

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

Section B: American Film Since 2005

What is SPECTATORSHIP? Teacher Guide



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Teacher Guide

Two films will be studied, one chosen from **group 1** and one chosen from **group 2**:

Group 1: Mainstream film

- No Country for Old Men (Coen Brothers, 2007), 15
- Inception (Nolan, 2010), 12A
- Selma (Duvernay, 2014), 12A
- Carol (Haynes, 2015), 15
- La La Land (Chazelle, 2016), 12A

Group 2: Contemporary independent film (produced after 2010)

- Winter's Bone (Granik, 2010), 15
- Frances Ha! (Baumbach, 2012), 15
- Beasts of the Southern Wild (Zeitlin, 2012), 12A
- Boyhood (Linklater, 2015), 15
- Captain Fantastic (Ross, 2015), 15

Specialist Study Areas

The Specialist Study Area for this Section is **Spectatorship** and **Ideology**. This Study Guide will introduce the concepts and debates around these topics, and introduce key ideas using a range of films from the specification. It then will discuss these ideas using *Inception* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as case studies. There will be activities that encourage students on their own viewing experiences as they watch the focus films.

Area 4 Spectatorship

A central part of Film Studies is exploring how films address individual spectators through, for example, particular shots, editing, music and performance as well as narrative and genre to engage their interest and emotions. Films are generally constructed to provide the spectator with a particular viewing position, most often aligning the spectator with a specific character or point of view. This in turn raises questions about how 'determined' spectators' responses to a film are and how far spectators can and do resist the position they are given. Learners will thus consider how far spectators are 'passive' or 'active' in their responses to film and how social and cultural factors, as well as the specific viewing conditions in which a film is seen, influence spectators' responses.

Learners study the following:

- how the spectator has been conceived both as 'passive' and 'active' in the act of film viewing
- how the spectator is in dynamic interaction with film narrative and film features designed to generate response
- reasons for the uniformity or diversity of response by different spectators
- the impact of different viewing conditions on spectator response and the analysis of narrative, visual, musical, performance, genre and auteur cues in relation to spectator response
- the possibility of preferred, negotiated, oppositional and aberrant 'readings' of film.

In this guide we will look at a range of theories about how we watch films. These will be divided into those that assume a '**passive**' spectator and those that assume them to be '**active**'.

Introduction - How do you watch films?

Task: Ask students to interview each other and answer the following questions:

- What was a scene in a film that you had a strong response to? Was it emotional? Was it intellectual? Was it visceral (i.e. disgust, jump-scare, 'edge-of-seat' excitement)?
- What caused that response? Do you think your response was personal to you, or do you think the filmmaker deliberately 'triggered' this response?
- Did you identify with characters? If so why? Did this contribute to your response?
- Was the response caused by the narrative (plot/story reveals information, builds suspense, creates mystery)?
- Was it the themes and issue being explored? How does this relate to you?
- Was it the techniques the filmmaker used? Use of camera, music, editing etc.
- Where did you view the film? Did the environment influence your response to the film?
- Did other people respond similarly to the film? Similar responses? Different responses?
- If different - do you have any ideas why they responded differently?

Now discuss the various answers students gave.

Big Questions:

- *What does this tell us about audiences - what stimulates them?*
- *How do filmmakers create deliberate effects?*
- *How much is audience response personal and individual?*

Spectatorship Theories - The 'Passive' Spectator

The following theories all suggest that the audiences for films respond in a fixed way that has been created by the techniques of the filmmakers. They group audiences into 'formation' or 'demographic' (e.g. by age, ethnicity, gender) and seek to explain why films have a particular effect on one or more audience. This isn't to say they are simplistic - many seek to explain using complex psychological ideas why people enjoy films.

Mode and Environment of Viewing

Task: *Think about your own film viewing experience: Where do you mostly watch films? Why do you choose that environment? What encourages you to engage with the film? What distractions are there?*

- The Frankfurt School (1920s-30s Germany) were amongst the first to analyse the media. They said the cinema created the illusion of *proximity* - the combination of sound and a very large moving image, experienced in a darkened room, with attention focused on the screen made the audience feel they were *in* the scene.

Task: *Read this article about early cinema and audience reaction.*

<https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/first-film-audiences-panic-footage-train.htm>

Why do you think the audience responded in this fashion?

- Christopher Metz adapted the psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Lacan - he said that the cinema screen acts as a 'mirror' to the spectator. Because we are focused entirely on the action on the screen, we create an idealised character on the screen (more on this later). Laura Mulvey said that the darkness of the cinema creates a sense of privacy and alleviates the guilt of taking voyeuristic pleasure at watching.

