

The Lost Boys

(Joel Schumacher, 1987)

Component 1: Key Developments in US Film

Core Study Areas:

- **Key Elements of Film Form**
- **Contexts of Film**

Rationale for study: *The Lost Boys* was one of the first teenage vampire movies, updating and revitalising the genre. It achieved this by portraying the ‘monsters’ as cool, youthful renegades rather than eternal and weary old men. Later cultural events such as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the *Twilight* franchise were heavily influenced by the film. It could also be seen as a sly satire on the 1980s American obsession with ‘family values’.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings

‘The Lost Boys’ Lair’ – in: 23:43
out: 26:19

‘Michael begins to turn’ – in: 36:05
out: 40:56

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Aerial shots (probably filmed from a helicopter - drones were not used until decades later!) are used to show us the Lost Boys’ POV as they swoop over the town – these shots clearly show that the Boys are supernatural beings.
- In the first clip, as Michael is shown around the Lost Boys’ cave, the camera moves around with him, spinning to show his facial reactions in response to the lair. This also shows Michael’s

bedazzled state of mind.

- Camera movement, often dollyling towards or away from characters faces, add a kinetic intensity to the scene. Watch the second clip mentioned above. Consider how ‘dolly zooms’ are used to intensify the scene where Michael is at the bathroom door.

Mise-en-Scène

- The lair of the Lost Boys, we are told by David, is the remains of a luxury hotel that was swallowed by an earthquake. The set design and the Lost Boys’ costumes are a mixture of old and new, rich and poor: chandeliers and musical hall posters, a candelabra and a fire in a trash can, dangling starfish and dolls. Consider how this design makes the Lost Boys appear timeless, perhaps hinting at their immortality.
- The hair, make-up and costumes of the boys resemble that of 1980s rock stars, mixing old (a 19th century military coat) with new (leather jackets and cowboy boots). This emphasises their roles as ‘bad boy’ outsiders, dangerous yet also attractive.



Image by AA Film Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

- The usual props from a vampire movie are present throughout: stakes, holy water, garlic and a mirror in which the vampires cast no reflection. However, as the narrative progresses, we realise some of these weapons are not as useful as the heroes would hope.

Editing

- Like many horror films, *The Lost Boys* uses shot reverse shot to help us empathise with the characters. Unusually, this is often used for comedic effect in the film. Watch the sequence where Sam is unnerved by the stuffed animal. Consider how shot reverse shot is used to convey Sam's discomfort, but also to create humour.
- In the sequence where Michael is stalking up the stairs, a sense of threat is created with parallel editing. The scene crosscuts between the sinister silhouette of Michael, getting closer to the bathroom, and Sam, oblivious to the danger, singing and messing around in the bath. As Michael gets closer, the cutting pace increases to intensify the suspense. Cutaways to Nanook the dog sensing Michael and growling adds to the sense of approaching danger.

Sound

- The Lost Boys* was partly marketed by the release of a soundtrack album featuring pop and rock songs (but no score). Almost every scene has a rock song playing in the background (or in a live performance). Consider how this creates a different effect to an orchestral score that is usually used in horror films. How does it also target a teenage audience?
- The arrival of the Lost Boys is often preceded by a number of sound effects: the howling wind, jangling wind chimes and then the whoops of the vampires themselves.
- The dialogue is a major area where the director has made *The Lost Boys* into a hybrid genre film: a teen horror comedy. Often a scene of danger or fear is followed by a funny line that subverts the genre e.g. "My own brother, a creature of the night! Boy, you wait 'til Mom finds out!"

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social/Political

- The film has some complex and interesting representations of families. Lucy is a struggling single mother ("the only woman to have lost out in a divorce"), forced to move back in with her father. Michael and Sam seem to get into the most trouble when she is working nights. Michael is tempted by an alternative family – the Lost Boys – whose initial taunting and initiation rituals resemble a gang.
- In the 1980s, 'televangelists' (Christian ministers with their own TV channels) tried to mobilize conservative religious Americans as a right-wing political force, opposing social liberalism (feminism, homosexuality, atheism) as an enemy of 'family values'.
- Consider *The Lost Boys*' portrayal of American families – how does it both subvert and reassert traditional 'family values' (you may want to specifically consider the character of Max by the end of the film)?

Cultural

- The title is taken from J.M. Barrie's classic children's book *Peter Pan* (1911). In this story, The Lost Boys were missing children who'd been taken to NeverNeverLand where they never grew up.
- There are many stereotypical horror, and particularly vampire, movie conventions used throughout. Sam even learns about the danger his family are in (and how to take action) by reading horror comics. Their Grandfather's home is a direct reference to the house of horror in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974). The film is also littered with cultural references to fashion, TV and pop music (Sam's mention of his brother's attitude references both TV soap opera *Dynasty* and a song by Prince!) These references add a level of enjoyment for the audience who understands them, but also serves as a way to add comedy.

Institutional

- *The Lost Boys* was originally intended to be a children's film, with much younger characters and far less obvious horror elements. Director Schumacher realised it could be 'sexed up' by making all the characters teenagers.
- The script was re-written by Jeffrey Boam to turn the Boys into darkly attractive figures that seduce Michael away from his own family. Schumacher has said that the appeal of vampires is their immortal youth and sexual allure. They also offer their victims a new way of life, away from the domestic world. The vampires in *The Lost Boys* aren't lonely, ancient beings like Dracula, but instead 'live-fast-die-young' MTV rebels which appealed to a teenage audience at the time.
- This new type of vampire characters became extremely popular, especially in the *Twilight Saga* novels/films.

ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA: Narrative Starting points

- Consider the characters in *The Lost Boys*. In what ways do they fulfil or challenge the traditional roles of hero/protagonist, villain/antagonist, donor, helper etc.?
- Consider the narrative structure of the film – in what ways does it follow or challenge the established structures such as Todorov's five stages (Orientation, Disruption, Recognition, Resolution and Return)?
- You may also want to think about the Hero's Journey (or 'monomyth'). How does Michael leave his safe domestic world? How is he 'called to adventure' by David? At what point does he enter the 'underworld'? What is his crisis point, and what decisions does he make?
- Consider the end of the film – how satisfying do you find the climax in terms of action and in terms of plot?

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

'The Bottle' in: 27:53 out: 30:26

- Consider how the camera and lighting are used to establish David as the leader of the vampires.
- The prop of the bottle, and the other characters' responses to it, establish that to drink from it will be a momentous decision. Consider how the prop design – and the performances from David, Star and Michael – add to the dramatic intensity. How does the use of cross-cutting to the chanting Boys give this scene the feeling of a gang initiation?
- After he drinks, Michael seems to fall into a strange intoxication. Consider the use of high angle shots and close-ups of faces. Also, look at editing techniques like superimposition and slow motion. How do these techniques evoke Michael's experience?
- How does the music make us feel the ritual is both evil and deeply sensual? Consider the use of choral vocals – what other horror films use this kind of music?