The Limey: Crash Course Film Criticism #10

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Uxeqt6dIziQ
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[PBS Digital Studios Theme]

Some stories tell intricate stories filled with twists–like the search for truth in All the President's Men, the dark tangents of Mulholland Drive, or the trippy lunacy of Being John Malkovich.

Other times, the story is very simple, while the telling is remarkably complex. Steven Soderbergh's 1999 film *The Limey* is one of those movies. By using unusual or even experimental techniques, filmmakers can draw out of the themes of a film and challenge viewers to look at cinema in a whole new way. From its scrambled timeline to its occasionally avant-garde editing style, *The Limey* takes a familiar plot, and layers it with deeper meaning.

This film shows how movies, more than any other medium, can mirror the ways minds work, and ow memories unfold.

I'm Michael Aranda, this is Crash Course Film Criticism, and I have a cold.

[Crash Course Film Criticism Intro music]

In 1998, Steven Soderberg had just finished directing *Out of Sight,* the sexy crime thriller starring George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez. And he was gearing up to make *Erin Brockivich* and win a Best Director Oscar for *Traffic*. But before scaling the heights of mainstream Hollywood, he turned his attention to a little revenge thriller written by Lem Dobbs, best known for writing the sci-fi noir cult hit *Dark City*.

The Limey follows a British thief named Wilson, played with steely conviction by Terence Stamp. He travels to Los Angeles fresh from prison to investigate the death of his daughter Jenny. The thing is, Wilson's been incarcerated for most of Jenny's life. He barely knows her. So he starts filling in the gaps.

He gets help from Eduardo, a fellow ex-con played by Luis Guzman. Eduardo knew Jenny and becomes Wilson's reluctant sidekick. Wilson also connects with Elaine, a former actress and mentor of Jenny's, played with tragic grace by Leskie Ann Warren.

The trail ultimately points to Terry Valentine, a former music producer who was dating Jenny at the time of her death. Played by Peter Fonda, Valentine is a vapid, charming sleaze-ball. He has recently started laundering money for a drug cartel to make ends meet.

Wilson spends the movie circling his target, investigating Jenny's death, and avoiding a pair of hitmen hired to take him out. There are flashes of violence, moments of deadpan humor, and a galvanizing 1960's soundtrack.

The final gun battle at Valentine's beach house in Big Sur, California leaves most of Valentine's crew dead or dying. Eventually, Wilson chases a wounded Valentine to a rocky beach, and he gets the whole story. Jenny had discovered Valentine's illegal activities and threatened to turn him in. Valentine panicked and tried to stop her, and in their struggle, she struck her head and died.

Wilson remembers Jenny threatening to call the cops on him when she was a young girl, without ever following through on her threats. And, in that moment, he recognizes that he played a part in her death. He leaves Valentine bleeding on the beach as the tide comes rolling in.

And that's it. It's a pretty familiar plot, but Soderbergh saw something else buried inside the tropes. For him, *The Limey* was a deep introspective story about memory, regret, and forgiveness. And Soderbergh thought that he knew how to shoot and edit the film in ways that would make these themes central to the experience of watching it.

Basically, he thought he could cut the movie so that it *felt* like a memory. And when you're critiquing a film, it can be helpful to take a magnifying glass to the filmmakers' choices and techniques. By doing that with *The Limey*, we can figure out how Soderbergh adds layers of complexity to the characters and plot of a classic revenge story, and the ways he carefully controls how the audience experiences it all.

Now, as we talked about in Crash Course Film History, most films are edited using a strategy called continuity editing. This means that most cuts are seamless, or even invisible. The edits are designed to make the film's time and space clear. They don't interrupt the action, and time generally moves forward.

The Limey takes another approach. From the first few shots, Soderbergh and editor Sarah Flack opt for a strategy called discontinuity editing. Here the edits deliberately draw attention. The filmmakers cut back and forth within or between scenes, without actually telling us how they fit into the film's timeline or geography. This fragments the narrative and forces the audience into a more active role–we have to really *watch* the movie and piece it together. It's like solving a puzzle, which is exactly what Wilson's up to.

As the film progresses, we get shots of Wilson sitting and thinking–in an airplane, unpacking in his hotel room, turning on the shower, then back to him in the plane, staring out the window. Did he ever get back on the plane? Did he leave? Is this a memory? A fantasy? A flash forward?

The movie sets up a kind of dissonance between sound, image, and time. The filmmakers scramble these elements to get at something deeper in their story. All these cross-cut shots of Wilson give the film a much more contemplative tone than your average revenge thriller. And as soon as we're used to those, the film deploys even more sophisticated discontinuity editing techniques.

Soderbergh and Flack start cutting to heavily stylized shots of a young girl on a beach. She looks right at the camera, a circle of reflected light flashing over her face. This is Jenny, refracted through Wilson's memory. It's an almost ghostly image–imperfect, sad, yet beautiful.

And these memory shots lead to other flashbacks, often without dialogue. They're of a convict that looks remarkably like a young Terence Stamps trying to maintain a relationship with a woman and their daughter. Turn's out, it is a much younger Terence Stamp! Soderbergh had the idea to use a 1967 film by Ken Loach called *Poor Cow* to show Wilson's backstory. That film follows a single mother played by Carol White as she struggles to make a life for herself while dealing with a troubled young thief played my Stamp.

