



Department  
for Education

# Film studies

**Draft AS and A level subject content**

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# The content for AS and A level film studies

## Introduction

1. AS and A level subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all AS and A level specifications in film studies. It provides the framework within which the awarding organisations create the detail of their specification and the possibilities for progression to HE.

## Aims and objectives

2. AS and A level specifications in film studies must offer students an in-depth, rigorous and coherent course of study which requires students to be able to:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a diverse range of film, including at A level, documentary, film from the Silent Era, experimental<sup>1</sup> film and short film
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the significance of film and film practice in national, global and historical contexts
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of film and its key contexts (including social, cultural, political, historical and technological contexts)
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how films generate meanings and responses
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of film as an aesthetic medium<sup>2</sup>
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the different ways in which spectators respond to film
- apply critical approaches to film
- demonstrate an ability to apply knowledge and understanding of film through either filmmaking or screenwriting

## Subject content

### Breadth and depth of content

3. AS and A level specifications in film studies must build on the knowledge, understanding and skills established at key stage 4 as well as provide an appropriate basis for progression to Higher Education. They must introduce students to the discipline of advanced level film studies and must require the study of a diverse range of critically

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<sup>1</sup> “Experimental film”: films which are non-narrative or which work against the conventions of narrative used in both mainstream and independent film production practice

<sup>2</sup> “aesthetic”: the way a film’s visual and aural elements are used to create significant non-narrative dimensions of the film, including the film’s ‘look’

recognised, culturally and historically significant<sup>3</sup> films. A level specifications must extend these studies in breadth and depth, enabling students to analyse and study film using more advanced critical approaches such as auteurism and filmmakers' theories of film..

## Knowledge and understanding

4. AS specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a minimum of six critically recognised, culturally and historically significant feature-length<sup>4</sup> films set by the awarding organisation. The films must include the following:

- three US films, at least one of which will be independent<sup>5</sup>
- two English language films made outside the US, at least one of which will be British
- one European film (non-English language)

5. The minimum number of films for AS level must include at least one contemporary<sup>6</sup> feature-length film and one feature-length film from each of the following<sup>7</sup>:

- 1930 to 1960 and
- 1961 to 1990

6. Awarding organisations must also require a comparison of two films to be studied in relation to their contexts as set out in paragraph 9 as well as in relation to their constituent elements (as set out in paragraphs 15-27).

7. In addition, at A level, specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the equivalent of a further six feature-length films (as a minimum) set by the awarding organisation. The films must include examples of the following:

- at least one additional English language film produced outside the US
- at least one example of a non-European, non-English language film

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<sup>3</sup> "critically recognised, culturally and historically significant": critically acclaimed through awards and nominations at major film awards (Oscars, BAFTAs) and major film festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Sundance); critically celebrated by the academy of film scholars and serious critics in the British Film Institute's and American Film Institute's ten yearly polls of the best films and the annual surveys carried out by British Film Institute since 2007; and culturally and historically significant as featured in standard academic accounts of the medium. Awarding organisation film choices will be accompanied by a rationale to justify their inclusion against these criteria.

<sup>4</sup> "feature-length film": considered for the purposes of specification design, to be a film of at least 80 minutes.

<sup>5</sup> "independent": two kinds of independent are acknowledged. The first is produced outside the major commercial structures of, for example, Hollywood or Bollywood, but which is still intended for cinematic release targeting a niche market: the second is a low budget and often oppositional film, which may receive little cinematic exposure outside specialist festivals but which circulates widely among communities of interest. Examples of either kind of independent film may be set by an Awarding Organisation.

<sup>6</sup> "contemporary film": released in the UK from 2010 to present.

<sup>7</sup> "Time periods stipulated": the time periods stipulated for AS and A level are not designed to correspond to specific film historical periods but are intended to ensure coverage of a historical range of film.

- at least one documentary film
- a compilation of historically significant films from the Silent Era with a total duration of at least 80 minutes (equivalent in time to a feature-length film) or a complete silent feature-length film from the Silent Era
- at least three short films<sup>8</sup> (all critically recognised, culturally and historically significant films as defined in paragraph 3, note 3) with a combined duration of at least 80 minutes (equivalent in time to a feature-length film)
- either one feature-length experimental film or a compilation of experimental films with a total duration of 80 minutes (equivalent in time to a feature-length film)
- one film from 1991-present

8. Awarding organisations must also require the study of at least two major movements or stylistic developments in film history, characterised by the significant contribution they made to film aesthetics, such as montage, expressionism, neo-realism or the new wave cinemas of the 1960s. (See paragraphs 24-25 for more information on aesthetic dimension of film).

9. AS and A level specifications must require students to be able to show how knowledge of the way in which films, including the films studied, reflect their social, cultural, political, historical and production contexts (including financial and technological opportunities and constraints) informs analysis and understanding of these films.

