

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

COMPONENT 2

Global filmmaking perspectives

Section C: Film movements –

Silent cinema

TEACHER'S GUIDANCE NOTES

by Principal Examiner Patrick Phillips



Teacher's Guidance Notes on Film Movements – Silent Cinema

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A Level Component 2: Global filmmaking perspectives

Section C: Film movements – Silent cinema

1. Silent film

Before getting on to issues of film movements it is useful to start with an overview of some of the challenges – and pleasures – of teaching silent film.

Films of the 1920s are often considered among the greatest masterpieces created in the whole history of the medium. The argument of those who concur with this view is that cinema should be regarded as primarily a visual medium. They believe that by the mid-1920s filmmakers had developed ways to tell film stories visually with great skill and ingenuity. Filmmakers and critics alike despaired with the coming of sound at the end of the 1920s as the unique dimension of film had been discarded. Dialogue-driven narrative was perceived as dragging cinema backwards as a form of theatre, rather than as the brilliantly new, innovative and artistic form of visual expression it was proving itself to be.

Trying to recapture this sense of the brilliance and independence of mature silent cinema is important for students. Instead of seeing their silent film study as nothing more than an historical curiosity, and working from a deficit model in relation to their experience of contemporary cinema, students should be encouraged to appreciate the thrilling qualities of a quite distinct kind of film.

One thing always to remember: silent film was never silent – it just didn't have recorded speech. A silent film always had a musical accompaniment, the function of which was very much to influence spectator response. One of the film options, *Sunrise*, was released with a recorded soundtrack. This was in part to provide a consistent experience for the spectator – otherwise every viewing of the same film was potentially an entirely fresh experience because the improvised musical accompaniment was unique to that performance. Indeed in representing a move toward standardisation, the example of *Sunrise* reminds us just how free and open to spectator engagement silent films were. It is great fun and a terrific learning experience to run a silent film silent and get the class to jam with whatever musical instruments or noisy objects they have available to them. This really does get them to see and to feel the film.

Of all the learnt pleasures of watching silent films, the most important is to recognise that the lack of recorded dialogue can be seen as a strength, not a weakness. The argument is that lack of recorded dialogue draws the spectator into a much more active engagement with the film. Even when we have inter-titles, these rarely do more than provide a summary indication of what is being spoken between characters. As spectators we are able to make the detail of the film story our own, thanks to the sketchy way in which the spoken word is indicated. Indeed, the ultimate ambition of the great filmmakers of the mature silent cinema period such as Eisenstein and Murnau was to make films with no inter-titles at all. Rather a film would be a visual canvas on to which the spectator could project their own imagined detail, in other words become co-storytellers.

There are three specific obstacles to watching a silent film that are experienced by many people:

- The simplicity of the story, often with no sub-plot and the extended amount of time taken

to make a narrative point.

We are used to complex plots and the quickest way of making a point and moving the story on. Silent film can appear as a form of ‘slow’ cinema! Surely this simple story could be told in half the time? Silent film depends on what might be called visual amplification. Gestures and details are used to make a narrative point, and then the point is reinforced and possibly reinforced again. The shot is often held for longer so that the point being made can be fully chewed over by the spectator. The spectator is given room. This is not ‘primitive’ as a form of filmmaking but it is different. This is a different kind of cinema with different techniques that offers a different experience for the spectator.

- Gestural acting is a terrible turn-off.

In fact we should be very careful here in generalising about acting style in silent cinema. For German Expressionism, the acting style was of a piece with the aesthetic of that movement. For Soviet Montage / Constructivism, the human body was seen as machinic so actors could communicate states-of-mind using their bodies as precise instruments. By far the biggest influence on silent screen acting was the melodramatic theatre which, for the previous century, had developed a range of very broad mannerisms to express heightened emotional states. Another influence was vaudeville and indeed the circus, especially for the clowning and high jinks of silent film comedy. At the very least, a historical understanding will produce an informed student. Here, perhaps the most we can hope for is that the student ‘makes allowance’ though it is possible to be more ambitious in arguing for these as modes of acting that demonstrate that the ubiquitous naturalism of contemporary cinema is only one choice among the options available to filmmakers.

