

The Media Studies Conference

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Tears for Fears: Popular Film and Emotional Response

JEREMY POINTS

tears for fears: popular film & emotional response



...different kinds of emotions produced in film spectators...



...through genres like (teen) horror, comedy & romantic comedy (with its touch of melodrama...)



'Powerful sensory and emotional responses and how they're produced in film spectators,' as the A Level Film Studies specification (FM4) puts it. That's what I'll be exploring in a session which combines thinking about the topic with teaching approaches to it.

I'll begin by showing how the micro analysis – where personal response is encouraged as a way of exploring spectator response – provides the groundwork for this A2 topic. I will look at obvious ways in which different kinds of film – from action and melodrama to horror – effectively 'construct' emotional responses through a combination of micro and macro features. I then want to look at how film, particularly popular film, can produce contradictory emotions for spectators – and that's apart from the fact that not all spectators will respond to the same film in the same way. I also don't want to forget the emotional responses stars produce in spectators – and the way those emotions are equally to a large extent 'constructed'.

...from the AS/A film studies specification

FM4 - Section B: Spectatorship Topics

The emphasis in all four options for Section B is on the study of the interaction of aspects of film form and the spectator. It offers continuity from work in FM1.

Spectatorship: Popular Film and Emotional Response

This study is concerned with the ways in which popular film (whether deriving from Hollywood or elsewhere) produces powerful sensory and emotional responses in the spectator. It is possible to focus on a particular genre – such as horror and consider shock effects – or the melodrama as 'weepee'. Alternatively, the focus may be on spectacle, whether relating to the body of the star or to the staging/choreography of action. This topic is not concerned specifically with either issues of representation or value judgements but rather with developing understanding about how films create the emotional responses they do. It is expected that a minimum of **two** feature-length films be studied for this topic.

Note: Further material will be available for those attending the session.

Extract from *A2 Notes for Guidance*

SPECTATORSHIP: POPULAR FILM AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

Why is there a particular reference on “emotional response” in this option?



**...emotional response ...
it's complicated... more
so than we think?**

This is a fair question because (i) an emotional response is also significant in the other options in Section B and (ii) popular cinema generates more than an emotional response for the spectator. The reason for making this the specific emphasis here is that popular cinema is studied elsewhere within the Specification. For example, at AS level popular films are studied in relation to form (narrative and genre) and in relation to representation (meanings and values). Here the focus on popular cinema is very much in terms of its affective dimension – feeling.

In the previous Specification one particular affective dimension – shock – was the focus. Here affect embraces a broad range of spectator experiences, posing questions like: why do we cry or laugh or hold our breath or wince at key moments in our viewing of popular films.

So what approach is recommended in studying Popular Film in relation to spectatorship?

There will be some focus on film form and on the particular strategies filmmakers use in order to generate response. In this respect, there is continuity from the micro analysis work done in FM1. However, as often as one might want to argue for a clear cause/effect relationship between film device and response, there will also be the need to explore and question these assumptions from a spectator perspective. For example, why might a ‘shocking’ horror film make us laugh? Why might a comedy make us cry?

You may wish to centre your study on a particular genre – such as horror or melodrama or thriller. This is perfectly acceptable and indeed adopting a mixed genre approach might produce too diffuse a study.

There is also an ideological dimension – which better students will almost certainly raise. This concerns manipulation and the pleasure of ‘surrendering’ to the film experience. You may wish to choose films which are overt in the level of control and manipulation being exercised – so that your students are in no doubt that a particular film has a “palpable intent”. More specific questions may return to issues of representation. In as much as this option is looking at the affective pleasures made

available by popular films, then a gendered critical approach may be mobilised. Are the pleasures offered 'male' or 'female' and what might this mean? You may even wish to explore Mulvey's old question about what the female spectator does when watching a film dominated by the male gaze...though this is a suggestion not a requirement!



**Avatars for emotion:
emotional responses ...
through 'breathtaking'
special effects?**

For the purposes of this option, what is a "popular film" and what is recommended?

A popular film is one that sets out to reach a broad mainstream audience using what can broadly be described as a conventional stylistic approach and employing tried-and-tested film techniques to provide audience pleasure. In doing so, it is likely to be identifiable by its adherence to classical narrative and to generic features. In addition, it may play on the particular screen persona of one or more stars. A popular film need not be an English Language film. Essentially your choice of films should be determined by the intensity of the affective viewing experience they offer and the interesting reasons for this.