Soderbergh not only uses these shots to fill in the gaps of Wilson's backstory, but also to highlight *The Limey*'s connections to bold British cinema of the 1960's. In 1967, director John Boorman made *Point Blank*, an aggressively non-linear revenge thriller about a double-crossed criminal left for dead. Richard Lester's *Petulia* from 1968 uses discontinuity editing to reflect the scrambled quirky nature of the characters' experiences. Inspired by these and other films, Soderbergh has played with non-linear storytelling in everything from his debut film *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, to *Out of Sight*.

But nothing comes close to the fractured quality of *The Limey*. Two sequences especially illustrate how far Soderbergh and Flack are

willing to push the envelope.

Early in the film, Wilson visits Elaine and takes her out to dinner. She tells him about Jenny, painting a picture of his daughter's life in LA. And he shares a heartrending story about how he knew she'd died before he'd been told. It's a straightforward conversation that deepens our understanding of Jenny, her difficult relationship with Wilson, and Wilson's growing intimacy with Elaine. But instead of shooting the conversation in a conventional, linear way, Soderbergh decided to film it in three different locations: Elaine's apartment, the restaurant, and along the moonlit pier. Then, when he and his editor cut the sequence together, they kept the dialogue linear but the film cuts between the tree locations on almost every line, scrambling our sense of time and space.

[from *The Limey* scene:]

Elaine: That's where Eddie wrote you? In prison?

Wilson: Oh, no. No, no I knew. I knew beforehand. Uhhh... What time was it supposed to have happened? Eddie said...two in the morning. Well that's like, eight hours difference between here and London. That would have made it about like, ten o'clock my time. I was just going out in the yard.

Michael: The effect is disorienting and visually confusing, but the emotions–the yearning, pain, and regret–are the connective tissue throughout the sequence, and play *very* clearly.

To make the scene even more complex, it's here that Soderbergh cuts in most of the *Poor Cow* footage, as Wilson thinks back to his early days with Jenny's mom. It's a risky technique, one that threatens to confuse the audience, but used in such an intentional way, it's tremendously effective.

An equally creative and effective sequence plays out at Valentine's house, high in the Hollywood Hills. Wilson and Eduardo crash a cocktail party, because Wilson wants to see Valentine in the flesh. After skulking around the house and stealing a photograph of Jenny, Wilson finds himself out on the deck, staring back inside at an oblivious Valentine. Wilson's staring is intercut with stylized, slow motion shots of him walking in the house, pulling his pistol, and shooting Valentine in the chest. Over these shots, we hear just the sound of crashing waves, a motif that recurs throughout the film.

[slow-playing audio of crashing waves, talking, and then gunshot from *The Limey* scene]

These choices make it clear that this is Wilson's fantasy, rather than something that's actually happening. The film then cuts back to Wilson on the deck, and he starts walking into the house. And again, we cut to shots of Wilson pulling his pistol, aiming, and firing. This time, we hear more party noise and the shots played at regular speed. It feels like we're getting closer to reality, but not quite.

And then, we cut back to Wilson entering the house a third time. This time, Soderbergh doesn't stylize the shots, and the sounds of the party play at full volume. So this feels very real. Wilson pulls his gun, Valentine sees him and freezes, and Wilson shoots Valentine in the head. A woman screams, and we cut to...Valentine, unhurt, as Eduardo stops Wilson from drawing his pistol.

By gradually stripping away the slow motion and subjective sound design, Sodebergh fools us into believing that the third time we were actually seeing Wilson's revenge. But it was really another example of how filmmaking techniques put us in Wilson's head, giving us access to his imagined experience.

So how does all this work? What makes the movie hold together, instead of fracturing into a confusing mess? One idea holds that our minds work by moving back and forth in time, and in and out of fantasy. You hear a song on the radio, which reminds you of that high school dance, which makes you which makes you think of that outfit you thought was so cool, which reminds you, you need to go shopping this weekend for a new coat, which makes you imagine that you might bump into a local celebrity, and so on. Most films iron out these chains of association, creating clear and linear stories. Not *The Limey*. Here, Soderbergh uses cinematography, editing, and sound design to immerse us in a character's mind. His goal is subjectivity, not objectivity. And it comes full circle in the last scene.

We see Wilson back on the airplane, in the same shots that opened the movie. But this time we learn that he's on his flight back to the UK. Suddenly, all the shots of Wilson on that plane scattered throughout the movie take on a new meaning. They frame the whole film as a string of memories. He's sitting on the plane, thinking back over the people he's met and the things he's done. His memory is naturally jumping back and forth, mixing events, capturing fleeting moments, and not always making narrative sense.

And the intended meaning of the film becomes clear: It's a story about Wilson's meditation on regret, redemption, and the inability to escape the past. With *The Limey,* Soderbergh has taken a conventional revenge plot and used the tools of cinema to elevate it to somethin richer and more profound. It's a unique puzzle of a film that gets its power less fro the story itself, and more because of how that story is told.

Next time, we'll find new ways to get at a character's subjective experience as we look at Juliette Binoche's performance in Kieslowski's classic film *Blue*.

Crash Course Film Criticism is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. You can head over to their channel to check out a playlist of their latest shows, like *PBS Infinite Series, PBS Space Time,* and *It's Okay to be Smart*. This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio, with the help of all these nice people, and our amazing graphics team is Thought Café.

[Crash Course Film Criticism Outro music]