- Rhetorical excess makes spectators feel as though they are being bludgeoned around the head – and usually at the service of a very ‘preachy’ presentation of the film’s message.

The rhetorical excess referred to here has partly been covered in the two previous points. It is true that few silent films are ideologically ambiguous though many of the best are nuanced in their representation of key characters and situations. With a focus on the individual scene or sequence, it is possible, as referred to above, for the spectator to revel in the ‘roominess’ provided by the distinctive techniques of silent film storytelling. Another thing that can be said here is that this objection about rhetorical excess leads to a consideration of the ‘critical debate’ assigned to this section of the specification: the realist / expressive debate – about which plenty will be said below.

In general the more contextual knowledge the student has, the easier it will be to find their way into the distinctive world and distinctive communication system of their silent film. It’s important to be positive or even better ‘ordinary’ in approaching the screening of the film. It’s just another great film on the specification ... enjoy!

2. Film movements – some general considerations

Umbrellas

A film movement is one of those critical umbrellas we can throw over a body of films because we have a strong hunch that they are distinctive, have lots in common with one another and can be collectively explained in some relatively neat, coherent way. Other critical umbrellas we have include genre, auteur and national cinema.

Some Problems with umbrellas

Before we try to nail down a definition of a film movement, it is worth reflecting briefly on some issues with the umbrellas that we use routinely in film studies. They all work more or less in the same way, requiring the identification of shared characteristics across a number of films, which may be stylistic, thematic or both. Textual study is complemented by contextual study with the latter providing further justification for asserting a shared identity and coherence to this group of films. Sometimes these concepts are extremely useful in enhancing our understanding and appreciation of particular films. Sometimes they produce quite tricky critical problems. For example, genres tend to splinter into sub-genres and change over time while a national cinema study has to keep an eye on borders quite literally, as ideas and talents and professional practices circulate globally.

In some respects it may be helpful to approach the study of a film movement as similar to the study of a genre and a national cinema. However, a film movement represents a looser collection of films than those looking for clarity and precision would hope for.

High-End

One way in which the discourse of film studies strongly differentiates a film movement from a genre study comes from what might be described as the ‘high-end’ status of film movements. Film movements have been identified, defined, de-limited as part of the process of constructing film history. They offer significant milestones in the ‘story’ of film with the implication that their influences, either direct or indirect, continue. As such they are given considerable importance and are the subject of serious academic study. Film movements have contributed to the enhanced artistic and academic status for film – indeed, the very idea of a definable ‘movement’ encourages the relocation of film studies within art history.

Film movements are associated with film art and, therefore, with film artists. If, as already stated, film movements are closely related to national cinema study, they are also closely associated with another of the cornerstone ‘umbrella’ critical approaches of film studies: auteurism. Directors of great originality and boldness of vision, capable of doing something new, taking the medium in a fresh direction, often as a revolt against existing filmmaking practice, are commonly associated with film movements. [And, as a footnote here, this ‘something new’ was often made possible because of developments in film technology.]

This orientation of film movements toward ‘art’ is one reason for the exclusion of very significant developments that occur with the ‘industrial’ system of production, most obviously Hollywood. This is actually quite problematic. For example, can Hollywood be seen to have contained discrete film movements within its history – for example, the MGM Musical under Arthur Freed? In practice film movements have most often been included in an “alternatives to Hollywood” discourse. This seems less and less sustainable given the rich, creative dialogue between different kinds of film practice that characterises contemporary cinema. This specification does challenge convention by proposing American Silent Comedy as a movement.

Manifestoes and Collectives

Arthur Freed didn’t write an artistic manifesto and this is a further peculiarity of film movements: they often have manifestoes, or a body of writing, some theoretical, some political, some aesthetic, which can be described as para-text. These are more likely to have been written by critics and cultural thinkers associated with the movement than by filmmakers themselves, Sergei Eisenstein being the stand-out exception. The most well-known of more recent film movement manifestos was Dogme produced by Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995, but this is interesting precisely because it was such a

self-conscious act. Usually, the manifesto of a film movement has a much more organic relationship with the films themselves, reflecting a process of experimentation in which filmmakers were part of a broader cultural and intellectual movement. Indeed some film movements have been wonderful examples of the symbiotic relationship between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.

