

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

COMPONENT 2

Global filmmaking perspectives

Section D: Film movements –

Experimental Film

TEACHER'S GUIDANCE NOTES

by Principal Examiner Patrick Phillips



Teacher's Guidance Notes on Film Movements (Experimental Film)

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A Level Component 2: Global filmmaking perspectives

Section D: Film Movements – Experimental Film

1. Experimental Film

What is an experimental film? The spectrum of possibilities is very wide. It can include experimenting with new technologies in the service of a big budget commercial film in which the experimenters are a vast team of specialists and it can include video installation work in a museum or public space in which the experimenter is a single artist-filmmaker.

Within the specification experimental film is limited to the **narrative** dimension of a film. Each of the film options has a distinctive and 'experimental' approach to film storytelling. Each film is challenging the spectator in its narrative approach if only because it refuses to confirm the assumptions and satisfy the expectations we normally bring to our film viewing.

In experimenting with narrative it is inevitable that key elements of film such as editing, mise-en-scène and sound will become key means by which the experiment is developed. So a study of the film's overall experimental approach is inevitable – though narrative is the focus, narrative cannot be isolated neatly from a whole lot of other creative choices made by the filmmakers.

Why experiment with film narrative?

The motivations are varied. Sometimes a filmmaker is moved by a simple restlessness to break the mould, a refusal to conform any longer to a 'rule-book' approach as to how a film ought to be. Sometimes this natural desire is encouraged by some institutional context, like a new opportunity to make and distribute work of this kind; and sometimes the context is technological, as new equipment invites the filmmaker to push at boundaries.

Sometimes the motivation is political. Filmmakers are aware of critiques of the standard film narrative, including arguments that this standard approach is too comfortable for the spectator who is not provoked or challenged. A more experimental approach may force a reaction from the spectator, forcing them to engage more actively in the themes and ideas in the film.

Sometimes a film experiment has to be seen in the context of wider experimentation in the culture, such as in theatre and in the visual arts. These experiments may be seen as expressions or symptoms of a 'turn' in culture, a new sensibility.

Contextual knowledge will be important in gaining a foothold for understanding and appreciating your chosen film in this section. However, the most positive approach is to adopt the attitude of a fellow filmmaker, actively curious to explore new ways to tell film stories and to broaden your repertoire of film ideas. Approaching the experimental film this way opens up the possibility of the viewing and study of the film as a fresh and energising experience.

2. Film Movements – some (further) general considerations

This section should be read in conjunction with the equivalent first section of the [Teacher's Guidance Notes on Film Movements: Silent Cinema](#).

This is the summary of points made about a film movement in relation to silent cinema. 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.

Towards a (modified) definition of a film movement

The above definition comfortably covers principle film movements of the 1920s. However, in this section the prescribed films collectively cover a 40 year period. So purely in terms of a time frame it is difficult to make many useful generalisations. Additionally the ‘movements’ that emerged during this long span of time were less reflections of a national cinema and more of a reflection of global phenomena.

In brief, there are five key developments to consider in relation to the period 1960-2000:

The rise of the auteur: while some filmmakers enjoyed great creative control over their films going back to the 1920s and indeed before, it is only from the 1960s that the director becomes a ‘star’ – his or her ‘signature’ actively promoted as a mark of quality.

New waves: throughout this period different rebellions occurred against the conventional style, form and mode of production of commercial mainstream films. Films within a particular new wave vary wildly, for example, Truffaut’s French New Wave films and Godard’s French New Wave films have little in common beyond a shared spirit of youthful opposition to established commercial filmmaking practice. Other new waves were strongly influenced by the French example but often in no easily identifiable or particularly similar ways to one another over the next three decades.

Avant-garde political film: some filmmakers recognised that the standard form of the feature film was complicit with the ruling order, reinforcing political, cultural and social ‘norms’ which they felt should be contested. The conclusion of these filmmakers was to break the mould – make films differently.

Postmodernism: in the post WW2 period a loss of faith in modernity became more pronounced, especially after the 1960s. This manifested itself in a range of different ways including irony and cynicism. By the 1990s we were, to quote a phrase “playing among the ruins” of modernity – with the emphasis very much on playfulness: mixing genres, collapsing differences between categories and, most importantly, this representing a collapse of confidence in ‘reality’. The very same constructivism that drove modernity in the silent cinema period now became the centre of a destabilising self-awareness of the constructed and therefore endlessly provisional nature of ‘reality’.

