

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

COMPONENT 2

Introduction to Film Movements: Silent Cinema Teacher Resource

FILM MOVEMENTS – SILENT CINEMA



**Introduction to Film Movements:
Silent Cinema Teacher Resource
Component 2: Global filmmaking perspectives
Section C: Film movements – silent cinema**

One of the following film options will be studied:

One Week (1920), The Scarecrow (1920), The ‘High Sign’ (1921) and Cops (1922), (Keaton, US)
Strike (Eisenstein, USSR, 1924)
Sunrise (Murnau, US, 1927)
Spies (Lang, Germany, 1928)
Man with a movie camera (Vertov, USSR, 1928), and A propos de Nice (Vigo, France, 1930)

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

- **Area 1: The key elements of film form; cinematography, mise-en-scène, 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 a silent film in terms of one specialist study:

Debate 1: The realist and the expressive

In the 1940s, the French film critic André Bazin set in motion a major debate when he argued that both German Expressionist and Soviet Montage filmmaking went against what he saw as the ‘realist’ calling of cinema. This opposition between the realist and the expressive has informed thinking about film from the beginnings of cinema when the documentary realism of the Lumière brothers was set in opposition to the fantasy films of Méliès.

Introduction:

This resource will offer you suggestions for teaching silent cinema which will be directly linked into what is outlined in the specification and how the 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: An introduction to the study of silent cinema
This will offer some introductory tasks to the study of silent cinema in relation to the core elements of film.
- 2: Specialist study area – applying Debate 1: The realist and the expressive to silent cinema
This section will give suggestions for teaching realism and expressionism and ways in which students can apply this to the silent film/s set for study.
- 3: Case study – Sunrise (Murnau, 1927)
This unit will examine ways of teaching Sunrise by focusing on the core and specialist areas of study. These methods are transferable to other silent films in this section.

Studying silent cinema

Task 1: Personal responses

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- Have you ever seen a silent film?
- If so, what films have you seen and what was memorable/interesting about them?
- How did you experience these films (e.g. at the cinema with live music or online)?

Possible responses and teacher guidance:

- Very few students will have seen a feature length silent film. Some may have heard of silent comic stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. They may have seen images or clips from German Expressionist films such as Metropolis or Nosferatu.
- Some students may have seen The Artist (Hazanavicius, 2011). This film is a good introduction to silent film. You might encourage students to watch The Artist as a homework task.
- Encourage students to think about how cinemagoers during the silent period would have experienced these films, e.g. in a cinema with live music.

Task 2: Understanding silent cinema

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- How do silent films differ from sound films?
- What are your expectations of watching a silent film?

Possible responses

- Some students may initially be hesitant about watching a silent film. They might expect the films to be difficult to watch for a number of reasons. They may expect silent films to feel slow and 'boring'. Students might be put off by the acting styles which they might see as overly-exaggerated and melodramatic. The age of the film might be a barrier – they might feel they will not relate to characters or understand the context of life in the early twentieth century.
- You can introduce silent cinema by giving students some knowledge and understanding about what to expect of a silent film. Explain to students that films of the 1920s are considered to be the great masterpieces of cinema. Encourage students to consider films of the 1920s as innovative, artistic and a distinct kind of cinema. This will ease them into the viewing experience and may allay some of their concerns.

Task 3: Telling a story with no dialogue

By the end of the silent period, filmmakers were adept at telling stories in purely visual terms, with sparse intertitles used only when necessary.

Task: Create a storyboard for a short clip from a sound film with dialogue (you may wish, for example, to use one of your contemporary Hollywood films). Storyboard the scene as a silent film, telling the story visually, with the use of one intertitle if necessary.

Teacher guidance: Students can produce a digital storyboard or an individual drawn storyboard. This will help equip students with the skills they require for their practical coursework. The task should enable students to understand how silent filmmakers could tell a story by purely visual means, with minimal dialogue.

