

Popular Film and Emotional Response



Consider the following:



- How does film manipulate the spectator?
- The difference between form and content
- The relationship between the film and the audience: to what extent is there 'agreement' between text and spectator as to emotional response?
- Is there a *purpose* in stimulating emotional response?
- Reasons why different spectators experience different responses

What aspects of **film form** can stimulate emotional response?



- Give examples

Case Study Films

- *Audition* (Takashi Miike, 2000)
- *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson 2008)
- *Malena* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000)
- *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961)

Plus:

- *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino 1992)
- *The Lion King* (Roger Allers, 1994)
- *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998)
- *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)

Sample Exam Questions

- Would you agree that strong emotional effects are achieved in some films by the careful use of film construction techniques and in others by the subject matter itself?



- **How far is the emotional response to popular films influenced by different viewing contexts? Refer to the films you have studied for this topic.**



- Creating the opportunity for emotional responses in popular films is simply to do with manipulating the audience: mainstream films don't attempt to use emotional responses to make any more considered points. From your experience would you agree with this?



Spectator and Audience?

- **Spectator** – individual, personal connection
- **Audience** – a group, group experience, shared meaning



- It might 'shock' some people to be shown experimental, avant-garde or alternative film simply because they had never thought of the possibility of there being forms of film other than realist narratives.
- This unit focuses on **POPULAR FILM** but consider how the mainstream can 'borrow' from experimental film

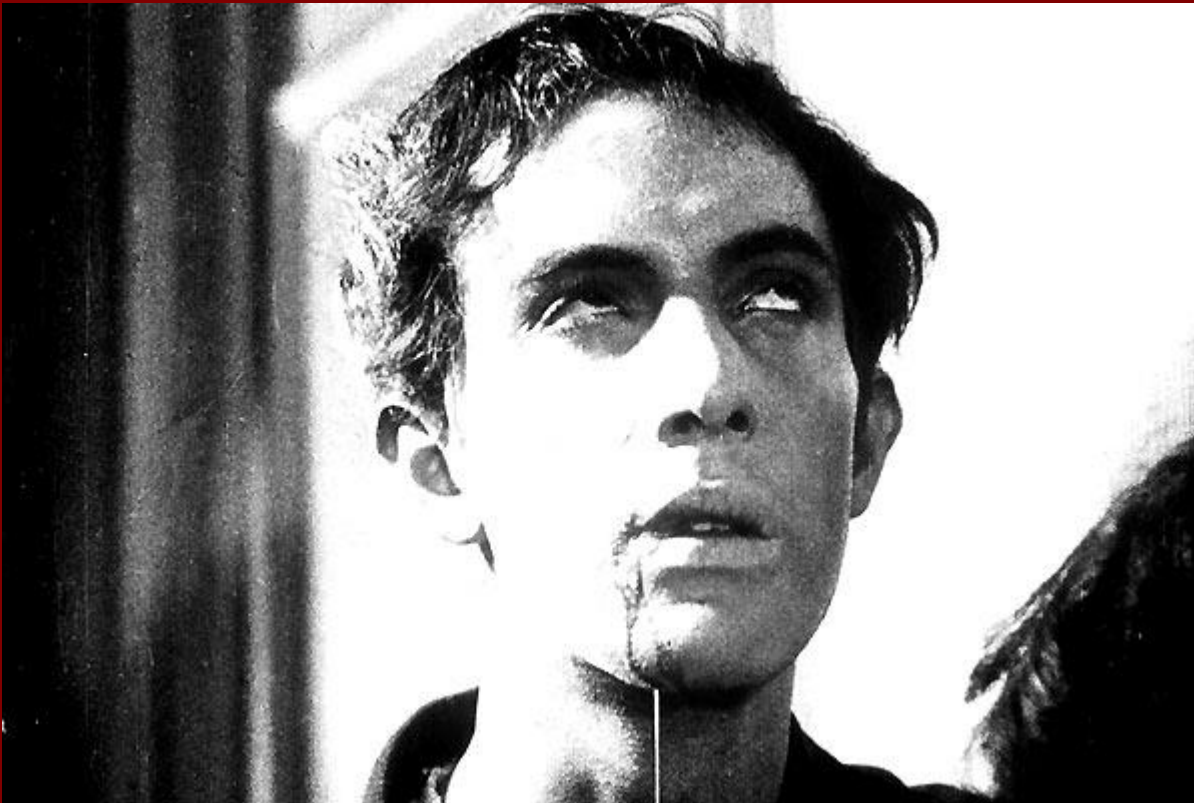


- Most people's initial response when considering this issue is to see 'shock' in terms of scenes of a graphic sexual or violent content in more popular mainstream films.



