HorrorFest Lesson: The Canted Angle

As the 60 Second Horror Fest is in full swing, I wanted to talk today about one of the requirements of the contest: The Canted Angle.

The Canted Angle, (or the Dutch angle as it is called by many) is an angled shot, achieved by twisting the camera on the horizontal axis. In other words, it tips the camera to one side or another, skewing the horizon line, as one tripod leg is shorter than the other.

Originally, the Canted Angle was used heavily in German Expressionism. However, it was not until WWI that it gained its unofficial mislabeling of the "Dutch Angle". When the United Kingdom was having troubles with Germany, English dock workers were ordered to refuse any luxury good shipped to the UK from Germany (which included films). Since German Expressionism was famous for using the Canted Angle, customs agents would simply say "You can keep your Deutsch films with their Deutsch angles". Therefore, over time and repetition, the word "Deutsch angle" eventually transformed into the "Dutch Angle" and thus, a film term was born.

The canted angle serves an incredibly specific purpose. It tips the world out of balance. It communicates to the audience that something is wrong and everything is not perfect. It's a visual representation of an internal stress. It reminds the viewer to be on guard and to anticipate the worst.

While this works in everything from horror movies to 1960s Batman, it also works quite well in spy thrillers.

In 1996, Brian De Palma (director of Carrie, The Black Dahlia, and The Untouchables) directed the first Mission: Impossible film. In act one, Tom Cruise loses his entire team to a sabotage operation. He is the sole survivor of what should have been a routine espionage mission.

This scene is immediately following the tragedy of losing his team and he is meeting with his boss. (Warning: contains a singular instance of mild profanity).

Mission: Impossible

For a class assignment:

- Watch this scene and have the students just watch.
- Ask them how tension is created in this scene. (You might suggest music, framing, lighting, editing, acing, writing, etc)
- Explain the canted angle.
- Watch the scene again and specifically look for Canted Angles.
- Discuss how that altered the meaning of the scene and how that created an effect within the viewer (e.g. disorienting)
- Have the students identify where they have seen this technique before.
- Have the students plan where and when these types of shots should be used in their own films.
- Bonus: If they are competing in the Horror Fest, you can have a discussion with the filmmakers about how they can use this to enhance their narrative.

Canted angles are written into the very history of cinema. When students engage with these shots, they embrace an elemental component of cinema construction that, while being tried and true, can create a visually stunning and modern feeling piece that engages their audience visually as well as psychologically.

Contact

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