The films may be contemporary or not. It is worth bearing in mind that if you don't want to study the films of Danny Boyle, there is Hitchcock or Sirk or Ophuls. You may wish to take a genre approach as mentioned above. You may wish to take an historical genre approach, comparing, say, *Cat People* with a contemporary psychological horror film.

And, to repeat, there is no restriction on country of origin. Bollywood or East Asian films, for example, would be perfectly fine.

Recommendations – including those from teachers – will be posted on the website after each relevant examination series.

Specific Recommendations in approaching this topic.

In choosing a popular film designed to give pleasure to an audience, the first criterion should be – does it raise interesting questions for a study of spectatorship?

Let us take a specific film – Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (which, by the way, is a 'popular film', an Oscar winner and a film clearly designed for the mainstream market in its country of origin, and which has gone on to be a global best seller in the dvd market.) *Life is Beautiful* tells an emotive story – designed to play on the cusp between comedy and tragedy. It is somewhat (!) fantastic in its premise but has a coherence within its own fictional terms. We may ask the following questions:

- How does the film work to generate emotion, and here the emphasis may be on relatively straightforward issues like the use of mise-en-scene, staging and music or more complex issues of identification and spectator alignment with particular characters?
- How far does the spectator feel consciously manipulated by the film and, by contrast, how far does the emotional power of the film derive from a combination of elements which are difficult to pin down?
- How far does the emotional impact of the film derive from contextual knowledge - in this case, our ability to respond to the film in the gap between fictional representation and historical fact? Studying this film alongside *Schindler's List* opens up some important broader debates about 'good news' Holocaust movies.

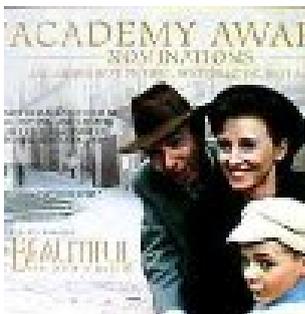


More complex, contradictory emotions created by *Life is Beautiful* and *The Reader*?

The above is a complex example – chosen to illustrate how rich and challenging this topic can be, depending on the level of ambition.

Some steer has already been provided above for how you might choose films for this topic. You may take a genre approach – or identify auteurs whose cinematic approach lends itself particularly well to the study of emotion and spectatorship. As a completely serendipitous way of identifying possible films, here are the Oscar winners, 1988 - 2008:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>Rain Man</i> | <i>Shakespeare in Love</i> |
| <i>Driving Miss Daisy</i> | <i>American Beauty</i> |
| <i>Dances with Wolves</i> | <i>Gladiator</i> |
| <i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> | <i>A Beautiful Mind</i> |
| <i>Unforgiven</i> | <i>Chicago</i> |
| <i>Schindler's List</i> | <i>The Lord of the Rings: the Return of the King</i> |
| <i>Forrest Gump</i> | <i>Million Dollar Baby</i> |
| <i>Braveheart</i> | <i>Crash</i> |
| <i>The English Patient</i> | <i>The Departed</i> |
| <i>Titanic</i> | <i>No Country for Old Men</i> |
| | <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> |



And keeping to the Oscar theme, here are some foreign language films that have been nominated or have won "best foreign picture" during the same period:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Cinema Paradiso</i> | <i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i> |
| <i>Life is Beautiful</i> | <i>Tsotsi</i> |
| <i>All About My Mother</i> | <i>The Lives of Others</i> |

As none of the above films represent animation, it is worth saying that some of the most affecting of films are animations. But perhaps it is time to move beyond the death of Bambi's mother.

Another powerful body of work is propaganda, with the interesting appeal to patriotism and the national. Yet another rich vein may be sports movies – from *Chariots of Fire* to *Breaking Away* or from *Fever Pitch* to, yes, of course, *Rocky*....

Approaches to the topic

introductory

- simple idea of spectatorship
- inviting group to come up with film moments which have made a powerful impact on them (and parents/guardians, others in family...?)
- simple idea of what is meant by an emotional response

Stage 1—exploring how and why films create emotion in spectators

- exploring extracts which highlight in an obvious way how micro features produce emotional responses
- explore the role of macro features (genre, narrative, character identification/alignment)
- raising issues about how far spectators' emotional responses are 'constructed' and how far spectators are positioned.
- do all spectators respond in the same way? Do spectators respond differently in different circumstances?