Film Cultism: from the 1960s film began to be taught as a subject of study – while informal learning was encouraged by an explosion in books about film – and most recently by the emergence of the internet. The idea of the ‘cult’ film changed the perspective on how films were grouped. The idea of a film movement now seemed limiting in the context of highly informed fans making all kinds of connections between films. The filmmakers-as-auteurs, coming out of film schools, were cultists too, often making reference to other films in their own work.

While each of these phenomena expressed themselves in particular national and regional cinemas, they were part of a global shift. Also, they are not discrete. Rather they can be found inter-mingled in any particular film: for example, new wave films are often strongly marked by postmodernist tendencies and all are auteur films, many celebrated as cult films.

All of these developments prompt a modification to the definition of a film movement as provided for the Silent Cinema options.

In the period 1960-2000 (and beyond) film movements are generally:

- looser collections of films than our earlier definition suggests with a much greater emphasis on the trans-national than the national.
- driven more than ever by auteurs who themselves become more trans-national in their working practice.

While the kinds of political, social and cultural themes the films are responding to are as likely to be ones shared across very different locations: Paris, Hong Kong, Los Angeles.

It may be useful to think in terms of meta-movements, film movements that are less about specifics of time and place and more about connections and linkages:

Definition:

A meta-film movement is one which reflects global cultural tendencies, although these may well still be refracted through national cinema, including shared characteristics with other films which may constitute a local film movement / new wave. A meta-film movement will be auteur-driven and will aspire to put itself in critical dialogue with more mainstream practice through its thematic and formal or stylistic innovations.

3. What movement?

Films with multiple identities

Our individual films have multiple identities and represent different narrative experiments

<i>Vivre sa vie</i>	Avant-garde (Brechtian) (Godardian) French New Wave
<i>Daisies</i>	Avant-garde (Surreal-fantasy) Czech New Wave Feminist (and <i>Saute ma ville</i>)
<i>Pulp Fiction</i>	Postmodern New Hollywood Genre
<i>Fallen Angels</i>	Postmodern Hong Kong New Wave Genre
<i>Timecode</i>	Postmodern Digital Experimentation

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

Note: While each film continues to reflect an auteur cinema, there is a shift, especially in the 1990 films away from experimentation as ‘art cinema’. In most cases the shift is toward film cultism, which is very much in keeping with postmodernity itself.

4. The Film Options and Narrative Experimentation

European Avant-garde

Films of the 1960s: *Vivre sa Vie* and *Daisies*

In the 1960s where the great new wave movements were simultaneously reflecting the avant-garde spirit of modernity and the playful disillusionment of the coming postmodernity. This is most vivid in the films of Jean-Luc Godard in France. ***Vivre sa vie*** is a great modernist avant-garde movie and it is a movie about the kind of dislocation, loss of self and identity, the need to endlessly play with the idea of the self, which anticipates postmodernity. Its narrative is modern cinema’s best example of the application of a Brechtian approach.

Communism in Eastern Europe was a particular manifestation of modernity – the centralised, bureaucratic state which exercises a ‘scientific’ control over its citizens. Artists in some of the countries occupied by Soviet forces during the 1960s engaged in avant-garde practices which playfully ridiculed the kind of social and political state they found themselves living in. So again we see this interesting mix: formal avant-garde practices associated with modernism and a kind of deep ironic opposition to the modernist bureaucratic state expressed in ways that anticipate postmodernity. ***Daisies*** is a feminist and political avant-garde film. It can be placed within a long Czech cultural tradition for expressing opposition through surreal fantasy, going back at least as far as Kafka in the 1920s. Like *Vivre sa vie* it focuses on the disintegration of any clear sense of self, focusing on two young women who endlessly play with the idea of identity and the reality of experience. Incidentally, it is

not helpful to see *Daisies* as primarily a surrealist film – it is too directly engaged in its time and place and is more appropriately considered as an agitational feminist political film, made under tight censorship laws.

For sure, both *Vivre sa vie* and *Daisies* can be located within more precise film movements, the first in the French New Wave and the second within the Czech New Wave. Their respective directors can also very clearly be located within these movements, at the centre of debates and energised by the filmmaking and other cultural activity going on around them.

So, looking at the 1960s we can ask of different national new wave ‘movements’, what deeper trends do they reveal about filmmaking in this period? In practice we find we have to do this anyway because the films also have very strong auteur signatures and these may actually be more significant than any narrowly defined film movement tag. With our particular films Godard is at the extreme avant-garde end of the spectrum of French New Wave filmmaking and the same can be said of Chytilova with respect to the Czech New Wave.

