

## Evaluative Analysis: Love in a Letter

'*Love in a Letter*' is a short film with a narrative twist. It follows a retired man, living an uneventful and habitual life with his wife, looking for some excitement and change from his routine. My aim was to create a realistic fiction with a subtle story where the audience empathise and identify with the characters, withdrawing from the 'old grumpy man' and the 'stubborn old lady' stereotype seen in many films.

List of Short films studied:

- *Meshes in the Afternoon* (Deren, US, 1946) – 14min
- *Pitch Black Heist* (Maclean, UK, 2011) – 13min
- *Wasp* (Arnold, UK, 2003) – 24min
- *Connect* (Abrahams, UK, 2010) – 5min
- *Stutterer* (Cleary, UK, 2015) – 12min
- *Curfew* (Christensen, US, 2012) – 19min

Total: 87 minutes

The short films *Wasp*, *Stutterer*, *Curfew* and *Connect* are realistic fictions that depict the habitual everyday life, with a small action occurring departing them from that cycle. *Meshes in the afternoon* contains a different narrative, but captured me with its strong surreal repetitive theme. *Pitch Black Heist* and *Curfew* are both films with a narrative twist. These films inspired me and helped me develop the film's narrative, allowing the spectators to empathise and relate with the characters.

*Connect* inspired me the most as I was drawn to the idea that a film doesn't have to convey a political or social message or overdramatise the plot to be impactful, but rather follows an ordinary person on their daily bus journey. It's the simplicity and subtleness that gives it the power. The main character is seen to be weary from her everyday travels, and begins to search for some excitement by imagining various events. She soon starts a playful connection with a stranger on the bus, holding hands gently before going their own separate ways. I liked the idea that a small gesture can make a meaningful difference, without long-term implications, by bringing excitement and change in the character's mood and perception. In my film, Frank is also seen searching for excitement by highlighting shows and films in the newspaper, but never goes to see them. The prompt which breaks his routine comes in the form of a mysterious letter. The letter improves his mood and adds excitement to his daily routine; he dresses smart, brushes his hair and watches a film with his wife.

This idea of a small action or gesture having an impactful outcome is also very prominent in the film *Curfew*. The opening scene follows Richie attempting to commit suicide, the phone rings and his sister, unaware of the situation, asks him to look after her young daughter Sophia. The ringing phone plays a crucial role as it saves Richie's life twice throughout the film. The simplicity of a phone call preventing the seemingly inevitable act of suicide, is ironic. This juxtaposition inspired me, but I applied a subtler approach – a letter heightening Frank's mood.

The repeated cycle images in *Meshes in the afternoon*; key, door, couch and clock inspired me to do the same in my film. However, not to convey the psychological trauma, rather, the dreary life Frank lives, in the form of a montage. I was also inspired by the mystery in the narrative, more specifically the mysterious figure with an unknown identity. My film's narrative twist includes the wife being Frank's secret admirer taking the role of the mysterious figure. This contrasts the ending in *Meshes in the afternoon* where the spectator is left with uncertainty of the exact identity of the figure and his reasons behind his actions.

During my production stages, I was influenced by a variety of films, styles and techniques, particularly by the French New Wave. This movement explored existential themes and relationships, applying unique cinematic techniques like long takes, using stable and static shots with smooth and planned camera movements, allowing the audience to passively emerge in the film. However, it was also common to purposely break this pattern to show a change in narrative or time and actively force the audience to engage in the film. This was done using techniques such as handheld tracking shots or through self-reflexive filmmaking, such as looking at the camera and using jump-cuts.

The film regarded by many to kickstart the French New Wave was *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960). The film used both subtle and experimental editing, such as jump-cuts. In the automobile scene with Patricia and Michel, the jump-cuts create a Brechtian distancing effect preventing the audience from losing themselves in the narrative. The scene breaks the fourth-wall between the viewer and the film's production. Similar to *Breathless*, I decided to use jump-cuts to convey a shift in my narrative, however I still maintained the continuity and pace I used throughout the film.



Jump-cut automobile ride (*Breathless*) Jump-cut preparing coffee (*Love in a letter*)

Jeunet in *Amelie* (2001) took inspiration from the French New Wave, combining it with modern film technology. His use of shot angles and lighting inspired me to compose shots in a similar way. In *Amelie* the spectator is brought to 'peek' into Amelie's personal life watching her walk around her house without the camera interfering. The frame, partially

obstructing the audience view of her, enhances the ‘peeking’ feeling, giving it a fly on the wall perspective. I used a similar shot to peek on Frank performing his daily routine.



*‘Peeking’ on Amelie in her kitchen (Amelie)*

*‘Peeking’ on Frank in his daily routine (Love in a letter)*

*Amelie* is dominated by yellow tones (filters and grading) and palette changes in colour are often linked to changes in narrative. A yellow hue in many films is used to convey the past usually a flashback, giving it a nostalgic feeling. In my film, I decided to use colour to emphasise the change in Frank’s mood, before and after receiving the letter. Before receiving the letter, I used blue and darker colours, while after receiving the letter, the colour changes to brighter yellow tones.

Moreover, *Amelie* uses handheld and long tracking shots which contrasts the stable and static shots. This can be seen when there is a shift in narrative, and Amelie decides to start helping people. Similarly, in my film, I used a handheld tracking shot in the film’s turning point, when Frank receives the letter.