There is often a sense of a ‘collective’ of filmmakers and thinkers who all know each other and influence one another’s work. This is certainly the case with Soviet, German and American film in the 1920s.

Towards a Definition

So are we now able to define a film movement? We have established that:

- as a critical approach a ‘film movement’ discourse has broad similarities with other ‘umbrella’ critical approaches, most notably genre and national cinema studies
- a film movement is associated with film art and film artists (auteurs) reflecting the fact that ‘movement’ is a term taken from art history
- these artists form a loose collective, knowing and influencing one another’s work and sharing a common sensitivity to the particular historical time and physical place in which they are working
- a film movement enjoys high status within film studies, providing an art cinema discourse to parallel and oppose that of popular cinema.

Definition:

A film movement is constituted by a distinctive body of films, each directed by an auteur. It is often further constituted by a related body of critical or theoretical writing. A film movement will be of significance in film history because of thematic and formal / stylistic innovations which characterise the films and which are, most often, a response to wider political, social or cultural changes at a particular time and in a particular place.

Footnote: A single film study

All of the above indicates that the study of a film movement – like a genre or auteur or national cinema study – requires an overview of several films in order to establish common (and contrasting) characteristics. In the A Level Film Studies specification learners may study only one film exemplifying that movement. This means that a list of features characterising the film movement is most likely to be ‘taken off the shelf’ leading to an inductive rather than a deductive approach.

The film movement as a whole becomes contextual knowledge in the study of the particular film and in preparing for assessment.

3. Which movement?

Strike

This film is contextualised within the Soviet Montage / Constructivist Movement

Man with a Movie Camera and A Propos de Nice

These films are contextualised within the Soviet Montage / Constructivist Movement. Additionally both are examples of ‘city symphonies’, a poetic documentary genre that

flourished in the last few years of Silent Cinema.

Sunrise

This film is contextualised within German Expressionism. The film is made more interesting by its marriage of German Expressionism with elements of Hollywood Melodrama.

Spione

This film is contextualised within German Expressionism. This film also includes Soviet and American film characteristics, demonstrating the porous edges of film movements within the international exchange of film ideas and techniques.

Keaton Shorts

This film is contextualised within American Silent Comedy.

See Eduqas guidesheets for further notes on individual case study films.

4. Film movements of the 1920s and modernism

Modernism

The first 20 years of the history of filmmaking, from 1895, can be characterised as a period of constant experimentation. From around 1915 the institutional mode began to establish itself in Hollywood through the refinement of continuity editing, and the successful adaptation from popular theatre of the three-act melodrama narrative model. In parts of Europe these experiments into the nature and possibilities of film continued through the 1920s, an artistic restlessness that can partly be explained as a coming to terms with the 1914-18 World War and its political and social aftermath.

What unites these different movements of the 1920s is Modernism. There is a strong commitment to the machine, including the machinery of cinema, as a progressive force, promising to create a bold new future. Culture celebrates the invention of a whole new way of life; indeed it has been described as the period in which ‘modern’ life was invented. There is a looking forward, a sense of a new and different world under construction and this is experienced not only materially but also psychically.

What we can see, and in opposition to the rather precious idea of these films constituting ‘art movements’ is the idea that they are contributing to an international effort to understand through experimentation what is possible with the medium of cinema, an understanding that informs art cinema and popular cinema equally.