A further particularity of the 1960s is the rise of feminism. Chytilova’s *Daisies* is a key film in the avant-garde approach to feminist issues, including the very nature of cinematic representation as it relates to the female experience. To see *Daisies* as primarily a feminist avant-garde film is an example of taking a more meta-approach to the idea of a film movement. (*Daisies* is studied alongside Chantal Akerman’s first short film, *Saute ma ville* – and the linkage is this shared feminist intent rather than any sense that the two films belong, in any narrow sense, to the same film movement.) And as a footnote, it is worth considering how far Godard’s *Vivre sa vie* can be considered a feminist film, dominated as it is by Anna Karina’s performance and by a narrative that exposes the idea of the ‘throw-away’ moll of the urban gangster movie.

Postmodern Film

New Hollywood and East Asian New Wave

Films of the 1990s: *Pulp Fiction*, *Fallen Angels*

By the 1990s the postmodern is fully developed, especially in films that are now seen as cult classics: *Pulp Fiction*, most famously, and *Fallen Angels*, most brilliantly. Both films explore and manifest the sense of lost self, of style and surface over any more solid sense of reality. Both films, like the German expressionist films, marry formal experiment and aesthetic excess to the framework of genre cinema, specifically the gangster genre and its hit-man sub-genre. Both films have very strong auteur signatures: Tarantino and Wong Kar-Wai among the most celebrated exponents of a postmodern cinema.

This section is called “experimental film” and a film like *Pulp Fiction* may cause some concern in this context – is it so experimental? In fact, as already stated, the Specification requires a focus on the study of experimental narrative in this section, considering the films’ distinctive methods of telling their stories. Beyond the obvious and quite radical dislocation of plot and story in *Pulp Fiction*, perhaps it is most useful – as it is for *Fallen Angels* – to concentrate on the approach to the ‘depthless’ character, to character as a pure surface effect of cinema.

Digital Experimentation

Timecode

Timecode offers the most formally ambitious experiment in film narrative of the options available, even though it offers an entirely linear viewing experience. Shooting the film in real time, 'live', with four cameras and offering the spectator the experience of constantly shifting perspective across the four independent screen quadrants is a remarkable experiment. So unusual is the experience of coming to terms with this very different kind of narrative, that it is possible to lose sight of the fact that this film too is full of postmodern irony, and is comically self-reflexive throughout. This is particularly true towards the end as a pitch is made to a producer for the very film we have been watching and which is ridiculed as rubbish.

5. Teaching Film Movements: Experimental (1960-1990)

Choosing the film

This repeats what was said about choosing a film for the silent cinema study. If we consider that a key part of the learning experience in A level Film Studies is the students' own creative work, then one criterion here in choosing films is considering which will most excite, most challenge and most inspire in relation to students thinking of themselves as potential filmmakers or screenwriters. While this could be said of all sections of the Specification here there are particular opportunities to push boats out and quite a long way. Far from approaching these films as textually 'difficult' or culturally inaccessible, they can be approached in terms of filmmakers talking directly to other filmmakers (your students) about the creative possibilities - and pleasure – in the exploring the film medium through trying out new ideas.

There are equal and opposite challenges for students in coming to terms with the specific film experimentation each offers. *Vivre sa Vie* and *Daisies* each provide the student with a kind of film they are most unlikely to have not experienced previously. *Timecode* may appear more accessible, but it has in fact proved to be one of a kind. By contrast the challenge in teaching *Pulp Fiction* and *Fallen Angels* is that they may now appear 'ordinary', their cinematic experimentation very quickly absorbed into mainstream filmmaking.

What to Teach?

Teaching the Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film

The core area is common to all sections of the Specification. In this section what is notable is the experimental ways in all five key elements – cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, sound and performance. These key elements are integrally related to experimentations in narrative. It is enough to look at the first 5-10 minutes of each of the films to gain a strong sense of this.

For example, *Vivre sa vie* opens with a title card announcing what is about to happen in the first of twelve tableaux. The opening mise-en-scène has the key characters with their backs to us throughout while the sound is discontinuous, refusing any conventional spectator

engagement. The use of tableau, mise-en-scène and sound are all elements of a conscious avant-garde experiment, applying Brecht's alienation / distancing techniques to film.

The first few minutes of *Timecode* provide an initially disconcerting spectator experience – we are being asked to watch and listen to four screens simultaneously, and gradually realise that the characters in each are inter-connected by the unfolding narrative. There is no editing except that performed by the spectator's eye movements in 'cutting' from one screen to another, with the very deliberate prompt of the soundtrack volume which is constantly being altered to draw us to one quadrant at the expense of the other three. The great 'performance' is of the film itself, most notably in the four camera operators working independently and yet in complete synchronicity with one another.

