

DISSECTING DEXTER

Based on the novel “Darkly Dreaming Dexter” by Jeff Lindsay, Dexter is an American television drama series adapted by screenwriter James Manos Jr. In 2007, the series won an Emmy award for “Outstanding Main Title Design”. While the series itself are being received very well by the audience, my personal interest was attracted to the award winning main title.

In this essay, I will first introduce the series and then try to dissect this introductory film sequence. Because the introductory scene is very visual and symbolical, it makes a perfect research project to look and try to find out the deeper meaning of each shot and the reasons why certain design decisions were made. In the end I hope to find some conclusions related to the screen work and meaning of this main title, as well as its quality which made it an Emmy winner.

Introducing the killer

The series, set in Miami, revolve around the character Dexter Morgan who works for the Miami Metro Police Departments forensic lab as a blood spatter analyst. Because of a traumatic experience in his youth, Dexter happens to be an “ethical” serial killer who kills criminals according to a moral code thought to him by his foster father. The first part of the series is mainly an introduction to this character, which you get to know as an very charming and kind man with a “dark passenger”: the voices in his head which urge him to kill. The latter part of the season is more about the connection between him and another serial killer, with who he can truly identify himself.

Especially in the first couple of episodes, the screen writing is done in such a way that it is hard to judge whether or not Dexter is a good or a bad guy. The psychological effect of alternating between a very gentle, decent forensics person and a brutal serial killer is very confusing for the viewer. The most common judgment on Dexter after the first season is still a positive one, because the series reveal more and more of Dexter’s humane side, next to his cold blooded traumatized side. Because Dexter’s killing is strictly to his “moral code”, which consists out of a set of rules before a kill is “justified”, the viewer seems to accept his behavior because the kills seem more and more “just” as the series progress.

Title sequence editing

The main title of the series is a montage spanning 1 minute and 47 seconds containing about 16 sections, each containing about 3 to 6 shots in which the main character of the series, Dexter, is seen preparing himself for work in the morning. The activities Dexter performs are things like waking up, shaving, preparing breakfast, making coffee and tying his shoelace. Though the activities themselves have no real meaning at all, the composition and directing of the shots make strong suggestions about Dexter’s “dark side” which is what the plot of the series is all about.

By combining the visuals and audio effects the director tries to mimic killing related activities by portraying them in the morning rituals which are so familiar to every person. By making these rituals as common as possible (e.g. frying an

egg, making coffee and tying shoelaces) it is nearly impossible not to identify with these visuals. The links between the common day activity and the killing activity is pretty obvious in most cases, though in some cases it isn't clear by itself.

This is where the psychological part of the editing comes in. The editor makes use of the so-called "Kuleshov effect" which is "The name given to the mental tendency of viewers to attempt to figure out how filmed shots fit together, even if the shots are totally unrelated"¹. The essence of the Kuleshov effect is that the viewer is filling in the blanks on his/her own, while the activities in the shots don't necessarily have to be related to each other. By only showing the viewer a closeup of a fried egg on a plate where ketchup is splashed on he doesn't really know what the shot is about, but when all of the shots look like an imitation of a killing activity like slicing a body or strangling someone with a cord the scene gets a meaning as a whole.

Opening an introduction

In this part I would like to describe the shots one by one and explain some things about the visuals. Not only the basic meaning of the shots is delivered in an acceptable way but the composition, editing and details of the shots is of extremely high quality. This is an excellent demonstration where the quality of the editing and montage help to get the overall message across without depending on special effects, text or narration.

The intro opens with a black screen, with the white text "SHOWTIME presents" fading in and then out again in 6 whole seconds. I think the main point of this first shot is to reclaim silence and focus from the viewer, as modern television is very hectic: commercials and previews are wild and loud and the attention of the viewer is most likely at a lower level if the film shots would start immediately. In this way the viewers attention is "reset" before the actual intro starts. Also it acts as another branding mark for the producers.

