

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

COMPONENT 2

Experimental Film Teacher Resource GLOBAL FILMMAKING PERSPECTIVES



Experimental Film Teacher Resource

Component 2

Global filmmaking perspective

Section D: Experimental film

This is a single-study film where you will be required to study one of the following film options:

- *Vivre sa vie* (Godard, France, 1962)
- *Daisies* (Chytilova, Czechoslovakia, 1965) and *Saute ma ville* (Akerman, Belgium, 1968)
- *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, US, 1994)
- *Fallen Angels* (Wong, Hong Kong, 1995)
- *Timecode* (Figgis, US, 2000)

The films are studied in relation to the following core study areas:

- **Area 1: The key elements of film form; cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, sound and performance.**
- **Area 2: Meaning and response; how film functions as both a medium of representation and as an aesthetic medium.**
- **Area 3: The contexts of film: social, cultural, political, historical and institutional, including production.**

Specialist studies

Learners will be required to approach an experimental film in terms of two specialist studies.

1. Narrative and alternative forms of narrative

Alternatives to mainstream narrative film have been present throughout cinema history. The choice here is of films from 1960 to 2000. Over this period New Waves have often challenged the mainstream filmmaking.

2. Auteur

This approach sees filmmakers as creative decision-makers, responsible for the selection and construction process in films which experiment with narrative and film form.

Learners should consider what 'signatures' can be identified for a film as a result of a more experimental approach to the filmmaking process.

Introduction

This resource will offer a number of ways into teaching Experimental Film. It is directly linked to what is outlined in the specification and how this area is going to be assessed in the examination.

The structure of this resource will be based around lesson tasks and ideas that will supplement the delivery of this part of the course.

1. What is an experimental film?
This will offer some introductory tasks to the concept of experimental film.
2. Specialist studies – looking at and applying narrative and auteur
This will give a sense of how to apply narrative and auteur to the experimental films chosen in the specification
3. Case Study – *Vivre sa vie* (Godard, 1963)
This unit will examine ways of teaching this film by focusing on key aspects of the core and specialist areas of study. These methods can be easily transferable to the other films in this section.

What is an experimental film?

An experimental film challenges the spectator. Students may find experimental film strange or distancing. Their response to the film can form initial discussions about how the film challenged their usual comfortable spectator positioning.

Task: Personal responses

This is an individual task. Answer the following questions:

- How would you define mainstream or conventional films? Consider narrative and the pleasures offered by the familiarity of mainstream films.
- Have you seen any examples of films which are unconventional and in some way experimental? Make a list of films you have seen which you consider to be experimental.
- Choose two films you listed as experimental. What was experimental about these?

Possible responses:

- Students might refer to the Hollywood films they have studied on the course. They might discuss how mainstream films are easier to watch and made for primarily entertainment purposes.
- Students could discuss the use of conventional narratives, with a beginning, middle and end. Conflicts and questions are resolved at the end of the film.
- They might discuss how mainstream films use classical filmic techniques such as shot/reverse shot, 180° rule, continuity editing and use of music to guide and heighten emotion.
- Students may refer to examples of independent films which may offer some challenges to mainstream Hollywood films. They may be most familiar with the films of directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Wes Anderson. You might discuss how experimental these films are and what they have in common with mainstream cinema. They may also refer to some of the more experimental short films they have studied in preparation for their practical coursework.

If you have not seen many experimental films, suggest reasons why this might be the case.

Possible responses:

- Dominance of Hollywood and mainstream films
- Lack of exposure to experimental films
- Little publicity for experimental films
- Preferential treatment for mainstream narrative films
- Experimental films may be seen as 'difficult'.

Task: Motivations for making experimental films and exhibition of them

In small groups of two or three, discuss the following questions:

- Why might filmmakers choose to make experimental films?
- Where are you most likely to encounter experimental films?
- Encourage students to think about political motivations, using an ideological critical approach. A filmmaker may wish to deliberately provoke or challenge the spectator. An experimental filmmaker may wish to deliberately break the rules of classical filmmaking to challenge the spectator in new ways and create a more active spectatorship.
- Students may discuss the art-house/independent cinema as a venue where experimental films are most likely to be screened. You might tie this into discussions about the importance of cultural capital, as spectators are often cineliterate and enjoy films which are challenging and provoke discussion. Students may also consider the art gallery as a space for screening more challenging art films.

Task: Experiencing an experimental film

Watch a sequence from an experimental film listed on the specification. After watching the sequence, answer the following questions:

- How does the film differ in form from the Hollywood films you have studied so far?
- How does your experience of watching the film differ to your experience of watching mainstream films?

Teacher guidance: Consider using the film you have selected for study. You could show students the opening sequence

to gauge their initial reactions and begin discussions on the nature of experimental film. Responses will depend on the film screened. Students may discuss use of long takes (e.g. *Pulp Fiction*, *Vivre sa vie*), use of split screen (*Timecode*), abstract or surreal imagery (e.g. *Daisies*) or films which are highly stylised and draw attention to their stylistic devices (e.g. *Fallen Angels*). You could then screen the opening sequence of a chosen Hollywood film as a point of contrast. This enables students to revise their Hollywood film and consider Hollywood and experimental film as distinctive modes of filmmaking.

Task: Discussion – defining experimental film

Look at the following terms:

Avant-garde
 Artistic
 Personal
 Non-conformist
 Playful
 Self-reflexive

Outline what these terms mean in relation to experimental film. You may have to research some unfamiliar terms.