Psychoanalytic and Feminist Film Theory

- Psychoanalytic film theorists take a cue from the Surrealists who believed that cinema (with its techniques to distort reality with slow motion, superimposition etc.) was the closest art form to dreaming. Just like a psychoanalyst can mine beneath the surface of dreams and uncover hidden meanings and desires, so they believed they could reveal the 'subconscious' of the film: its 'subtext'.
- Christopher Metz said the reason people enjoy films is because they both recognise (identify with) a character on the screen... but the imperfect, distorted reality of the film also creates an idealised, impossible character. Our experience of film satisfies us because we are able to immerse ourselves in the sensory world of this idealised self.
- Because of this, Metz believed the spectator was 'constructed' by the film itself.

Task: *What film character do you most admire? What qualities do you like? What similarities do you have with this character? What differences? What are some examples of the character behaving in an exaggerated or unrealistically impressive way? Why is this unrealistic? Why do you enjoy it regardless?*

Some ideas:

James Bond is a character many male audiences admire. If they are British, then the audience identify with his gender, his nationality. They may also identify with the values he upholds. However, many few spectators are as strong, skilled, clever and efficient as Bond. Even though Bond is unrealistically brave (and sexually successful) Metz would say the audience identify with the character enough to empathise with them... and therefore getting the thrill of being immersed in the sensory experiences of this 'idealised mirror self'. For a short time, male audiences feel like they *are* Bond, they live out a 'wish fulfilment fantasy', and this gives them pleasure.

Discussion: What problems can you see with this theory?

Some ideas:

This theory, like all those that posit a passive audience, assumes that a film has only one, fixed possible response, designed by the filmmakers to manipulate the audience and give them 'fantasy' pleasures. The above example makes sense if the audience are all (white, heterosexual) males - but are there some men who would respond differently? What happens if you're a male viewer who hates Bond? How would women spectators respond? What about LGBTQ viewers?

- Laura Mulvey also focused on male spectators and proposed the idea of the 'male gaze'. This is the idea that films are "made by men, for men" and produce a patriarchal view of the world. In the 'male gaze', male characters are active, capable protagonists, whilst women are portrayed as passive, incapable, and sexually available. Mulvey said "men act, women appear."
- The male audience, she said, enjoys this because they 'narcissistically identify' with strong, idealised male characters and feel they can sexually own (by 'voyeuristically objectifying') the passive, weak and eroticised female characters.
- The combination of sexual desire (libido) and power (thanatos) over the female characters "reinforces the neurotic male sexual ego" i.e. makes them feel sexually confident and strong.

Task: Watch the scene in *Live and Let Die* (*Hamilton*, 1973) - 29:28 - 38:20
 Why might Mulvey say Rosie is 'voyeuristically objectified'? Use the chart below to spot examples of female passivity and sexual availability. Why would a male audience (according to Mulvey) enjoy this?

Passive Female Traits	Example from <i>Live and Let Die</i>
Physically weak	
Insecure	
Scantily dressed	
Easily scared	
Hysterical	
Sexually passive	

Why might Mulvey say the male spectator 'narcissistically identifies' with Bond? Use the chart below to spot examples of idealised masculine traits - where does Bond display them? Why would Mulvey say a male audience would enjoy this?

Idealised masculine traits	Example from <i>Live and Let Die</i>
Authoritative / assertive	
Wealthy	
Cool and calm (when in danger)	
Technologically adept	
Brave	
Quick-thinking	
Physically strong	
Resourceful	
Sexually successful	

Discussion: What problems can you see with this theory?

Some ideas:

Similar to criticisms of Metz, Mulvey only discusses a male audience (that she also assumes is hetero-sexual). She doesn't really think about how a female or LGBTQ audience may respond to the sexual subtext she assumes all films contain. One surprising fact is that Mulvey didn't do any actual audience or psychological research - her theories are based on her own readings of selected Classical Hollywood films. She doesn't look at independent or world cinema, where there are often more empowered female characters. Nor does she look at films by female filmmakers, those with strong non-stereotypical female characters or those that sexually objectify the male body.

Task: *Can you think of any films you have seen that seem to 'prove' Mulvey's ideas about spectatorship? How were men portrayed? How were women portrayed? Why might this provide pleasure for a male spectator?*

What are some different interpretations of the film? How might female spectators respond?

Can you think of some films that seem to 'disprove' Mulvey's theories? How are women portrayed in an active, capable or non-sexualised way? How are men portrayed in a weaker or more vulnerable way?

Spectatorship Theories - the 'Active' Spectator

The following theories suggest a more complex relationship between text and reader. These suggest that the spectator's meaning and response to a film is much more individualised and influenced by personal experiences, values and social contexts. They also propose that spectators 'use' films for a range of psychological purposes and have can have a range of conflicting yet simultaneous responses.