Stage 2—the more challenging issues

- exploring more complex, contradictory emotional responses and the reasons for them—micro and macro factors, cultural factors influencing response & reception, conditions of viewing?
- debating why film is arguably an 'emotional' medium—raising issues through the emotional?

film choices

Stage 1: extracts from a variety of genres which are overtly designed to produce an emotional response in spectators—comic moments, spectacle, 'stars', dramatic moments, horror, the big romantic gestures—leading up to a single film choice, allowing consideration of role of macro features (genre & narrative, including character) as well as micro features (cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, sound [particularly music], performance)

Stage 2: a single film choice to explore how more complex, contradictory emotional responses are produced & the factors affecting those responses—e.g. the postmodern emphasis on hybridity leading to an experience of emotion at same time as an awareness of the way your responses are being played with... *Inglourious Basterds* or *Chicago*...or the contradictory emotions created by such films as *The Reader*, *Life is Beautiful*, *American Beauty*, where there is arguably a tension between the emotions we experience and the issues they raise. Recognising that emotional responses are mediated.

A few obvious resources

Casey Benyahia, Gaffney & White (2009, 2nd edition), *A2 Film Studies* (Routledge), 'Popular film and emotional response', pages 364—381 - main examples tend towards emotional 'shock'.

Patrick Phillips, 'Spectator, audience, response' in Jill Nelmes, ed (2007, 4th edition), *Introduction to Film Studies* (Routledge) - pitched more for the teacher. There is also a list of reference books for teachers at the end of this chapter.

...the visceral immediacy of the cinematic experience (Steven Shaviro)
Emotion characterises the experience of film... (Annabel Cohen)

Simple idea of spectatorship



In exploring popular films and emotional response, you are looking at film from spectators' and audiences' points of view. In Film Studies, this exploration of people's responses to film is termed 'spectatorship'.

Spectatorship is about studying *spectators*, exploring how and why people respond to films as they do. It involves exploring:

- the impact of the film viewing experience on people—whether in a darkened space in a cinema, within a 3D environment, on DVD, or on a computer screen
- the impact on people of the way films are 'constructed' - their micro and macro features
- the degree to which all spectators respond in the same way.



Patrick Phillips, in 'Spectator, audience and response' (in Nelmes, ed, *Introduction to Film Studies*, p 144) provides a little more detail:

A central reason for studying film is to better describe and explain our response to the film experience. In a response study, we ask how and why we react as we do—both emotionally and intellectually. We may extend this to consider reasons for the uniformity or diversity of reactions among a group of people.

Film studies has distinguished between the response of social groups, collectives of people—an *audience*—and the response of the individual—a *spectator*.

The following are some of the working assumptions that have underpinned [spectatorship...all of which can be questioned]:

- Spectatorship is primarily concerned with the way the individual is positioned between projector and screen in a darkened space.
- The audience ceases to exist for the individual spectator for the duration of the film.
- Although the spectator is singular, a figure alone before the screen, spectatorship studies tries to generalise about how all spectators behave.



Film:



**Role of micro features in producing emotion
(cinematography, including lighting, editing, sound [music in particular?], mise-en-scène, performance)**

How are the filmmakers trying to create emotion in spectators?

Key moments in sequence

**How micro features create
emotional response**

David Jays on *The Reader*: 'Daldry's film privileges feeling over action, even if this pulls against the story's argument (*Sight & Sound*, Feb 2009, p70).

What is an emotion?

We think of an emotion as something that moves us— a feeling we experience. Indeed, the word 'emotion' comes from the Latin word for 'moving' and suggests something like moving us out of ourselves. If you look up the word in a dictionary or online, this is what you'd get (from *answers.com*):



A mental state that arises spontaneously rather than through conscious effort and is often accompanied by physiological changes; a feeling: *the emotions of joy, sorrow, reverence, hate, and love.*

This definition highlights the fact that an emotion is something we experience (a 'mental state') but that it arises—or appears to arise—'spontaneously'. In exploring our emotional responses to popular films, you're not expected to be a psychologist. But there are a couple of ideas that it's worth remembering when studying this topic.