10. In addition, at A level, specifications must require students to show knowledge and understanding of how spectators' responses are affected by social and cultural factors.

11. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how meanings and responses are generated by film, including in the films studied, through:

- cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing and sound individually and in combination with one another
- narrative construction (including the role of a film's screenplay in narrative construction and, where relevant, genre as a principal structuring element of narrative)
- the way both of the above contribute to the representation of cultures and societies in film

12. In addition, A level specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and a critical understanding of:

- how meanings and responses are generated by film through performance, staging and direction

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<sup>8</sup> "short film": a short film from the silent era may not be set as a short film.

- the ideological implications<sup>9</sup> of narrative construction, narrative structure and representations of different societies and cultures
- the significance of narrative structures which are alternative to and/or in opposition to conventional narrative structures.

13 AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the fundamental elements of spectatorship, including

- how the spectator has been conceived both as ‘passive’ and ‘active’ in the act of film viewing
- how the spectator is in dynamic interaction with film narrative and film features designed to generate response
- reasons for the uniformity or diversity of response by different spectators

14 In addition, at A level, specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of more advanced elements of spectatorship, including:

- the analysis of narrative, visual, musical, performance, genre and auteur cues in relation to spectator response
- the impact of different viewing conditions<sup>10</sup> on spectator response
- the possibility of preferred, aberrant and oppositional ‘readings’ of film

15. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of cinematography, including lighting, in the films studied:

- camera shots including point of view shots, focus including depth of field, expressive and canted angle shots, handheld camera in contrast to steadicam technology
- the principles of 3 point lighting including key, fill and backlighting
- composition, including balanced and unbalanced shots
- monochrome cinematography
- how all aspects of cinematography can generate multiple connotations and suggest a range of interpretation
- how shot selection relates to narrative development and conveys messages and values
- how lighting, including 3 point lighting, conveys character, atmosphere and messages and values

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<sup>9</sup> “ideological implications”: the points of view implied by the way a narrative is constructed and the representations it incorporates and the way those points of view can convey sets of values, attitudes and beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> “viewing conditions”: the different technological and social conditions under which a film can be viewed such as on a mobile phone, computer screen, television or in 3D at a cinema (technological) and individually, as part of a group of friends or family, or as part of mass audience (social).

16. In addition, at A level, students must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of cinematography, including lighting, in the films studied:

- camerawork including subjective camera, shifts in focus and depth of field, mixed camera styles, filters
- chiaroscuro<sup>11</sup> lighting and other expressive lighting effects
- how cinematography, including lighting, provides psychological insight into character
- how cinematography, including lighting, is used to align<sup>12</sup> spectators and how that alignment relates to spectator interpretation of narrative
- how and why different spectators develop different interpretations of the same camera shots and lighting
- how cinematography, including lighting, contributes to the ideologies<sup>13</sup> conveyed by a film
- how cinematography including lighting can be indicative of an auteur approach and can contribute to a film aesthetic

17. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of mise-en-scène in the films studied:

- how the principal components of mise-en-scène (setting, props, costume and make-up) can generate multiple connotations and suggest a range of possible interpretations
- how changes in mise-en-scène contribute to character and narrative development
- how mise-en-scène conveys messages and values
- how the significance of mise-en-scène is affected by cinematography, in particular through variation in depth of field, focus and framing
- how mise-en-scène can be used both naturalistically and expressively
- the significance of motifs in mise-en-scène, including their patterned repetition

18. In addition, at A level, students must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of mise-en-scène in the films studied:

- how staging, movement and off-screen space are significant in creating meaning and generating response
- how mise-en-scène is used to align spectators and how that alignment relates to spectator interpretation of narrative

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<sup>11</sup> "chiaroscuro": the dramatic effect of contrasting areas of light and dark in a shot through the use of controlled light sources and props.

<sup>12</sup> "align, alignment": terms used in film studies to indicate the way in which film, particularly through cinematography and narrative construction, encourages spectators to adopt the position and outlook of particular characters. Spectators are thus encouraged to 'align' their responses, as well as in general their points of view, with particular characters and issues.

<sup>13</sup> "ideologies": sets of values, attitudes and beliefs.