Modernism and Constructivism: Soviet Cinema of the 1920s

Sergei Eisenstein, the greatest filmmaker-as-theorist of all, uses his first feature, ***Strike***, as a laboratory experiment in the power of montage. However, we should be careful never to limit Soviet Montage to editing – and that’s why it is better to call this movement Constructivism which links developments in cinema to wider artistic innovations of the time. Constructivism celebrates the machine, including the human machine – with new theories of acting and physical movement based on exploring the mechanics of the human body and human communication. Dziga Vertov’s ***Man With a Movie Camera*** is just about the last word in this celebration of technology, constructivism and modernism. (For the record the linkage of *A Propos de Nice* with *A Man with a Movie Camera* is because Dziga

Vertov's brother, Boris Kaufman shot the French short and both films can be regarded as representing an art genre of the time, the 'city symphony' characterised by its creative use of montage.)

Modernism and Expressionism: German Cinema of the 1920s

The German Expressionist films with their characteristic lighting quite literally take a darker view of modern life, but ultimately still one that is driven by a fascination with the transformations brought about by modernity. Much more than Soviet Montage, German Expressionism left a deep mark on Hollywood and other forms of popular cinema – its thematic and aesthetic interests easily adapted to genre cinema. Both the German Expressionist films available for study are also genre films. *Sunrise* is a very German film but the genre, melodrama, is very American, as are the performances. The director, F.W. Murnau and his crew had all just arrived in Hollywood from Berlin in 1927. This film is hugely significant in demonstrating the willingness of Hollywood to incorporate European innovation and hugely significant in highlighting just what level of stylistic and technological innovation the Germans were bringing to mature silent cinema. The other option is *Spione* which marries German Expressionism and its evolution into the "New Objectivity" (Neue Sachlichkeit) to the thriller – indeed to a film often regarded as the very first spy movie. Here again modernity and the technologies of modern life are at the centre. What both these German films demonstrate is the flexibility of a film movement, it's energy in engaging so dynamically with popular genre cinema.

Modernism and American Silent Comedy

The international exploration of the medium of film in the 1920s is often assumed to be the preserve of European films – with Hollywood importing and adapting constructivist and expressionist techniques. In practice this experimentation worked both ways. One of the major contributions of American popular cinema to European art cinema, especially in the Soviet Union, was Silent Comedy.

In case there is any doubt, let us locate American Silent Comedy within the terms of the definition of a film movement offered at the end of Part 1. American Silent Comedy produced a significant body of work, now regarded as of great importance in film history. The key exponents of this movement (Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd) all knew each other, influenced each other's work and were always experimental, pushing at the boundaries of film form and film technology. In particular American Silent Comedy further illustrates the preoccupation with modernism in the film movements of this period. In this latter case this can be seen in a similar interest to the Soviet constructivists in the machinery of cinema and the mechanics of acting. Just as German Expressionism was repeatedly engaging with genre cinema, so American Silent Comedy marries formal experimentation from popular culture, in particular vaudeville, exploiting the possibilities of cutting edge cinema technology available in Southern California in the 1920s. It is possible to place American Silent Comedy in the wider frame of the 1920s avant-garde, with particular connections to the emerging art forms of Dadaism and Surrealism in Europe, as well as its strong impact on Eisenstein and others in the Soviet Union. (A footnote: the only film Samuel Beckett made – called "Film" – was with Buster Keaton.)

5. Teaching silent cinema

Choosing the film

Each of the films offer an amazing cinematic experience. For sure, some are more accessible than others and some may better suit a particular cohort of learners.

If we consider that the heart of the learning experience in A level Film Studies is the students' own creative work, then one overriding criterion in choosing films is which film will most excite, most challenge, most inspire in relation to your students thinking of themselves as potential filmmakers or screenwriters. The 1920s is often referred to as the decade of 'mature' silent cinema; a period after the initial experimentation to establish the fundamentals of the new medium. With these fundamentals in place, filmmakers moved toward an ever-greater commitment to the idea of film as a visual medium. The lack of dialogue, far from being considered a deficit, was rather regarded as the great strength, precisely what differentiated it from theatre and what gave it its artistic credibility. For students, any of these films can teach so much about how to communicate visually and engage the spectator by visual means.

For sure, there has to be some historical empathy in teaching and learning about the Silent Cinema film. For example, students need to appreciate the amazing level of ambition of filmmakers in relation to their technological resources in the 1920s. See also what is said below about adapting as modern spectators to the pleasures of films without recorded dialogue.