Teacher guidance and possible responses

- Encourage students to research the meaning of these terms. This task can be undertaken in a number of ways. You might split students into small groups and give each group a different term to define, then ask each group to feed back to the whole group. Alternatively, you can set this as an individual or paired task and ask students to define all the terms.
- Avant-garde – a French term literally meaning ‘advance guard’. It refers to films which are not inhibited by the rules of classical form and narrative. These are experimental films, often made outside of major studios by artists.
- Artistic – a filmmaker who is artistic has a ‘natural creative skill’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Artistic films may be made for their authentic personal or political expression rather than for profit.
- Personal – an auteur may make a film which is personal in some way to their life and philosophy. Their body of films may possess a personal vision.
- Non-conformist – filmmakers who may deliberately break rules. They may be seen as ‘rebels’, ‘mavericks’ or ‘outsiders’. They may belong to a wider movement or new wave which aims to challenge the mainstream,
- Playful – synonyms include mischievous, comical, light-hearted. Experimental filmmakers may deliberately ‘play’ with film form and narrative. *Daisies* and *Pulp Fiction* are highly playful and at times humorous films.
- Self-reflexive – films which refer to their own artificiality. They are self-aware. Filmmakers draw your attention to filmic devices. Characters might break the fourth wall or refer to other films.

Return to these terms after screening your chosen experimental film. How many of these apply to your chosen film?

Specialist study areas: Narrative and auteur

Directors of experimental films often have a high degree of control over the film and may not necessarily be working for a major studio. The film is their personal vision.

Task: Recap auteur study

Look back at your notes on auteur from your Hollywood comparison study. In small groups, discuss the following questions then feed your responses back to the whole class:

- Define auteur
- To what extent is Hollywood studio filmmaking more of a collaboration?
- Can you think of auteurs who work in Hollywood yet still create personal films and have a distinct auteur trademark?
- Do you think that working outside of a large studio and producing more experimental films may give a director more freedom?

Teacher guidance: Consider the development of the auteur theory from Cahiers du Cinema to Andrew Sarris' 1962 essay, 'Notes on the Auteur'. Consider how experimental film may be much more personal to the director than the Hollywood films students have studied.

Possible responses:

- An auteur is a filmmaker with a particular trademark or personal vision evident across their body of films.
- Hollywood studio filmmaking is collaborative, although auteurs such as Hitchcock did work within a Hollywood studio system.
- Students may discuss directors such as Tarantino or some of the 'indie' auteurs such as the Coen brothers and Wes Anderson,
- Students may argue that working outside of a studio can give more freedom, although there are obvious budget constraints in independent production. Students might then consider how budget constraints may encourage more experimental filmmaking and perhaps a more realist mode of filmmaking, using handheld cameras, real locations and natural lighting.

Research task: Auteur

In your own time, research the director of your chosen experimental film. Write a short report on your experimental director based on the following questions:

- What are the director's auteur trademarks?
- What are the director's key motivations when making experimental films?
- Who does the director collaborate with (e.g. actors, editor, cinematographer)? What do key collaborators contribute to the overall aesthetic of the director's films?

Teacher guidance: This task will help prepare students for their screening of your chosen experimental film. They should be able to identify auteur trademarks and the collaborative nature of filmmaking as the director may work with some of the same personnel. This task can be set as a homework task, encouraging students to conduct their own research. Encourage students to use sources other than Wikipedia and personal blogs and instead use text books, online documentaries and reliable web sources such as Senses of cinema, Film studies for free, The Guardian, The Criterion Collection and Film Education.

Narrative

Experimental filmmakers may explore experiences and identities in ways not possible or restricted by conventional narrative forms. Experimental films are therefore free from the constraints and limitations of conventional form and narrative.

Teacher guidance: Each film on this list experiments with narrative. You might begin this unit by revisiting narrative from the British cinema two-film study. Ask students to consider the narrative structures of more conventional films. You can then use this as a starting point for discussing how your chosen experimental film challenges and subverts conventional narratives.

Task: Read the key points from David Bordwell's 1979 essay 'Art cinema as a mode of practice'. This will help prepare you with what to expect of an experimental film.

The full essay is available online: <http://academic.uprm.edu/mleonard/theorydocs/readings/Bordwell.pdf>

David Bordwell identifies the following characteristics of art cinema:

- Narratives are explicitly against the classical narrative mode. Art films are characterised by looser narratives and looser sense of cause and effect. Narratives have a drifting, episodic quality
- A realistic cinema with use of real locations
- Psychologically complex characters dealing with real problems
- Characters may lack defined desires and goals
- A cinema of reaction rather than action – focus on psychological effects and their causes
- May have a documentary factuality and/or an intense psychological subjectivity
- Violations of classical film time and space – e.g. jump cuts, plot manipulations of story order
- Stylistic devices such as the long take, the moving camera and deep focus may be employed

- Foregrounding of the film’s author/auteur – director has creative freedom
- The viewer expects stylistic signatures rather than order in the narrative
- Viewers encounter the film and auteur through film festivals, essays, reviews, film education
- Auteur signatures manifest through violations of classical cinema
- An ambiguous cinema, reflecting character ambiguity, the author’s signature and “life’s untidiness”

What does this list suggest about how narratives of experimental films differ from classical narratives? How many of these characteristics apply to your chosen experimental film (apply these after the screening of your experimental film)?

Teacher guidance: David Bordwell’s essay is useful in helping students to understand the differences between experimental film narratives and characterisation and classical narratives. This should help guide students in their understanding of narrative when viewing their experimental film. You can revisit this list with students after the screening and see how these apply to their film. You can ask students to give specific examples from the film as evidence for the characteristics which apply.