*Tracking shot - Amelie walking a blind man (Amelie)*     *Frank receiving the letter (Love in a letter)*

To show the passing of time and illustrate the repetitiveness cycle of Frank’s daily life, I decided to use a montage. I particularly liked the montage used in *Nobody* (Ilya Naishuller, 2021), showing the habitual routine of Hutch Mansell, a family man who used to be a government assassin. The montage shows the days passing and events that repeat themselves (coffee, metro card, work, home). Instead of using day titles, I used different coloured socks and a clock to indicate that a new day began. Similar to *Nobody*, I used medium close-up shots for preparing eggs and having a cup of coffee. In addition, both films share exaggerated use of everyday diegetic sounds and have minimal use of dialogue during the montage.



Montage -Hutch's daily routine (*Nobody*)

Frank's daily routine (*Love in a letter*)

Reverting back to the French New Wave filmmaking, directors would often depart from script-based filmmaking in favour of improvisational scenes. In *Breathless*, the dialogue between Patricia and Michel were all improvised and added a sense of realism and naturality to the film. In my film, similar to *Connect*, my initial intention was to avoid dialogue and mainly rely on diegetic everyday sounds, to emphasise the routine and repetitiveness. However, when I started shooting, the actors spontaneously improvised a dialogue, which added to their relationship and evoked a natural atmosphere.

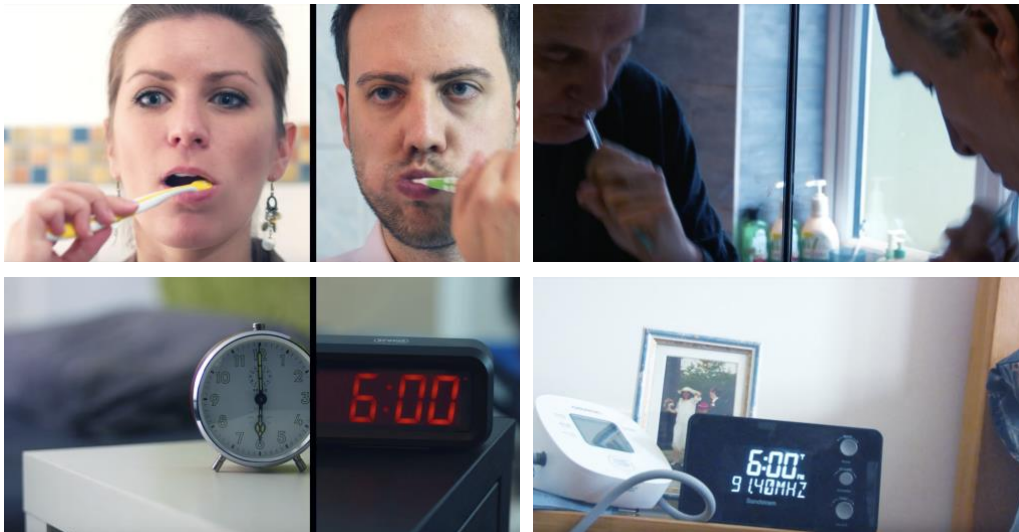
Referring back to my film's aims, I think I succeeded in creating a realistic fiction film which breaks from the elderly stereotype often seen in films, allowing the audience to empathise and identify with them.

My film depicts an ordinary healthy elderly couple illustrating their everyday life. In many films elderly characters are used for comic relief or as the 'grumpy old man' and the 'stubborn old lady'. This can be seen in *Lucky* (John Carroll Lynch, 2017), where the protagonist is a 90 years old 'grumpy' man who searches for enlightenment, and in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989) depicting a 72-year-old stubborn woman who is fixed in her long-established ways and later suffers from dementia. While my movie begins with their habitual everyday life, it evolves to show their drive for excitement and playfulness.

Similar to *Connect*, my film takes place in a familiar, everyday setting. Whilst *Connect* takes place in an ordinary English bus, mine is set in a typical English home. This increases the realism of the film and allows the audience to further relate to the characters.

Similar to *Connect*, *Wasp* and *Curfew*, I wanted the audience to empathise and identify with both characters. With Frank and his desire for a 'spark' and a change in his monotonous routine and with his wife, who knows and cares for Frank and 'plays along' to provide him (and also her) a bit of excitement. Frank's routine is very similar to any person's routine, shown in a montage of short shots depicting everyday activities (waking up, brushing teeth, eating, watching TV), and therefore relatable to many people at all ages. A montage, depicting a similar routine was also seen in the short film *6AM* (Film Theatre Forum, 2017),

but with younger characters, who were tired from their uneventful routine cycle, looking for a change.



*Habitual morning (6AM)*

*Habitual morning (Love in a letter)*

The desire to break the routine is shown using close-ups of Frank circling shows and movies in the newspaper he would like to see, but never actually goes. This emphasises the desire for change, but often the difficulty in doing so. In *6AM*, *Connect* and *Wasp*, the main characters are the ones who take the initiative for change by doing something simple, such as changing their route (*6AM*), meeting a guy in the pub (*Wasp*) or initiating a playful connection with a stranger (*Connect*). In my movie, similar to *Curfew*, the change comes from an external source (his wife). I wanted to convey the message that a small, simple action, either from an internal or external source, can make a meaningful difference.

One of the things I would have liked to improve in my film is the narrative twist. I believe my film's twist is not as strong as I had hoped. In contrast to *Pitch Black Heist* where the narrative twist of Liam being Michael's father is unexpected, my twist is more of a pleasant surprise. In *Pitch Black Heist*, the filmmakers purposely left hints for the spectators demanding active participation before the twist is revealed, making it more impactful. Perhaps if I would have expanded the theme of mystery in my film by having more shots of the secret admirer, it would have added more tension, forcing the spectator to engage more actively, and thus strengthening the impact of the twist.

To summarise, I believe that with the techniques discussed above, I have managed to depict a realistic fiction film with a non-stereotypical view of a relatable elderly couple.