Uses and Gratifications

- Blumler and Katz first proposed that audiences actively select media to use for their own benefits (as opposed to being passively manipulated)
- they identified a range of different 'uses' that offered specific pleasures (gratifications), that they grouped under: Education/Information, Personal Identification, Social Interaction, Escapism/Entertainment
- the '**Uses and Gratifications**' **Resource** sheet breaks these categories down in more detail/

Task: *Use the sheet to discuss in groups, examples of films that offer the specific uses and gratifications. Explain how they offer these pleasures.*

Multiple Spectating Selves

This theory proposes that when we watch a film, we do so from the perspective of many different selves, each of which gain a particular pleasure from the experience. They are:

- Social Self - gains satisfaction from having a similar response to other spectators, with similar values.
- Cultural Self - 'gets' references and meanings generated by the memory of other films, TV, news, etc.
- Private Self - generates personal and unique meanings based on personal memories.
- Desiring Self - brings un/conscious energies and responses that have little to do with surface content

Task: *Think about a film you know well. How could it provide pleasures for multiple 'spectating selves'? Use the chart below to help you identify specific content.*

Spectating Self	Film example + how does it appeal to that 'self'
Social Self	
Cultural Self	
Private Self	
Desiring Self	

Stuart Hall and 'Encoding/Decoding'

- Stuart Hall was part of *The Center For Contemporary Culture* (also known as the Birmingham School) who in the 1970s were amongst the first Media Studies academics in the UK.
- He said audiences created meaning from a text in three main different ways.
- Firstly, the creator of the text 'encodes' an intended meaning.
- The 'reader' then 'decodes' the meaning. The 'preferred' meaning is the one intended by the author.
- But there may also be a 'negotiated' meaning - where the reader recognises the intended meaning but may not entirely believe or accept the message.
- There is also an 'oppositional' or 'aberrant' reading, where the viewer may deliberately reinterpret or mistake the meaning, creating a new message/response from the text.

Task: Watch the trailer for *Captain Fantastic* (Ross, 2015).

What do you think is the filmmakers 'encoded' and 'preferred' meaning?

What do you think might be the 'negotiated' meaning? What kind of spectator might create this meaning?

What might be an 'oppositional' meaning? What kind of spectator might create this meaning?

Some ideas:

The filmmakers have two equally dominant, but conflicting meanings. The first is that escape from 'boring' civilization and living on one's own terms in the wilderness is a wonderful and nourishing thing to do. The other is that contemporary urban life can offer - especially young people - opportunities a rural lifestyle cannot. A dominant message is that families - however unconventional - are a powerful and positive element in people's lives.

A 'negotiated' meaning might be that older generations don't understand the needs and values of younger generations. (Here the spectator has acknowledged the conflict in the film, and the clash between two lifestyles, but relocated the meaning to a different issue in the film).

An 'oppositional' meaning might be that Ben and his family are 'dirty hippies' and that the children are being raised in neglectful and unsanitary conditions. (The trailer portrays Ben's family and their lifestyle in a 'Utopian'; however, if the spectator has personal experience of a neglectful childhood, or of idealistic parents having a harmful impact on children they would 'decode' the images in the trailer in a completely different way.

David Chandler and the Gaze

Chandler identified a number of different ways that the 'gaze' is produced - and represented - within a film. There are some films that are 'self-reflexive' i.e. they draw attention to the fact we are watching a film. These challenge the spectator to reflect on their own spectatorship.

- Spectator's Gaze - the viewpoint of the camera, usually offering voyeuristic pleasure (we are watching someone's intimate life without them knowing we are watching)
- Intra-Diegetic - the characters look at each other (we empathise with their responses because of use of shot reverse-shot)
- Extra-diegetic - the characters looks directly at the camera, becoming aware that they are being watched (either by another character or the spectator)
- Camera's Gaze - the film reveals the 'mechanics of the gaze', reminding us we are watching a film
- 'Text-within-a text' - the characters are also watching/making a film, and for a time we watch the film they are also seeing or constructing.

Task: Watch one of your focus films. How does it provide pleasures via the way the ‘gaze’ is represented (according to Chandler)? Use the chart below to help you.

How is the ‘gaze’ represented?	Example + effect on spectator
Spectator’s Gaze	
Intra-Diegetic Gaze	
Extra-diegetic	
Camera’s Gaze	
‘Text-within-a-text’	

Some ideas from *Carol* (Haynes, 2015)

- Spectator’s Gaze - the viewpoint of the camera at the beginning of the film as it follows a very minor character and into the restaurant where he interrupts the protagonists; spectator enjoys the ability to ‘invisibly’ follow people and into their lives.
- Intra-Diegetic - the characters look at each other - the film is rich in unspoken communication (lots of lingering looks over cocktails!) The spectator enjoys being immersed in the rush of love and desire the characters are feeling; and the pleasure they get from looking at each other.
- Extra-diegetic - the characters looks directly at the camera - though no-one in *Carol* breaks the fourth wall (addressing the spectator directly), there are numerous instances of Carol catching Therese (and us) clandestinely watching her.
- Camera’s Gaze - the film reveals the ‘mechanics of the gaze’, reminding us we are watching a film - Therese is a photographer and this, combined with the flashback structure, reminds us that who we know as ‘Carol’ is someone filtered through Therese’s ‘gaze’.
- ‘Text-within-a text’ - the characters are also watching/making a film, and for a time we watch the film they are also seeing or constructing - this element isn’t included in *Carol*.