- Go deeper – are we shocked by uncomfortable truths? Particular behaviours? Beliefs?

Remember, *Un Chien Andalou* is not a 'popular film', so refer to it as an influence, rather than as a key study film



Content and Form

- Compare the way in which the scene from *Un Chien Andalou* is constructed with the slicing off of the policeman's ear in *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1991)
- The basic content is similar but what about the way the scenes are constructed? Which is more powerful?
- Consider the use of mise-en-scene, performance, cinematography, editing and sound in both cases.



- For both scenes consider whether the nature of the shock changes on a second viewing, and if so in what ways.
- Are there other emotional responses that you or other spectators have had to either of these scenes?
- Could you imagine the possibility of further emotional responses which might be possible?

What use of cinematic techniques prompts us to respond to these images?



What do you feel? Is it more complex than simple 'shock'?



Consider composition and character
identification

How does editing steer our
response?



- How does composition render the familiar strange?



Shock and morality?



Consider character identification



The Hungarian critic Bela Balazs considered the close-up to be the most emotive shot in cinema.

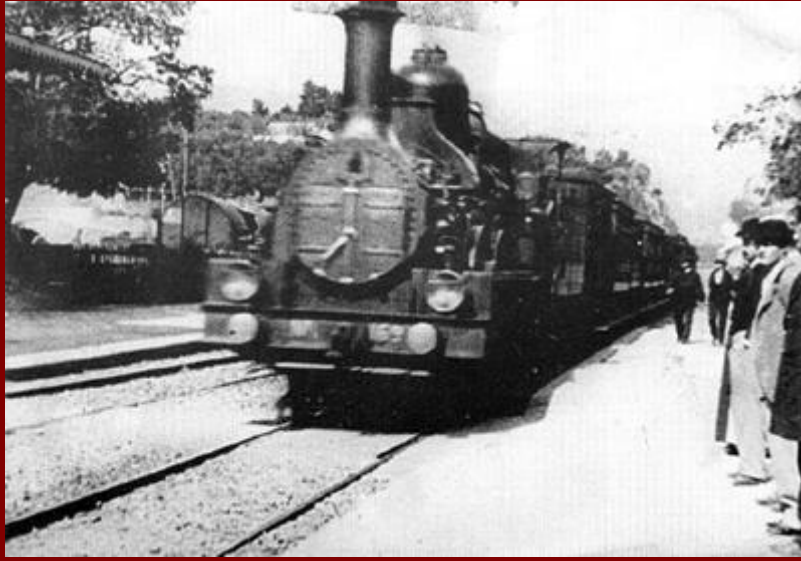
- Do you agree with Balazs?
- Do you have your own perspective?
- What then, by implication, does a long shot suggest?
- Can you explain using an example from *Malena* or another film of your choice?
- Can you link the use of the close-up to other factors, such as narrative structure?

Other emotions

- Consider the use of the medium of animation and its target audience. Are children a more easily manipulated audience when it comes to emotional effect?
- Is there a cultural or emotional context that is important in influencing our engagement with these films?



Context of production/Context of spectatorship



Does emotional response to popular films change over time? Why?



A typical camera angle used by Riefenstahl in her film makes Hitler appear larger than life.

Consider how films stimulate particular **associations** through cinematic technique



Narrative structure

- Can a film's structure influence an emotional response?



- Consider linear vs. flashback structure or character perspective

Critical Perspectives



Projecting Illusion: Film spectatorship and the impression of reality (Richard Allen)

- “Contemporary film theorists construe the film spectator as a passive observer of the image who is duped into believing that it is real. In fact, as I shall argue, the film spectator knows it is only a film and actively participates in the experience of illusion that the cinema affords.”



Can cinema affect us without 'central imagining'
(Richard Wollheim)?





Richard Wollheim made a well-known distinction between two kinds of imagining: central imagining, in which we take the point of view of a character in the story; and acentral imagining, in which we take up the perspective of an onlooker

Which is used in the opening to The Shining?

Stuart Hall

- Do we respond as a director intends?
 - Preferred response
- Do we respond in a way unintended?
 - Oppositional response
- Do we partially accept a preferred reading?
 - Negotiated response



Oskar and Eli are complex characters – how do we respond to them?

- How much of our response is to do with:
- Casting?
- Performance?
- Narrative structure?
- Cultural/language context?
- Personal experience?



Looking away/looking through

Julian Hanich attempts to answer the paradox of why we enjoy films that thrill us, that scare us, that threaten us, that shock us –affects that we otherwise desperately wish to avoid.