Task: Sound and 'silent' cinema

Silent films were never silent. They were always accompanied by music. There is currently a resurgence in silent cinema and therefore opportunities for you to see silent films in a cinema with live music.

You will watch a short clip from a silent film with no musical accompaniment.

- In small groups, discuss what sound and music you would use to accompany the image and heighten emotion.

Teacher guidance: You might choose a short clip from the silent film(s) you have chosen to study. Ask students to think about what sounds they would use to accompany the image and heighten emotion. You could also develop this into a practical task (if time allows). If you have musical students, they may wish to compose and record sound for the clip or you could ask students to find suitable sound they would play with the image.

3. Critical debates: The realist and the expressive

This section explores this debate in relation to silent cinema. All the films in this section will utilise aspects of the realist and the expressive with a wide variety of results. The tasks here enable students to explore and understand the realist and the expressive in relation to their set film(s).

Task: Realist and expressionist modes of filmmaking

- What is your understanding of a realist mode of filmmaking? Can you think of examples of films that are realist?
- What is your understanding of an expressive mode of filmmaking? Can you think of examples of films that are expressive?
- Can you think of any films which merge the two traditions?

Possible responses:

- These questions should elicit a personal response and encourage students to think about different modes of filmmaking. They may reflect on their own filmmaking in their practical coursework. You should expect students to draw upon their own experiences of watching films which will commonly be contemporary Hollywood films.
- Students might consider realist films to be films which deal with the everyday, with characters in real, recognisable locations. They might, for instance, consider some British films to be more realist. In contrast, they might consider fantasy films and superhero films as more expressive.
- Students might discuss filmmaking devices such as long takes and handheld camera as a more realist mode of filmmaking. They may reflect on their study of documentary film here.

Task: Lumière and Méliès

Louis and Auguste Lumière and George Méliès are two key pioneers of early cinema. You will be shown four or five short Lumière films and one or two George Méliès films.

After watching the films, make notes based on the following questions:

- What are the differences between Méliès' and Lumière's films?
- What is realist about Lumière's films?
- What is expressionistic about Méliès' films?

Teacher guidance: Lumière's and Méliès' films are easily accessible on YouTube and DVD.

This six-minute compilation of Lumière's first films (1895) is worth screening and should give students a sense of Lumière's 'actuality' films: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nj0vEO4Q6s>

George Méliès films are longer so one or two films will suffice. We suggest you screen A trip to the moon (1902) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEQQefvfnk4> and/or The kingdom of the fairies (1903) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFZ6M3fr_FE or short sequences from both films.

This task should help expose students to silent film. As students' chosen silent film for study will be from the later period of the silent era, they should notice the changes and developments in cinema from the early period (1895–1905) to the late silent period (1920–1928).

Possible responses:

- Students might discuss how Méliès' films are staged almost like a theatre production with props and sets, in contrast to the Lumières who film people in outdoor, natural environments. The Lumière brothers used the camera as an instrument to record the world as it was. Their films are the beginnings of a realist, documentary cinema.
- Méliès demonstrated the possibilities of the camera to create tricks and defy the laws of the real world. His most famous short film, A trip to the moon (1902) is one of the first examples of science fiction cinema and

how cinema could be used to create fantasy worlds.

- Encourage students to think about the Lumières' films as some of the first films ever made. The idea of movement would fascinate early cinema spectators, such as the leaves rustling on the background in Feeding the baby and the train hurtling towards the camera in Arrival of a train at La Ciotat.

Extension task: In your own time, watch Hugo (Scorsese, 2011). This film is Martin Scorsese's love letter to silent cinema and George Méliès. Here you will learn about the life and work of Méliès and the development of cinema in the early period.

Teacher guidance: You might direct students to watch the film in their own time as a homework task, or screen the film in an enrichment group or cinema club (if you have one). You can use students' experiences of watching Hugo as a way to discuss the realist and expressive uses of film and the development of film language.