GCE A LEVEL

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WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in
FILM STUDIES

Section B:
American Film Since 2005

What is IDEOLOGY?
Teacher Guide

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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 appropriate films/filmmakers 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 well as their experiences watching the focus films.

The concept of film as ideological involves exploring what ideologies are conveyed by a film as well as those which inform it which may, for example, reveal that a film reinforces or challenges dominant beliefs and attitudes within a society. Learners study the following:
- the connotations of visual elements and sounds binary oppositions, both those contained in the narrative and those contained in film's use of formal elements.
- the implications of spectator positioning and address ideological perspective.
- appropriate to the text (such as a feminist or a political perspective) .
- an evaluation of the ideological critical approach to film.

In this section we will be answering these big questions using some films and filmmakers from the specification.

Big Questions

- What are the main messages and values of the film?
- How are these messages conveyed through the use of the key elements of film form?
- Does the film reinforce, challenge or reject dominant attitudes within the society it is made in? What films/TV shows have similar (or different messages)?
- Which character(s) are the spectators encouraged to align themselves with and what is their dominant belief system?

Identifying messages and values

Ideologies are like a system of beliefs about the world: what is right and wrong, natural and unnatural, what is 'common sense' and what is madness. An ideology isn't one belief (e.g. gay people shouldn't have children, one of the issues explored in *Carol*) it is a network of connected beliefs (e.g. homosexuality isn't 'natural', a family should consist of heterosexual mother and father, marriage is sacred etc.) that build into a particular view of the world.

One way to discuss ideology is to use the terms **'left'** and **'right' wing** (also known as liberal and conservative). These terms are usually used in politics to denote people's beliefs about society, the news media they consume and the political parties they vote for.

Task: *What are some 'left' wing political beliefs about the social issues below? What are some right wing beliefs? Use this diagram by David McCandless to help you:*
https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/left-vs-right-world/

Left Wing	Issue	Right Wing
	Combatting terrorism	
	Unemployment	
	Gay Marriage	
	Drug Addicts	
	Refugees	
	Homelessness	
	Abortion	
	Big Business	

Now try to link these beliefs to specific events/characters in films you have seen. (If stuck, watch some trailers for films from the spec). *How does the film form construct these messages?*

Film	Belief	Close analysis of film form (i.e. how is this message sent?)

Some ideas:

Film	Belief	Close analysis of film form (i.e. how is this message sent?)
Carol	LGBTQ relationships are as valid as heterosexual ones.	A sense of intimacy and intense emotions is created by the use of music in the trailer, and cuts between CU of the two lovers staring at each other. Their relationship is presented in traditional 'romantic' style: as 'star-crossed lovers' who are rebelling against society for their love. The disapproval of other people is shown followed by the protagonists' faces looking upset. We are encouraged to identify with the women and feel both their love and their pain. The sexual element of their relationship is downplayed to encourage (male) audiences to empathise rather than objectify the lesbian characters.

The political mainstream (or *status quo*) usually promotes a **dominant** ideology. This could be seen as the most common beliefs in a society (usually influenced by political, religious and other institutions). A Marxist viewpoint would be that these beliefs are those which support the most wealthy and powerful in society (the dominant social class): that is why mainstream media tends to depict people in authority as trustworthy, capitalism and consumerism as positive, and wealthy people as those we should admire. You can spot whether a film is

supporting or challenging the dominant ideology by thinking about which characters we are encouraged to align with, empathise or sympathise with, or even aspire to be like.

Task: *Who are the 'dominant social class' in Britain and USA? (Clue: probably they do jobs your parents would like you to do!)*
How are these people portrayed in mainstream films (e.g. do they often play heroes? Are we encouraged to empathise/sympathise with them? Are we encouraged to admire or desire them?

Social group / career	Film	How does the film portray these characters positively? How are the audience supposed to respond?

Social group / job role	Film	How does the film portray these characters positively? How are the audience supposed to respond?
Businessmen / CEOs	*Inception*	Though big business is seen as threatening to Cobb and his team, the wealth and power exercised by Saito offers Cobb his salvation: he can return to America and see his children. The entire plot revolves around corporate espionage so many of the 'dream' locations are in shiny offices and hotels, with all the characters wearing sharp business suits, which glamourizes the corporate style. We as an audience admire (and perhaps aspire) the power and wealth of the characters. We are also encouraged to sympathise with Robert Fischer (regarding his relationship with his father); and to view massive corporate change (which could cost thousands their jobs) as a psychological/emotional conflict.

Task: *What are some marginalised or disempowered social groups? Often these groups are portrayed negatively in films – though some films challenge the dominant ideology and make these types of people the heroes. Can you think of some examples?*

Social Group	Film example	What message is sent?
		Negative
		Negative
		Alternative message: How is this different to negative views?

Social Group	Film example	What message is sent?
Drug dealers (and other criminals)	*Winter's Bone*	**Negative message:** The drug dealers (even Ree's father) are portrayed as violent, vicious, and greedy; particularly in the scene where the Milton women savagely beat Ree - they are willing to kill her to protect their meth business. We condemn the Miltons because we know Ree is only trying to find out where her father is to save her house and protect her vulnerable sister.
		Alternative message: There is a sense of community and 'honour' amongst criminals. People who break the 'code' (as Ree's father did) are violently punished. But after they beat her, the women of the Milton gang decide to help Ree by showing her where her father's body is. There is a moral value to their actions that shows a different side to the criminal community. **How is this different to negative views?** These particular characters are not wholly evil and sadistic - they don't seem to enjoy hurting others like a traditional villain. They are shrewd business people who need to protect their investment… But they also have a moral code that governs their actions. At the end, Ree also follows by not revealing where she found the hands.

For ideas and activities related to feminist approaches to film analysis, see the 'What is Spectatorship?' resource in this guide.

For detailed analysis of ideology in *Inception* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, see those sections.