He claims that at moments of extreme emotional stimulus, audiences look away from or ‘look through’ (i.e. recognise the artificiality) what they are watching.



Danny hides his eyes from the unreal visions in *The Shining*

Both responses suggest that audiences are fully aware of the **artificiality** of cinematic emotional triggers. What does this imply about how we use film as a stimulus?



- In the ear-cutting scene from Reservoir Dogs, we are not given a choice: the camera looks away for us. What does this suggest?

Emotional response and pleasure

You can discuss Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and scopophilia if you decide not to use it in the *Vertigo* question.



- The voyeurism of *Malena* would seem to encourage the notion of film as voyeuristically pleasurable
- but what is the connection between voyeurism and emotional response?
- What sorts of emotional response does voyeurism bring about?
- Is casting important?



- Are we being permitted to give rein to a type of human interest in others that might more normally be considered socially unacceptable?
- If so, what sorts of emotion do we experience at this point?





Does the film turn our voyeurism back on us?
How do we respond on an emotional level?
Does this link to Bela Balazs' focus on the
close up?

- What emotions are stimulated by the torture in *Audition* or the ear-cutting scene in *Reservoir Dogs*?
- Do these emotions involve pleasure of some sort?
- If so, what is the nature of this pleasure?
- If it is not pleasurable, why do spectators watch these sorts of scenes, deliberately exposing themselves to a certain type of emotional response?

Re-watch a key violent Scene and analyse the cinematic techniques used

- Editing and sound are the usual culprits

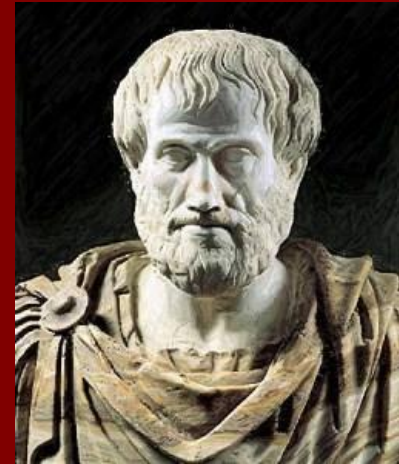


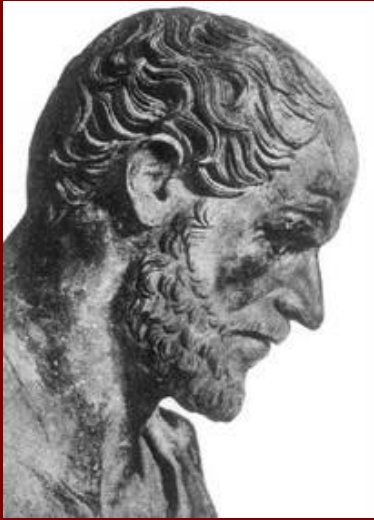
Aristotle and Catharsis

- Catharsis = purgation
- How this relates to the horror film:

Version 1

- Fear poisons life with anxiety.
- Catharsis can flush this feeling from our systems, bring it into the open, and clear the air.
- This may explain the appeal of horror movies: they redirect our fears toward something external, grotesque, and finally ridiculous, in order to puncture them.
- In this sense of purgation, the horror movie is a kind of medicine that does its work and leaves the soul healthier





Version 2

On the other hand, fear might have a secret allure, so that what we need to purge is the **desire for the thrill** that comes with fear.

- The horror movie provides a safe way to indulge and satisfy the longing to feel afraid, and go home afterward satisfied; the desire is purged, temporarily, by being fed.
- In this sense the emotional experience of film is a potentially addictive drug.



- Either explanation may account for the popularity of horror movies among teenagers, since fear is so much a fact of that time of life.
- For those of us who are older, the tear-jerker may have more appeal, offering a way to purge the regrets of our lives in a sentimental outpouring of pity.
- As with fear, this purgation too may be either medicinal or drug-like.



‘Shock’ as sudden and unexpected, or long-drawn out

- ‘Shock’ in film usually occurs as something sudden and unexpected so that the viewer is as it were caught unawares. But it is worth bearing in mind that this is not always the case; sometimes the shock effect is achieved in a rather more long-drawn-out fashion.
- (Alfred Hitchcock discussed the difference between ‘shock’ and ‘suspense’.)



- For example Gaspar Noé makes the inescapability of the rape scene in *Irreversible* (2002) unbearably painful as he gives us an experience of shock not as something sudden but as something of prolonged intensity.
- Sorry, I'm NOT showing you that!
- What is Miike doing in the torture scene in *Audition*?