After the fade out, the first shot is presented without a fade. It is an extreme closeup of a mosquito on human skin. In the third second of the shot, the camera switches to a little more distant one zoomed out, still focused on the mosquito. In the background we can see a dark head, laying down. The camera pans upward a little bit and then the mosquito is swatted by a hand. After the swat the hand reveals a drop of blood and the camera focuses on the head and we see the sharp image of the darker head, blinking his eye. This shot takes 9 seconds and after this the title logo is introduced, saying "Dexter" in a dark blood red font on a cream white background, while blood spatters appear on the lower right of the frame, indicating a police/homicide drama series with a strong relation to blood.

9 Second plot

Though the opening shot takes only 9 seconds, it contains almost all the elements of the plot right in the beginning of the intro, even before knowing the name of the series. For starters the main character is introduced, but if we look into the symbolism we can find that the mosquito actually stands for the victims Dexter

¹<http://www.ambiguous.org/robin/word/kuleshov.html>

makes in the series, who are criminals because they took the innocent blood of others, much like the portrayed mosquito.

Next to the main character, his victims and his trade (e.g. killing) the viewer is also introduced to the darkness of the main character. By keeping the character out of focus (unclear) and then focusing in (clear) we can see an analogy to the dark side of Dexter which gets more clear each episode. Even the actual waking up of the character could be addressed with the meaning of the start of the new episode, or the start of the kill.

The music that accompanies this first shot is also very well chosen. While there is silence during the black screen, when the mosquito is first seen there is an eerie, daunting tune played on a Bouzouki (sort of sitar), with some percussion effects on a bongo and a wood style sound. When the mosquito is swatted, the pizzicato (plucking) played contra bass sets in, while the main tune starts when the Dexter title screen is displayed. There is a very careful buildup with a start, climax and end in only six seconds or so which I found pretty remarkable.

Morning ritual details

After the title the first typed name appears in screen, which is the name of Michael C. Hall who plays Dexter. In this shot a mirror image is seen out of focus, followed by a lot of closeups of the characters stubble right before it gets shaven with razor. The razor leaves a drop of blood in the next shot which drips into the sink, still in close up. A remarkable thing is that while the intro shot was very slow paced, the pace of shots is very high in this part, with about 3 seconds per name on the screen, with about 2 to 3 cuts between each name.

After the drip of blood in the sink, a closeup is seen of the neck of the character, with a drop of blood where a tissue is applied which quickly turns red all over, soaking up the drop of blood. At that point, the perspective changes to a full closeup of the tissue turning red, accompanied by a subtle crash on a symbol in the music. This is a very aesthetically pleasing shot with high contrast between white and red, the slowly taking over all the white of the tissue. This is one of many representations of a blood spatter, or blood in general which are portrayed in this title sequence.

The next couple of shots are concerned with the slicing of meat and plastic wrapped meat which corresponds to the cutting of body's Dexter performs multiple times in the series when killing. To familiarize more with the cutting of the meat, the meat is thrown into a buttered pan and seen eaten by the character. This is one of the points in the video which might be misleading, as Dexter doesn't actually eat his victims in the series. I think the screenwriter let the character eat the meat to make it less suspicious that he is only cutting the meat with no real goal.

After the meat shots, we see the first slow-motion shot of an egg being cracked at the side of the pan, symbolizing the brutal physical violence often seen in the series. A nice effect of the breaking egg is that the actual breaking is split up into two different shots, which are played sequentially on the beat of the two hi-hat strikes. This image and sound synchronization is seen in multiple places throughout the intro which really makes for a cohesive whole and really draws the viewer/listener into the scene. The second reference to blood is also made here as the ketchup is being splashed onto the eggs as if it were a blood spatter.

The following shots show the main characters making coffee by grinding the coffee beans, which is accompanied with a nice time-lapse effect which shows the whole coffee beans in one shot and ground up coffee beans in the next one, immediately followed by the closeup of a fist clutching the coffee grinder handle. Again this is a symbolism to the violence in the series, this time pointing to the dismemberment of Dexter's victims. A remark can be made here that the ground up coffee beans produce the coffee as an end result, in contrast to the feeling of being alive that Dexter gains from his killing and dismembering of criminals. In the last shot of this section, the coffee pot is shown from the side and air bubbles can be seen rising upwards. In combination with the camera panning downward, I believe this symbolizes the place where Dexter dumps the bodies of his victims: on the ocean floor.