Equally we could highlight the use of mise-en-scène and performance in *Daisies* or the use of cinematography and sound in *Fallen Angels* or the slick combination of elements that makes for *Pulp Fiction* as a perfect embodiment of the performance of postmodern style.

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 the film experiment the chosen film embodies. For example, Godard's application of Brechtian distancing techniques within his avant-garde film *Vivre sa vie*, pre-determines the kind of fractured, self-reflexive representation of the central character, Nana. Figgis' use of four screens of parallel action in real time in *Timecode* determines that the representation of character and situation is complex and multi-layered but at the same time much more fluid and indeterminate than we are used to in more conventional forms of film storytelling.

Similarly there are interesting questions to explore about how the aesthetics of the chosen film is an integral part of the film's overall experimentation. For example Wong Kar-Wai and his cinematographer Chris Doyle produce a look for *Fallen Angels* that is highly stylised in its colour-coding and lighting, in its use of brash neon, in its constant camera movement. These and other aspects of the film's aesthetic are not added elements but are at the heart of the film, central to its meaning and effect.

Teaching the Core Study Areas: Contextual Study

In contrast to the Silent Cinema section where a question may be set which directly asks about context, with this section, contextual knowledge will inform answers that nearly always will have narrative issues at their centre.

It will be useful to identify your chosen film in relation to its new wave identity and in relation to its avant-garde and/or postmodern identity (see above). In practice the most explicit contextual factor in studying the chosen Experimental film is likely to be the auteur and this will find expression in the specialist study (see below).

Teaching the Specialist Area: Narrative

As already indicated the focus for the study of the films in this section is their narrative experimentation. (See the introduction to part 3) It is important to acknowledge that the

macro study of narrative should be supplemented by examples of how micro features, such as mise-en-scène, editing and sound make vital contributions to narrative. Narrative includes a study of the overall structure of the film but the ways in which narrative works at the level of the shot, the scene and the sequence are equally important areas of study.

Also as stated earlier, a key part of narrative study is a consideration of how characters are created, their realistic depth and complexity or otherwise and the functions they perform.

Teaching the Specialist Area: Auteur

This is a second area of the Specification in which the auteur critical approach may be applied. Here, there is not the same focus on the auteur struggling against the mainstream system as there is in the Hollywood 1930-1990 section of Component One. Here, within film movements the artistic individuality and autonomy of the director-as-auteur is generally accepted and does not need to be argued for. Godard, Chytilova, Tarantino, Wong and Figgis is each in very obvious ways the primary creative force - although each also works closely with key collaborators, reminding us that even within an auteur study we accept that film is a collaborative enterprise.

It is possible that students will be asked not only to demonstrate knowledge of the auteur director and the auteur critical approach but to evaluate it as well. Typically, this takes the form of a question that asks what additional understanding and appreciation of the film has been gained as a result of imposing an auteur critical analysis. In evaluation work, a tried-and-tested approach is what might be called the 'before' and 'after'. Before being able to apply specialist auteur knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the film was very different from after. New insights and fresh perspectives have been gained. However, there is also a negative possibility, that in some ways it might be argued the film does not need an auteur critical approach and that other critical approaches have proved more productive.

Ideally, a number of films by a director would be studied and an auteur identity would be deduced. Given the volume of material to be covered in the Specification as a whole, this is not a viable approach. There may be time to look at brief extracts from other work by the auteur, but essentially the auteur identity of the film has to be established from a pre-given list of characteristics that are then projected onto the film.

However, to put some perspective on this, by far the most important focus for teaching and learning is a consideration of the auteur's creative decision-making in the particular film being studied.

The questions on the sample exam paper are these:

(a) Explore how far your chosen film is experimental in challenging conventional approaches to narrative.

Or

(b) Explore how far cinematography [i.e. key element of film] contributes to the 'experimental' identity of your chosen film.

Assessment will also require candidates to consider:

- locating the experimental approach of the film to its context(s)
- considering the significance of the film as an auteur work
- evaluating the auteur critical approach in relation to its contribution to the study of the chosen film.

The 30 minute exam

This repeats what was said above in relation to the Silent Cinema study. 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 of 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.

Footnote: If *Daisies* is chosen then it rather than the short *Saute ma ville* must be the principle film. A reasonable expectation is that *Saute ma ville* is used as a supplementary film. This means that at least one detailed example from that film will be used either to reinforce a point being made about *Daisies* or to provide a contrast with that film.