



**SHORT
CUT**
SMALL STORIES
BIG ISSUES

THE DOOR

MIA LESSON PLAN

FILM ANALYSIS

 **nervebelfast**
creative learning centre



TITLE

'THE DOOR' DIRECTED BY JUANITA WILSON (2010)

ANALYSIS

1 - THE PLACES OF 'THE DOOR'

The cities

The Door begins with a man stealthily entering a city. Throughout the film this unnamed city is shown in two distinct temporal moments: before and after a nuclear accident. It is a markedly different place in each time frame. In one, it's still populated. In the other, it has been evacuated and is devoid of inhabitants. This change is reflected in how the space is depicted on screen in its before and after timeframe. In the scenes that precede and accompany the evacuation, there are human figures in the frame, there is ambient daylight, the city still shows some life. The scenes that take place after the evacuation are filmed at night. The city is now empty and has a ghostly quality that transforms it into a place with an almost supernatural appearance. It is more tomb than town.

After evacuation, the family is moved to another city. Upon their arrival we see them in a street, under an arch, lost and apprehensive. Their sense of disorientation contrasts with the apparent ease of the locals who walk by. Unlike these passers-by, the family feels lost and uncomfortable in this strange city that they do not recognise as their own.

The apartment

During The Door, the family lives in two homes. The first is their original apartment, which - like the city at large - is presented differently at different times in the film. Before the evacuation, the home is inhabited, decorated, and filled with daylight: it feels real. Later, when the father returns to it, the same apartment is seen at night. It has become dark, an inhospitable place, populated by shadows not people.

As with the city itself, director Juanita Wilson makes the same location look and feel like two different places. The layout of the rooms and the arrangement of objects remains unchanged but the difference is stark. One place is hospitable, the other is hostile to life. This difference is symbolised by the houseplants. Pre-evacuation they are seen on the kitchen window sill, alive and healthy. In the post-evacuation apartment they remain in the same place but are now abandoned and withered.

The other living space seen in the film is the one where the family is placed after the evacuation. They once had an entire apartment to themselves but are now obliged to share communal lodgings. The film thus signals a significant change in the way of life of these people, who lose their privacy. When the daughter asks her father, „When are we going home?“ she is both referring to the apartment where they once lived and expressing the belief that this new refuge is not their home. When her father replies: “Now, this is our home”, he knows that the old house, their real home is lost and irretrievable.

Significantly, the first shot of the new lodgings views the characters through a four-paned window frame that both recalls a wooden cross and the bars of a prison. The high angle of the shot emphasises the prison like atmosphere; our vantage point is like that of a security camera. [cf. Image 1] .



The hospital

In contrast to the apartments, places designed for long-term habitation, the hospital is an impersonal and transitory space. The hospital in *The Door* is, a place the characters pass through (the scene lasts less than 2 minutes). In this clinical setting they learn that their daughter is sick, news that upends their personal lives and sends the film on a new tragic trajectory.

In the hospital, we see two distinct spaces: a dark corridor that the three characters walk through, hand in hand, backlit, and also the doctor's office where the child is examined, and which is bathed in white light. However, this almost blinding light does not carry the same positive associations as the ambient light used to illuminate their original apartment. Here, the light reinforces the clinical and sterile character of this place. The large window on the wall of the doctor's office looks out onto a desolate, snow-covered exterior, which reads like a symbolic extension of the hospital's chilly interior [cf. Image 2].



2 - NARRATIVE: THE TEMPORAL STRUCTURE AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY

The viewer asks questions

The Door starts in medias res. Action is already unfolding but the viewer has not been given the story information regarding place, characters and so on that are needed to understand the story. As the film progresses, we are given additional information that allows us to fully construct the meaning of the narrative.

When we see the initial sequence, opening at night in an abandoned city, we do not have the context needed to understand the action that is taking place. When we see the man forcing his way into an abandoned house and evading a security guard, we are led to consider that he may be a thief. Likewise, when this same man removes the front door of the house, we don't know why he does it. The film's opening mines suspense from the man's actions but also prompts the viewer to ask a series of questions: who is this man? What is this place? Why does he take the door with him? As in a police procedural or a mystery film our desire for answers fosters our desire to keep watching.

Back to the past

Opening with a furtive and possibly criminal character fleeing the law and moving through a world of nocturnal shadows the opening is reminiscent of film noir films from the 1940s and 1950s. One of the characteristic elements of this genre is the beginning of the narrative in medias res, and the use of non-linear techniques such as the flashback to reveal hidden secrets. Non-linear structure can be seen in film noir titles such as *The Killers* (1946) and *Out of the Past* (1947).



The Door uses a similar narrative structure. At the end of the initial sequence, we see the protagonist fleeing the city, driving a motorcycle on which he carries the door. We hear a voiceover, referring to a certain day in the past, and the flashback begins. The voiceover is a bridge that links the two temporal moments. The flashback moves us to the past where, finally, we can begin to answer some of the questions posed by the opening. So, for example, we learn that the building the protagonist enters at the beginning is his own home, a place he was forced to abandon following an accident. By taking us to the past the flashback helps us to better understand the film's present day.