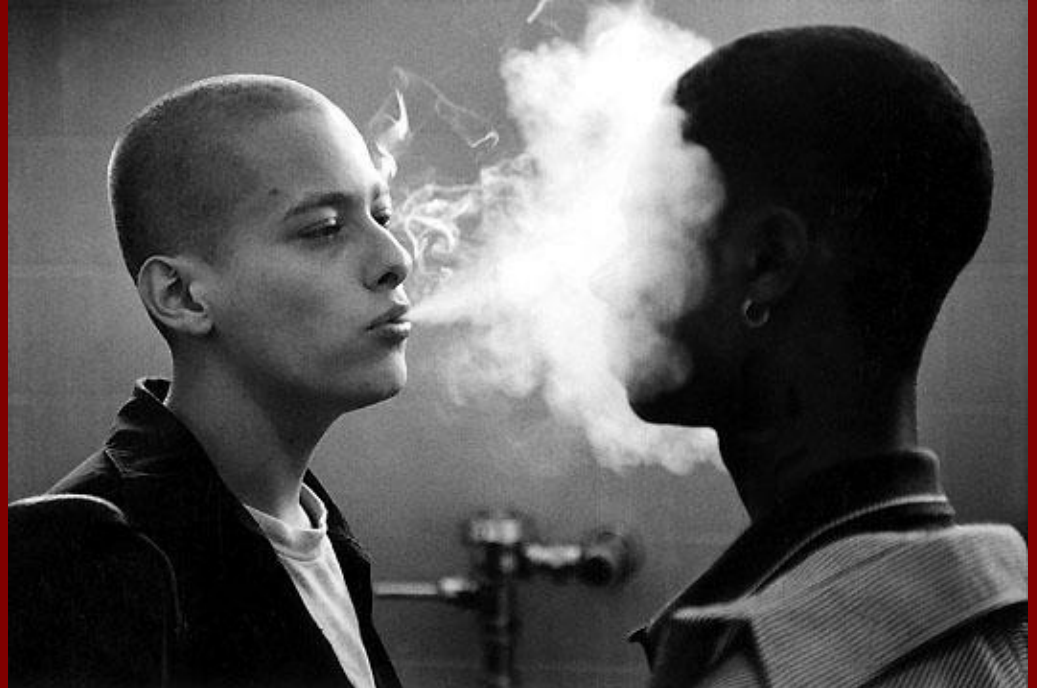


Racism and Extreme Politics

- It could be argued that the most shocking elements in films are not the actual incidents that are portrayed but the ideas that are expressed and that underpin the events.
- In American *History X* (Kaye, 1998), for example, it is the extreme right-wing politics and accompanying racial hatred that audiences may find most disturbing.



- The film could be accused of giving a platform to fascist ideas:
- Edward Norton as Derek gives a powerful 'race hate' speech almost directly to the camera. Do we as viewers have an emotional response to these sorts of scenes?



Questions you should address in your response

1. What types of emotion do spectators experience?
2. What are the reasons for these emotions?
3. How does the film work to bring about these responses?



How important is performance in understanding the spectator's emotional response to popular films? Refer to the films you have studied for this topic.

Level 4

- A detailed and sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the films studied, particularly their performance characteristics
- A sound appreciation of the significance of performance in relation to spectator response, including issues such as credibility and identification.
- An ability to answer the question directly, making close reference to appropriate examples. It is possible that having considered a range of examples the conclusion is drawn that performance is less important than other factors
- (The very best candidates) ... will demonstrate a sophisticated approach, possibly arguing that in many films performance is a part of a broader stylistic set of features and that in some films with heightened emotional content, performance may be characterised by particular generic as well as star features.

How important is the soundtrack in influencing the spectator's emotional response to a film?

- **Level 4**
- A detailed and sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the films studied particularly the use of sound track.
- An appreciation of how sound can be used in film to create response.
- An ability to develop a coherent discussion based on the above, focusing on precise film examples.
- (The very best candidates) ... are likely to discuss the relationship between soundtrack and emotional response, refusing to accept a simple cause-effect model.

How far do spectators respond to the emotional content of films in the way that the filmmakers intended?

- **Level 4**
- A detailed knowledge and understanding of the spectator, particularly the ways in which the spectator responds to the emotional content of popular films.
- • An appreciation and understanding of how the filmmaker attempts to manage spectator response through the range of macro and micro techniques available.
- • An ability to develop an argument based on the above with excellent examples to support the case.
- • (The very best candidates) ... will extend the discussion, possibly questioning the relationship between a hypothetical spectator and actual audience members, each with their own potentially idiosyncratic response.