

A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints



Synopsis

A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints is based on director Dito Montiel's youth during the mid-eighties in the tough neighbourhood of Astoria, Queens. All his old friends have ended up dead, as junkies, or in prison; Dito is the proverbial man who got out. For him, the 'saints' are the folks he remembers, the ones he left behind. For better or worse, they made him who he is today. A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints is an honest account of a bittersweet return to a neighbourhood that isn't the same and never will be again.

Teachers' Notes

This resource is suitable for students of: AS/A2, Highers, Film & Media Studies. It explores the following themes: representation; independent film; device and memory and narrative.

One of the main themes contained in the film is the growing sense of independence and individuality of the protagonist Dito. From the beginning we are positioned so that we see events from his perspective, this form of narration helps us to understand this character and his actions.

Representation

The representation of teenagers on film is nothing new. Famous examples include films like *Rebel Without A Cause* (Ray: 1955), *Grease* (Kleiser: 1978), *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes: 1985), and *Donnie Darko* (Kelly: 2001). The teenagers in these films grapple with the desire to make sense of who they are and where they fit into the world in which they inhabit.

Dito is clearly part of this tradition. In *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*, we learn that his relationship with his father is strained and his relationships with his peer group are complicated. Antonio is a significant force in the film and the relationship with Dito is complicated when he becomes friends with Mike O'Shea and starts to imagine life outside Astoria.

Consideration of the representation of teenagers in this film and others that you have seen brings up some interesting areas for debate.

Key questions

- Consider what difference class, ethnicity and gender makes?
- Do you think this film is more likely to be enjoyed by a male audience?
- Does the film produce stereotypical representations of character or settings?
- This film is set in 1986. Does it still have a relevance to audiences today?
- If you were marketing this film, which age group do you think would be most likely to come to the cinema?
- How would you reach this group?
- Which aspects of the text would you emphasise?

Independent Film

The representations that we see of the teenagers we see in the film are, as suggested, broadly familiar. However, a further layer of meaning can be discussed when we consider the difference between mainstream teens and those that we meet here in *A Guide To Recognising Your Saints*. Looking at the poster you will notice the names of the film companies involved; it is possible that these are not very familiar to you, compared to, for example, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Bros. or Paramount. Films like *American Pie* (Paul Weitz: 1999) and *American Wedding* (Jesse Dylan: 2003) have been produced by a major Hollywood studio (Universal) and provide the audience with a portrayal of teenagers that is perhaps more familiar. Considering the *American Pie* Trilogy as highly successful in business terms means that those elements that made it successful in the first instance will be returned to in the sequel. *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints* does not provide potential investors with sequel opportunities, there will be no 'What Dito Did Next'. The process of making an independent film means that budget constraints are very real and impact on every aspect of the project, from location to casting to marketing.

Key questions

- Do you think that independent films have greater freedom in their content than mainstream Hollywood films? (You could research this idea by considering recent films that have been labelled controversial in some way as well as top ten DVD charts to investigate those that have been most financially successful.)
- The 16–24 market is the most sought after. How much do you think your taste influences the films that are produced for this age group? You may wish to consider the last ten films that you watched at the cinema as a starting point.
- Considering the different types of representation of the teenager discussed above, what are the different pleasures offered by these different types of text? Make specific reference to films you have seen.

Device and Memory

Any film that is set in the past must carefully research the period to make it authentic. However, with *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*, the personal nature of the story means that this is not only a reconstruction of Astoria in the 1980s, but also the streets and home of the director and writer Dito Montiel.

The film is set in a very specific time and place. We meet Dito and his friends and family in their own neighbourhood, during the summer of 1986. Communicating this to the audience is done in part through the careful construction of *mise-en-scène*. The costumes, including hairstyles and accessories are all carefully chosen to reflect the time. (Think about the scene when a neighbour is trying to set a video recorder.)

Commenting on how *mise-en-scène* is used in conjunction with the filming, Montiel says:

'We kept going for this sense of opposites with the whole film. Eric Gautier, the director of photography, is never intrusive as a cameraman, he doesn't swoop in the hypodermic needles, if you know what I mean or zoom in on a hot radiator. The whole film is like that. I believed that it would come through without stressing the obvious things. That was a big part of it, from the acting to the costumes, we just trusted that it would seep through, I don't need a lot of New Yorkers talking like, 'Yo, Vinnie!' And I don't need to see the Empire State Building – that's what I mean about going for opposites.'

(Press Notes, *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*, 2007)

Key question

- Do you think that the intentions of the director are achieved?