3 - THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

Cinema is, by definition, an art of the visible. The film camera captures images of the physical world. Audiences then view the images. However, the core threat in *The Door* comes from nuclear radiation and whilst scientific instruments can detect radiation the human eye cannot. How, therefore, can filmmakers convey this invisible danger? Director Juanita Wilson deals with this quandary creatively. *The Door* establishes a creative dynamic between what can and what cannot be seen, as well as between what the film actively shows and hides.



The narrative is set in motion by the nuclear accident. However, this incident occurs outside the span of time depicted onscreen. We, as viewers, never see the accident itself. Even the earliest of the flashbacks unfolds in its immediate aftermath. We see the family inside the apartment, preparing to abandon it, and over the sound of wailing sirens we hear the sound of a radio broadcasting evacuation instructions.

4 - THE SAID AND UNSAID

Throughout its running time *The Door* makes startling and emotive use of silence. Dialogue is used sparingly and stretches of quiet are used to enhance its introspective and mournful tone.

The only exception to this rule is the evacuation sequence where the cacophony of sirens, combines with the terse tones of the evacuation announcements and the sound of a helicopter to create a frantic sense of panic.

Music is also used sparingly and is only deployed at moments of greater significance. As the father flees the abandoned city with the door sombre notes play on the soundtrack. Later, as he sands down the door for his daughters funeral procession a melancholy piece of piano music plays on the soundtrack. In both instances this non-diegetic music conveys the an aching sense of grief and loss that the characters themselves cannot fully express.

Throughout the film suggestion is favoured over direct explanation. The viewer is asked to construct a fuller picture of the story from scant pieces of narrative information. The accident which sparks the evacuation is not only not seen it is also never directly referred to nor explained. As the film unfolds, a clearer picture of events emerges along with two possible interpretations.

One might interpret the story as being unmoored from reality and assume that it depicts a mysterious public emergency requiring evacuation and the abandonment of all possessions. The illness which kills the daughter might be viral or chemical in nature - with toxicity from the incident having poisoned her. Viewed through an informed historical prism a likely interpretation takes precedence; the story events refer to the Nuclear reactor accident that occurred in Chernobyl in Spring of 1986.

Viewed as historical drama rather than fiction it seems likely that radiation poisoning is the cause of the child's illness and the prohibition on taking items from the now contaminated city makes more sense.

Wilson also uses silent, wordless gestures to convey the emotional weight of the hospital sequence. The doctor does not speak his diagnosis aloud but his silent gestures convey the gravity of the situation. Glances between the parents further cement the meaning. Instead of using verbal exposition Wilson uses Pure Cinema techniques. Silent glances and wordless gestures carry an emotional weight with an elegance spoken dialogue might not have been able to match. The sadness is unspeakable and so it seems apt that they not directly speak of it.

5 - THE DRAMA OF BEINGS AND THINGS

In this film about a human tragedy, animals and objects play an important role in the symbolic economy, highlighting tensions between presence and absence, possession and loss.

Upon arriving at the apartment in the opening sequence, the father examines the suitcase on a child's bed. Later the film will reveal that this abandoned suitcase symbolises everything that the family once owned and was forced to leave behind. At the end of the sequence, when the man flees on his motorcycle, his voice-over notes "That day, we didn't just lose a city. We lost our whole world." We see the motorcycle driving into the distance, its small rear light illuminating the snowy landscape as dawn breaks.

Soon after, the flashback begins we learn that the family has or had a cat. Before seeing the animal, we can hear it meowing, disturbed. The father tries to close little Shoush in a suitcase, but this proves to be impractical. „ Shoush doesn't want to be put in a suitcase," says the child. Given the impossibility of taking him, the father says that Shoush will have to be left behind. Shortly thereafter, we hear an official announcement telling the population that they will have to leave their homes without taking any other belongings apart from the clothes they have on their bodies.

Despite this official instruction, the daughter convinces his father to take, some of their coloured pencils, hiding them in his jacket. Later, we see her using the pencils as she draws in the communal kitchen [cf. Image 5] . As the father tells us in a voice-over, all objects transported are "time bombs." We are never directly told that she has radiation poisoning but the reference to objects as "time bombs" and the lesion we see on her finger reinforce that reading. Her pencils, seemingly harmless objects with symbolic links to childhood and innocence, may be directly related to the her death.

6 - THRESHOLDS

Throughout film history doors have been used to symbolise the crossing of thresholds. The final shot of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), for example, frames its loner antihero as he passes through a doorway into the wilderness beyond. Or Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), literally opening a door to walk from her sepia-toned everyday world into a colourful realm of magic and wonder.

Doors can be used to link spaces, passing through them one can move from one threshold to the next. In *The Door* there are several scenes that show borders that are both symbolic and literal. In the opening scene, when crossing the barbed wire that marks the perimeter of the age, the protagonist is simultaneously returning home and breaking the law - actions that are usually incompatible, since, under normal circumstances, returning home is not a crime.

Later in the first sequence a guard breaks the glass in the kitchen window of the apartment, thus violating a space that was once sacred but is now in ruin [cf. Image 5].



During the flashback, one shot reveals both father and daughter framed within the doorways of two adjacent rooms. [cf. Image 6] Later, when the man prepares the door for his daughter's funeral, we see him centrally framed within a doorway, the dark and gloomy hallway outside reflecting his sadness and despair.



Material translated and adapted from our Shortcut Portuguese Partners - Os Filhos de Lumière.