What to teach?

Summary of Areas of study to be examined for Silent Cinema

Core

- key elements of film form
- representation and aesthetics
- context

Specialist

- Realist / Expressive Critical Debate

Teaching the Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film

The core area is common to all sections of the Specification and so requires little elaboration here, except to say that silent cinema does possess some distinctive 'core' characteristics. Among the key elements of film, mise-en-scène and editing stand out as central tools in enabling the silent film to communicate story, message and emotion visually. In cinematography, the very fact that camera technology is still in its relative infancy means that there was much remarkable improvisation, pushing the available technology to its limits. Perhaps the most challenging of the core areas is performance; there can be much intolerance at first to acting which is expressive and exaggeratedly theatrical rather than naturalistic. Placed within the context of a study of visual communication, at least a reason can be found for this performance style. However, there are more complex and specific areas of study around performance depending on whether the chosen film reflects the typeage and 'mechanisation' of Soviet films, the expressiveness

of German film or the brilliance of the gag in American silent comedy.

As was noted in the introduction, it's important to remember that silent film was never silent – it just didn't have recorded speech. The study of sound in a silent film should not be ignored!

Teaching the Core Study Areas: Representation and Aesthetics

Whichever film is chosen, there are interesting questions to explore about how the approach to representation is distinctive to silent film in general and to the specific film movement in particular. For example, Eisenstein explored the possibility of entirely non-naturalist representation with his use of typage. Keaton's screen persona involves a human being with qualities that are comic precisely to the extent that gesture and behaviour in response to dramatic events seems so far removed from any 'natural' expectations we may have.

There is an almost unbreakable link between representation and aesthetics in these films. The representational strategy directly reflects the overall aesthetic idea of the film be it through distinctive uses of editing, design or performance. There is a unity of purpose in each of these films and so each film has a very strong film identity.

Teaching the Core Study Areas: Contextual Study

Context has already been covered at length earlier. Nevertheless it is worth reminding ourselves that the key contextual area of study is the film movement itself. This will in turn provide particular focus for the study of institutional, technological, social and cultural contexts under the 'umbrella' of the film movement.

Teaching the Specialist Study Area: Critical Debate

A helpful approach to this critical debate is to locate it within the 'core' study of film as a medium of representation and simultaneously as an aesthetic medium. How realistic is a film world is a question of representation; how expressive is its use of film form is a question of aesthetics.

This debate centres on whether film should be a 'realist' or an 'expressive' medium. In other words, should a filmmaker be concerned with representing the world as is, for example in the manner of a documentary, or should a filmmaker regard the medium as a creative one in which the everyday world is transformed? In film history this divide is traced all the way back to the period around 1895-1902 in France. The Lumières Brothers conceived of this new invention as one for recording found reality and in so doing encouraging the spectator to gaze freshly on a world that might otherwise be taken for granted. By contrast George Méliès made fantasy films of great imagination and creativity.

A moral dimension to this opposition was introduced in the 1940s by the French critic André Bazin. In supporting Italian Neo-Realism, he declared that this film movement represents the 'true calling' of cinema which is to enable us to look intently and deeply into the ordinary world around us, represented by the filmmaker in an unadorned documentary style. By contrast he denounced the flamboyantly 'expressive' Soviet and German cinemas of the 1920s, seeing their high-blown visual rhetoric as a betrayal of this true calling of cinema. While it may be easy to take-on Bazin's argument, his writing is the first significant

critique of the major silent cinema movements of the 1920s so we need to take it seriously if only for that reason.

	Realism	Expressionism
Representation	As unmediated as possible	Highly mediated
Visual Aesthetic	Simple	Highly constructed
Principle	Respect / Truth	Manipulation
Intent	Spectator reflection	Spectator 'agitation'

As a very (over-simplified) summary of the opposition we can consider the following:

Now as a debate, it is possible to think that this doesn't really get out of the starting blocks. Much film and media studies theory is based on assumptions that, of course, film is highly mediated, constructed, manipulative, etc. And more recently these 'qualities' of film have been explored less in negative terms and more in terms of how they are central to what audiences find pleasurable and what attracts creative people to want to use the film medium to precisely 'express' themselves.

