

# FM4: Varieties Of Film Experience – Issues and Debates

Section B: Spectatorship Topics  
Popular Film and Emotional  
Response

- Three considerations:
- Consider the relationship between the film on the screen and the audience in terms of the communication process
- Consider the idea that spectators will find that particular films and particular sequences within films draw out from them certain, often strong, emotional responses
- Consider the possibility that film may 'shock' in a variety of ways and intensities, and that it may as a result be both disturbing and challenging to spectators.

# Case Study Films

- *Audition* ( Takashi Miike, 2000)
- *Grave of the Fireflies* ( Isao Takahata, 1988)
- *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino 1992)
- *Malena* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000)
- *The Lion King* (Roger Allers, 1994)
- *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998)

# 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?

# Film as a communication process

- **One perspective:** Film is a form of communication, transmission of messages (single intended meaning)
- **Second perspective:** Film is a form of communication – meaning making is an interactive process (a variety of possible meanings)

- **Film 'Language'**: Film operates as a language; it communicates with the spectator through the use of images and sound
- **Films as 'constructs'**: Films are built by filmmakers from a series of component parts that we can identify, and since they have been constructed we can take them apart and see how they have been put together.

# Spectator and Audience?

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

# Emotional Response to film



# What is emotion?

- What exactly is emotion, or emotional response?
- To what extent should emotions be seen to be linked to thought?
- As we watch films we can each experience fear, and pleasure, and desire, and surprise, and shock and a whole array of possible emotions, but we will not all experience these emotions equally at the same moments in a film
- What is that determines our individual predisposition to respond in particular emotional ways at certain points in certain films?

# Film and the creation of 'shock'

- One emotional response that could be on your list of emotional responses to film would be 'shock'. Films have always been seen to have the ability to shock an audience.
- The nature of this shock can cover a wide range of possibilities. The early audiences for films in Paris in 1895 were apparently 'shocked' simply by the sense of realism created by the filmed image of a train moving towards them.



- 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.
- BUT this unit focuses on **POPULAR FILM**
- However, 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. These are certainly the areas that receive most media coverage in relation to 'shocking' film.

# What's shocking to you?

- List the range of ways in which you see film as being potentially 'shocking', and try to give an example for each. In order to comply with Film Studies good practice you should try to refer to specific scenes within particular films.

# What's shocking to you?

- What exactly is at work in the clips you've just seen that brings about the emotional response of shock?



# Content and Form

- In carrying out the activity above you should have become *aware of* the way in which 'shock' in film can be talked about in terms of either the content (or subject matter) and the form (or style) of the film under discussion.
- Clearly the opening eye-slitting subject matter of *Un Chien Andalou* is itself shocking, but so too is the film construction in terms of the way in which use is made of close-ups and an editing cut from the blank face of the woman with her eye being held open to the actual eyeball-cutting shot.

However, *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) which is handled in an altogether different way. Both scenes will draw a sense of shock from most spectators on a first viewing but perhaps the nature of the shock is different in both instances.
- 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?

- As you discuss or think about films and scenes from films that create an emotional 'shock', always make sure you are considering both content and film form.
- Try to decide on the nature of the shock experienced and the intensity of that shock. Is it a physical shock that affects your bodily response in some way?

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



# 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 are important in influencing our engagement with these films?



# Narrative structure

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



- Choose an additional case study film, watch and take note of key scenes that bring about an emotional response.
- In what ways might this be seen to be 'shocking' in terms of content, structure and style?
- Try to analyse the way the film has been put together in terms of its use of mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, sound, genre and narrative structure, in order to shock.
- Do you think there is any way in which the 'shock' in this film short may be said to be used to any social or political purpose?

# Consider character identification



- Spectators have always attended the cinema in order to have their emotions aroused and with the expectation that this will take place.
- Effective storytelling encourages us to feel human emotions by allowing us to sympathise, empathise or even identify with characters and their narrative experiences.
- As spectators we presumably find this process to be pleasurable or we would not return time after time to films, but in what ways is it pleasurable?

# Emotional response and pleasure



- 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?



- 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?

- What emotions are engendered by the vigilante bloodbath scene in *Taxi Driver*, 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?



# '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.
- 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*?

# Projecting Illusion: Film spectatorship and the impression of reality

(Richard Allen)

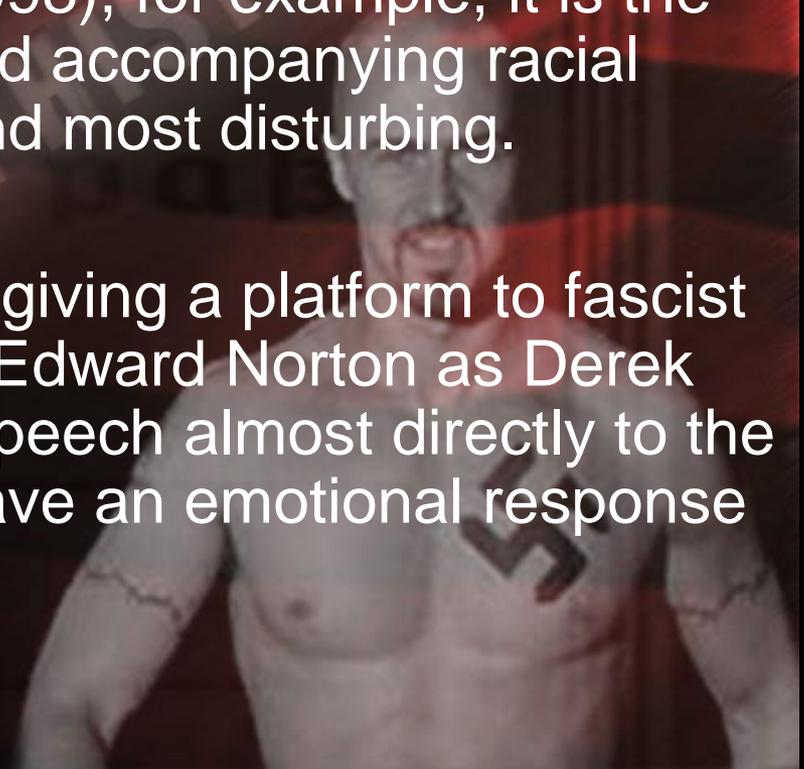
- “Contemporary film theorists argue that, for a number of reasons, the cinematic image appears to spectators as if it were reality, but this appearance is an illusion. In fact, the cinematic image provides an *impression* of reality...”
- “Cinema is a form of signification that creates the appearance of a knowable reality and hence confirms the self definition of the human subject as someone capable of knowing that reality... the reality are the “effects” of a process of signification”

# 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.”

# Racism and Extreme Politics

- If we move on from issues of sex and violence, 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: in *American History X* 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 need to ask yourself for a case study

1. What types of emotion did I experience?
2. How did these emotions shape my responses? (what did you do or feel in response to these emotions?)
3. What are the reasons for my emotions? (How do the film work to bring about these responses?)
4. How did these emotions shape my experience with the film? (Consider these emotions within the context of the whole film)