Music is used effectively in the film to communicate a sense of the time through the playing of pop songs from the period as a means of providing character information as well as communicating the time in which the film is set. Communicating the memories of an individual is complicated and often partial. When we look back on our own lives, we may not remember all of something that happened, or remember events in a particular way. Filmmakers use the interior thoughts of the characters expressed through voiceovers and pieces to camera to create a more complete picture.

Key question

- How effective do you feel these devices are in creating sense of time and place? (Think about music, costume, language and style.)

Montiel discusses this, saying:

'The only plan was to make things feel as real as possible. The hope was to experience the film more than to watch the film. A lot of the film, because it's set in 1986, is supposed to be these fragmented memories. How do you put those pieces back together again? That was the thought behind it, if there was one at all.'

(Press Notes, *A Guide to Recognising Your Saints*, 2007)

Narrative

The narrative is presented to us through several interesting devices. We first meet Dito as an adult at his own book reading in California. We then go back to 1986 and meet the young Dito along with his friends and family.

‘One of the film’s recurring motifs is the withholding of information from the audience as the storyline from the past plays out. Twice we experience characters playing out scenes against the breathtaking visual backdrops that Montiel doesn’t reveal until the end of the respective scenes, as if to suggest visual exclamation points. One such scene involves the personal threat against Dito that is spray painted around his bedroom window – an act to which Dito, Antonio and his friends respond long before we actually see it on screen. Another similar scene is a wide, night time shot of the majestic Astoria Park Pool, which we only see after a long period of intense dialogue between Dito and Mike O’Shea on the subject of their futures. This ‘backwards’ narrative strategy embellishes these scenes...’

(Press Notes, A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints, 2007)

Key questions

- Did you find the use of these devices effective? Did you find it confusing or a fresh way of storytelling?
- The narrative tells us the story of a young man who leaves the world that we have come to know. How sympathetic were you for his choice to leave?
- What questions does the film leave us with? Do you feel the ending resolves all or some of these questions?

Directing, Debut and Influence

Promotional material describes the film as:

'Set against an electric '80s soundtrack and exuding rawness and authenticity of the classic movies Mean Streets and Stand By Me, Montiel explores how he came unscathed, while his friends ended up either dead, junkies or in prison.'

(Press Notes, A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints, 2007)

Achieving a very specific impact on the spectator is achieved through some of the devices mentioned above. In addition to this the staff working on the film are significant as this passage suggests:

'A Guide To Recognizing Your Saints was put together by Montiel while working with two editors. Chris Tellefsen started out as an assistant editor for Martin Scorsese on The Color of Money and went on to edit the early films of Whit Stillman and films for Milos Forman, David O. Russell, Larry Clarke and M. Night Shyamalan. Jake Pushinsky had worked with Montiel for several years on his music and on Montiel's short films, but had never cut a feature.'

(Press Notes, A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints, 2007)

The considerable experience of Tellefsen must surely contribute to the overall look of the piece.

Key question

- Given the comparison between Mean Streets and Saints do you think that this is mainly because of the themes and content or because of the visual style?

Montiel is a first time director. The process of getting the project from book to script to screen involved the input of several other people, significantly here the producer Trudie Styler who said:

'I think Robert (Downey Jr.) thought of me for Saints because he saw what we did with Guy Ritchie and his first film... He knew I had an interest in first-time filmmakers...'

(Press Notes, A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints, 2007)

Ending up at a stage where posters are all over the country bearing your name, talking about your film is not an overnight process. In this case Montiel had already written the book, and then worked with Robert Downey Jr. and Trudie Styler in a development process that took over four years. The commitment involved in getting a project onto the screen is immense. Montiel's own process included the following:

'He workshopped the script at the Sundance Filmmakers/Screenwriter Labs with such mentors as director Frank Pierson and novelist Walter Moseley. He then met with the producers at Original Media and Belladonna Productions, who, from their respective projects The Squid and the Whale and Transamerica , among many others, knew how to make movies in New York on a budget. Next he enlisted the services of noted cinematographer Eric Gautier, who had recently shot The Motorcycle Diaries.'

(Press Notes, A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints, 2007)

Being prepared to rework the script and take advice on every aspect of the project are essential qualities for a director.

Earlier, Montiel is quoted as talking about opposites in the film, and trying to avoid obvious signifiers such as speech 'Yo! Vinnie', and landmarks like the Empire State Building. Some of you may have seen the film La Haine (Kassovitz: 1995). This film has a number of similarities to A Guide to Recognising Your Saints, both in terms of the themes it deals with but also as a debut full-length film for its director. Kassovitz takes a different approach to famous landmarks with his characters discussing the significance of the Eiffel Tower to them and a more widely represented tourist-friendly Paris. You may wish to compare and contrast these films considering the use of setting and the different approaches taken by the directors.