However, Bazin's intervention can be seen as a very useful way of calling 'time out' on our assumptions about what a film is and what it should be. There is surely a place for the kind of 'slow' cinema that enables us to reflect on the world, to be more attentive to the ordinary. More particularly, Bazin was bothered by the capacity of film for propagandist purposes, especially with Soviet cinema, and more broadly with the manipulation of audience emotions – which is the case with both Soviet and German films of the 1920s.

The debate is also both relevant and important because many of the techniques developed in Soviet and German films in the 1920s became commonplace, part of the repertoire of the filmmakers. At the least Bazin asks us to reflect consciously on these tendencies in film which we might otherwise take for granted.

As a footnote Keaton's work provides a fascinating case study. Strictly speaking his work is realist – he films the reality that happens in front of the camera. However, this 'reality' is a seemingly endless series of comic gags, sometimes including unimaginably dangerous stunts. Where does this lie on a realist / expressionist spectrum?

An effective way to explore the 'real' and the expressive' in your chosen silent film is by looking at the shot and the edit:

The shot: To what extent is it a shot of 'found' reality.
 To what extent is the shot 'constructed' (by lighting, camera position, decorative mise-en-scene, etc.
 Is the shot held long enough for us to reflect on what we are shown?

The edit: To what extent is editing at the service of 'found' reality?

To what extent is editing used expressively, driving both the cognitive and affective response of the spectator?

In practice you will find that a highly constructed, highly expressive film may still have, at the level of the shot, a commitment to realism.

In teaching this critical debate, the emphasis should not be on taking sides, of arguing for or against Bazin, for or against the very principles of, say, Soviet Montage. But neither should it be taught simply as an historical ‘fact’ that is interesting but of little real relevance today. It is suggested that contact with this debate will sensitize students, helping them to reflect more on their own preferences in filmmaking and the reasons for those preferences. It is possible that exposure to this debate will impact on the students’ own creative work as they reflect on their own identities as film practitioners, whether making films or writing scripts.

The 30 minute exam: exam technique

All the teaching and learning for this topic will come down to a question (from a choice of two) which must be answered in approximately 30 minutes. Your students need to be able to identify, describe and analyse relevant detail from the film very efficiently. Contextual knowledge needs to be used only when contributing directly to an answer to the given question. All references need to be precise and to the point. A ‘position’ in relation to any critical debate (for example in response to a “How far is ...” type question) needs to be established immediately in a brief acknowledgment of the question and this position needs to be consciously refined through the discussion and accompanying examples that follow. Practice will be essential to ensure your students not only complete their answer in the time allocated but feel satisfied that they have used their (considerable) learning to maximum effect.

The questions on the sample exam paper are:

(a) Discuss how far your chosen film or films reflect aesthetic qualities associated with a particular film movement.

Or

(b) Discuss how far your chosen film or films reflect cultural contexts associated with a particular film movement.

Assessment of understanding in this section may also require students to:

- relate the chosen film to the realist / expressionist critical debate.
- explore the significance of a particular key element of film, such as editing, in the film and how far this reflects the film movement more generally.
- consider how far specific issues relating to silent cinema, such as the absence of recorded speech, are significant in explaining particular creative practices in the chosen film / film movement.

Footnote: A rule about short films

If the compilation of Keaton Shorts is chosen for study, students might not refer to all four films as we are looking for an understanding of the film movement. Given the 30 minute time frame for answering, a reasonable expectation is that detailed focus will fall on two of the films. Students may provide further examples to reinforce their understanding but will not be penalised if they don't refer to all four films.

If *A Man with a Movie Camera* is chosen, then clearly it, not *A Propos de Nice* must be the principle film. A reasonable expectation is that in using *A Propos de Nice* as a supplementary film, at least one detailed example from that film will be used either to reinforce a point being made about *Man With a Movie Camera* or to provide a contrast with that film.