The next section concerning the orange juice is one of the most appealing and memorizing parts of the intro, also because the relation between the shots is about clear now, and the viewer immediately recognizes the deeper meaning behind these visuals. The section starts with an orange being cut in half in slow-motion, while the juice splashes out of the fruit. This symbolizes yet again the dismemberment, but maybe even more vividly than the actual meat cutting earlier in the intro. This might be because of the longer shot time, and the slow-motion effect which attracts even more attention. The shot switches to a side shot of the orange being cut in half, and then switches to the actual forceful squeezing of the fruit. The last shot in this sequence shows an extreme closeup of the fruit, unfocused, which looks like a bloody body part. After the camera focuses again it is clear that the object is actually the leftover of the fruit half.

After the fruit section, a closeup is seen of a finger wrapped with a white string, followed by a first person eye level shot looking downwards at two hands holding a floss string. After this the lower half of the main characters head is shown, and it gets clear that the string was used for flossing, while it looked as if it could have been used for strangling a person. The shot ends with the first flash/fade to white transition of the intro, instead of a normal cut or fade to black.

The next shot continues with the strangling analogy, showing the main character tying his shoe laces, first from a side shot showing only his arms and then a closeup of the laces on the top of the shoe and finally an extreme closeup of the final loophole of the shoe in which the string is pulled tight and held for a second, giving the viewer no doubt about the analogy between the shoelace tying and Dexter's strangling techniques.

The last morning ritual shot is a frontal shot of the main character while putting on a white t-shirt over his head. The contours of his face press against the t-shirts which make it look like a relief picture. The following shot is a closeup of the head, where the t-shirt slips down and the face of the main character is seen for the first time. Then the character looks directly into the camera for about 2 seconds without any expression. This is clearly a reference to the fact that Dexter doesn't feel emotions the same way as every other one, but rather puts on a "mask" that fakes these emotions towards the world outside. The white t-shirt pressing against his face in the first part could both resemble the emotional mask or be another imitation of a killing ritual, because it looks the same as if someone is getting choked with a bag over the head.

After we see the key of his apartment leaving the deadlock we see the main character from a distance walking away from his door, all ready for his day of

work. In this final shot Dexter has some sort of awkward smile/smirk on his face that resembles the “mask” I spoke of earlier, his fake emotions towards the outside world that he has to put on to be able to blend in with the rest of the world. The scene ends with Dexter looking past the camera’s left side and walking out of the shot, accompanied by a bell like sound which feels like a natural end of this segment. This is just one of the small details in the sound work that really aid the scenes in bringing the message across.

Recomposing the Dissection

By using a lot of great film and sound techniques this intro is a great introductory scene for the series in the purest form of its definition. By carefully choosing the objects that were placed in the scenes, composing these into a morning ritual and choosing the angles, speed and pace of the camera the screen writer has done a terrific job at using the Kuleshov effect to achieve a meaning of the whole without spilling the details in the shots apart. Though the shots aren’t entirely unrelated, the way they fit together is not because they are part of a every day normal mans morning ritual but because they are symbolisms for the every day life of a cold blooded serial killer. Combine these aspects with some deeper psychological meanings which speak for almost all of the series and you get a great intro, which truly proves its great reputation.

Dissecting an award winning intro has been very revealing and interesting to do. Though I have seen the main title sequence over and over again while watching the series, I missed a lot of details that I found when dissecting and describing the introduction, purely because most of the design decisions were made in such a way that the message was as clear as possible without distracting the viewer with too much special effects, loud music or physical violence. By looking closely to how the shots were setup, what angles were used and for instance what kind of visual objects were used to portray certain aspects of the series I got a very good view on why this sequence was not only nominated for an Emmy but won it as well, as it is an excellent piece of symbolism, cinematography, screen writing, sound engineering and artwork.

References

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