociopathic demeanor. The camera switches between high-angle, over-the-shoulder shots of Rick dying on the pavement and low-angle shots of Lou's face. Lou says "You took my bargaining power, Rick. You used it against me. You would've done it again, just admit it." Rick dies and Lou takes the camera off of his body. The low-angle shots in this scene place Lou in a position of power and display his feelings of superiority and his lack of morality. The high-angle shots place Rick in subjection to his unfeeling employer and they emphasize the lengths that Lou will go to for his footage; killing the only friend he might have ever had.

Conclusion

Filmmakers depend on typical conventions to place a film into the category of a crime thriller. They purposely alter or subvert the expectations of the genre to create new meaning in a

film through the use of camera techniques such as high and low-angle shots. These shots connote meaning in the film that an audience will recognize, like morality, doom, and power. These shots are also used to bring the audience closer to their own thinking, so they can ask themselves why they made assumptions or inferences without any concrete film evidence to do so. These techniques enhance the quality and enjoyment of film, which should be paramount to any filmmaker.