

The Babadook

(Jennifer Kent, 2014)

Component 2: Global film – Narrative, representation and film style

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Contexts of film**
- **Narrative**

Rationale for study: *The Babadook* is an original and moving horror film. Partly a psychological thriller, partly a dark fairy tale, the film plays with the conventions of the horror genre. It packs a powerful emotional punch as it depicts the dysfunctional relationship of a bereaved mother and son, their descent into madness, and their eventual redemption.

Starting points – useful sequences and timings

‘Destroying the Book / Awful Birthday Party’ in: 27:30, out: 32:42

‘Rest! / The Book returns...’
in: 36:54, out: 39:31

Core study area 1: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The film could be said to have an expressionistic aesthetic. This means all elements of the film evoke the emotional and mental states of the characters. For example, almost everything is shot from Amelia’s (and sometimes Samuel’s) perspective.
- Many of the shots are POV or close-ups of faces reacting to events. This creates a heightened emotional intensity. It also creates empathy with the characters – even when their behaviour

becomes psychotic. A good example of this is after the party, when Samuel says ‘something’ is in the car with them – we/Amelia can’t see it, but Samuel’s expression shows us the terror he is feeling.

- One use of camera movement in the film which is conventional to the horror genre is the slow dolly. In one scene, as Amelia reads the book in bed, the camera moves slowly towards her. She hears a noise and looks up directly at the camera, which halts; it then continues moving closer when she looks away. This creates the sensation that something is stalking her.

Mise-en-scène

- The Babadook book is the central prop; it has the style and design of a children’s pop-up book. When Amelia and Samuel first read it, the text and imagery look like that of a slightly sinister nursery rhyme (you could compare it to Hoffman’s *Struwwelpeter*), but the content grows more disturbing as they read on. The events in the book are a good example of foreshadowing.



Image by Atlaspix / Alamy Stock Photo

- Amelia's costume is a drab washed-out pink. This could symbolise the exhaustion she feels trying to fit into a feminine stereotype of the perfect mother. Everyone else's clothes are harsh black, marking them as separate and threatening (e.g. the mothers at the party, the social workers). This increases the sense of Amelia's isolation.
- Consider the end of the film once the Babadook has been 'tamed'. How has Amelia's costume changed? What does this say about her mental state? Look also at Samuel's magician outfit (that he is now permitted to wear). In what ways is it a brighter version of the Babadook's? What does this tell us about how the narrative has been resolved?

Editing

- Like many horror films, whose main aim is to make us empathise with the fear of the characters, the main editing technique is shot/reverse shot. This is especially effective in the sequences where mother and son are reading the book, particularly when new, horrifying sections appear.
- One technique the filmmakers use to intensify the fear is by showing us the character's reaction *first*, so the source of their terror is briefly left to our imaginations, before we cut to their POV and see what is causing the fear.

Sound

- In the first half of the film, the sound design of the film feels 'woozy' and distorted, evoking Amelia's lack of sleep. Once night falls, the sound effects become sharper and louder. Consider what effect this has on the audience.
- The sound the Babadook makes is a combination of sound effects from video games (one source is dragons from *World of Warcraft*), slowed down or sped up. By layering these sound effects over each other, the sound designers give the monster a tangible presence.

Core study area 2: Contexts

Social/cultural

- Jennifer Kent, the writer and director, said she

wanted to explore the anxieties produced by motherhood in Western culture. 'Women are conditioned to think motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. I wanted to show a real woman who is drowning in that environment.' How do you think the film achieves this?

Political

- Stereotypically, women in horror films have either been the victim or a monstrous 'other' that must be destroyed. Kent's film has been linked to a new wave of female horror directors who use the genre to explore a women's perspective. Consider how Amelia is portrayed throughout the film. How are you encouraged to empathise with her, even as she grows more psychotic?

Additional study area: Narrative

- Consider how *The Babadook* fits into Todorov's narrative structure.
- What is the equilibrium (i.e. how is the 'normal life' of characters introduced)? To what extent does the film begin at a crisis point?
- What is the disruption? Is there only one disruption? In the horror genre, there is often a series of escalating disruptions – what are they in *The Babadook*?
- What is the recognition? Often in the horror genre a 'helper' or expert figure appears in the narrative to explain the monster's nature and how it can be stopped (e.g. Van Helsing in *Dracula*). Consider the effect of not having this character in *The Babadook*.
- What is the resolution? Consider how the end of the film resolves the conflict between Samuel, Amelia and the Babadook (and the memory of Oscar). Why is this unusual when compared to other horror films? How does the fact that Amelia now seems to be *nurturing* the Babadook reflect on themes of motherhood?
- What is Samuel's 'character arc'? What is he like at the start of the film? What is he like when Amelia begins to become threatening? What is he like at the end of the film's story?

Key sequence analysis

'Rest! / The Book returns...'

in: 36:54 out: 39:31

- Consider how a sense of tranquillity is created at the start of the sequence. Think about lighting and the use of music.
- How does the camera movement and cutting pace differ from previous, more anxious scenes?
- How does the choral music change as Amelia comes downstairs? What's the impact of the sound of the door knocking?
- How does the music reflect Amelia's emotional state as she reads through the book?
- Consider the use of shot/reverse shot and how it creates empathy with Amelia.
- How does the use of camera and editing make the book appear as if it is 'coming to life'?
- *The Babadook's* design is strongly influenced by German Expressionist films such as *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Wiene, 1920). You could look at some images from these films and examine how Kent has used their imagery. What is disturbing or threatening about this imagery?
- In terms of narrative, consider why this is a pivotal scene in the film. Consider how 'supernatural' the events have been so far and to what extent they could be rationally explained. How does this scene cross the line between reality and the supernatural? What evidence is there that this may be part of Amelia's own deteriorating mental state?