- Emotions appear to be involuntary—something which happens to us. They are nevertheless caused by something. *Compare this with film:* you will be studying what it is in the film which gives rise to the emotions you experience.
- Emotions—and particularly the quality of that emotional experience—are nevertheless affected by our wider experiences, by what we know. Knowledge and emotion are sometimes thought of as opposites but they are in fact inter-related. Put formally: emotional experience is mediated by what we know.
- This point will become relevant when you start to explore the reasons why people differ in their responses to film and how there is frequently a tension between the emotions we experience when watching a film like *Life is Beautiful* (laughter) and what we know (that the holocaust is an appalling inhumanity which words and images can hardly convey).



affect/effect—a quick use of English reminder!

Both these words can be used as nouns and verbs.

Firstly, the words you are familiar with:

- an effect (noun) - the effect of the film was overpowering
- to affect (verb) - the film affected me deeply.

The less common uses:

- an affect (noun) - a specialist psychological term for 'emotion', which you may well come across in your research. (Can also be used as an adjective: the 'affective aspect' of a film is thus its emotional aspect.)
- to effect - to bring about/put into practice. The new teacher effected several changes.



'The camera, like every other decision—the wardrobe, the production design—is there to showcase the story...to make the story as moving as possible.'
- director Jason Reitman on his 2009 film *Up in the Air*



Emotional response and emotional involvement

Filmmakers aim to draw us into the narrative of films: they do that in the way they structure the narrative—both in terms of the overall structure of the film (beginning, middle and end/3 acts/ equilibrium, disequilibrium and restoration of that equilibrium) and in the way they construct the narrative shot by shot through editing. An important feature of the narrative are the characters: in mainstream films, characters are frequently cast in terms of the characters we like and those we don't (crudely: heroes and villains). We are encouraged to *identify* with characters, to become emotionally involved with them, to feel as they do. Characters thus become a means of creating emotional responses in us.



Identify key moments where the central character(s) appear in the film you are studying.

Explore the central character of the film you are studying

- **How are you encouraged to identify with that character?**
- **Does the star status of the actor playing the character—and thus how the character is shot—affect your response?**
- **What role does the performance of the actor play in shaping your emotional response?**

That process of identification is sometimes called *alignment* and refers to the way spectators are encouraged—through macro and micro features—to relate to characters' emotions as well as to adopt their points of view. The emotional impact of a film frequently depends on spectator alignment with central characters.

Positioning



Another way of describing that process is by using Stuart Hall's term: positioning. He demonstrated how media creators, including filmmakers, encourage us to respond in particular ways to what we see. Micro and macro features like camerawork, editing, mise-en-scene, music, narrative construction, genre position spectators: they encourage us to take up a particular 'position' - a particular point of view—to what we see. He emphasised the points of view—the attitudes and values—we are encouraged to adopt towards what we see. But you could equally apply this to the way emotional responses are created.

emotional response how individual?

raising issues
gender ?



Responding to the way spectators are positioned

Stuart Hall described three main ways spectators tend to respond to the way they are positioned:

- a *preferred* reading, where spectators accept the response and point of view that filmmakers intended
- an *oppositional* reading, where spectators reject the response and point of view filmmakers intended
- a *negotiated* reading, where spectators only partially accept the response and point of view filmmakers intended (modifying it with views of their own, treating it with some scepticism).

Emotional response is thus very closely related to the points of view, values and attitudes which films convey. That is a reminder that a powerful way of raising issues is through appealing to emotion.

Positioning: do all spectators respond in the same way? Things to think about...

Following Stuart Hall's ideas about positioning, it follows that spectators do not necessarily respond in the same way to films—people's social and cultural background influences the way they will respond.

This opens out other perspectives: does gender or ethnicity play a significant role in spectators' emotional responses? In addition, you might ask yourself whether as an individual spectator you respond in quite individual ways to what you see. Whereas spectators often respond to the issues which films raise in ways which are common to larger groups of people, there is frequently a more diverse emotional response to films. This can be explored by you as an individual—and you can aim to ask yourself why you respond in this way.



***Up in the Air*: '...a smart comedy with a tart and timely critique of US corporate thinking' (Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, Feb 2010).**

Using emotional responses—to the film's storyline, its star, its playing with generic expectations—to raise issues?

Film:



**Role of macro features in producing emotion
(genre, narrative, character)**

How are the filmmakers trying to create emotion in spectators?

Key moments in sequence

**How macro features create
emotional response**

**'The audience goes to horror films not only to see things to be feared...but to experience fear, to explore the outer limits of knowledge and of cinematic representation itself.'
(Christine Gledhill, 'The Horror Genre', *The Cinema Book*, ed Pam Cook (2007, 3rd ed, p352)**