- how and why different spectators develop different interpretations of the same mise-en-scène
- how mise-en-scène contributes to the ideologies conveyed by a film
- how mise-en-scène can be indicative of an auteur approach (director or designer) and can contribute to a film aesthetic

19. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of editing in the films studied:

- the shot to shot relationships of continuity editing including match editing, the 180° rule and the role of editing in creating meaning including the Kuleshov effect
- how the principal components of editing can generate multiple connotations and suggest a range of interpretations
- how editing implies relationships between characters and contributes to narrative development including through editing motifs and their patterned repetition
- how editing conveys messages and values
- how visual effects (created in post-production) are used, including the way they are designed to engage the spectator and create an emotional response

20. In addition, at A level, students must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of editing in the films studied:

- montage editing and stylised forms of editing including jump cuts
- how editing is used to align the spectator and how that alignment relates to spectator interpretation of narrative
- how and why different spectators interpret the same editing effects differently
- how editing contributes to the ideologies conveyed by film
- how editing can be indicative of an auteur approach (director or editor) and can contribute to a film aesthetic
- the use of visual effects (created in post-production) including the tension between the filmmakers' intention to create an emotional response and the spectator's actual response

21. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of sound in the films studied:

- distinction between parallel and contrapuntal sound, whether diegetic or non-diegetic, foley sound and sound used expressively
- how the principal components of sound can generate multiple connotations and suggest a range of interpretations
- how sound relates to characters and narrative development including the use of sound motifs
- how sound conveys messages and values

22. In addition, at A level, students must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of sound in the films studied:

- multitrack sound mixing and layering, asynchronous sound, sound design
- how sound is used to align the spectator and how that alignment relates to spectator interpretation of narrative
- how and why different spectators interpret the same use of sound differently
- how sound contributes to the ideologies conveyed by film
- how sound can be indicative of an auteur approach (director or sound designer) and can contribute to a film aesthetic

23. A level specifications only must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how the following aspects of performance contribute distinctive elements to the films studied:

- the use of non-verbal communication including physical expression and vocal delivery
- performance styles in cinema including method and improvisatory styles
- the significance of casting
- the significance of the interaction between actors
- the role of directing as a 'choreography' of stage movement
- the relationship between performance and cinematography
- how performance is used to align the spectator and how that alignment relates to spectator interpretation of narrative
- how and why different spectators interpret the same performance differently
- how performance contributes to the ideologies conveyed by film
- how performance can be indicative of an auteur approach (director or performer) and can contribute to a film aesthetic

24. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of the aesthetic dimension of film, including in the films studied:

- the role of mise-en-scène, cinematography including lighting, composition and framing in creating aesthetic effects in specific film sequences
- the role of music and editing in conjunction with the above in creating aesthetic effects
- the significance of the aesthetic dimension in film including the potential conflict between spectacle and the drive towards narrative resolution in film

25. In addition, at A level, students must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following aspects of the aesthetic dimension of film, including in the films studied:

- the aesthetic qualities of specific films and the concept of film aesthetics

- the relation of a film's aesthetics to the auteur critical approach
- critical approaches to film aesthetics including the relationship between film aesthetics and auteurism and ideology

26. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge of the following aspects of narrative construction, including the role of the screenplay:

- how narrative construction reflects plot and expresses temporal duration and ellipsis
- the relationship between screenplay and the realised film narrative
- narrative conventions of mainstream screenwriting, including the construction of dialogue, character and the use of images and sound to convey narrative
- narrational devices including voiceover, flashback, the framing narrative, the open ending, repetition and other forms of narrative patterning
- how the dramatic qualities of a sequence or scene are constructed, including through dialogue
- how narrative construction provides psychological insight into character

27. In addition, at A level, students must demonstrate knowledge of the following:

- the narrative conventions of the short film demonstrated in film and screenplay
- ambiguity in narrative including the ambiguous relationship between cause and effect and uncertainty over character identification
- how the dramatic qualities of a short film are constructed, including through dialogue
- how narrative construction is used to align the spectator and how that alignment encourages the adoption of a particular spectator point of view
- how narrative construction contributes to the ideologies conveyed by film and how narrative can function as an ideological framework<sup>14</sup>
- narrative forms which reject the three-act structure, including non-linear narratives.

28. AS and A level specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of key critical approaches to film and subject-specific terminology (as represented by the terms incorporated in this subject content). This will include critical approaches to film associated with:

- film poetics as an understanding of film as a constructed artefact, resulting from processes of selection and combination
- film narrative, including the formalist and structuralist conception of film narrative.

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<sup>14</sup> "how narrative can function as an ideological framework": how, for example, the overall structure of a narrative can affect the points of view, attitudes, values and beliefs being conveyed about its subject matter.

29. At A level, specifications must additionally require study of, and an evaluation of the validity of, the following critical approaches:

- auteurism
- ideology (the concept of film as ideological).

30. In addition, at A level, students must be required to debate critically the following:

- the claims of naturalism and realism as against the expressive (e.g., Bazin in opposition to Eisenstein's work)
- the significance of the digital in film and new possibilities for cinema (e.g., Prince and Manovich)
- the validity of at least two filmmakers' theories of film set by the awarding organisation (e.g., Eisenstein, Hitchcock, Rossellini, Bunuel, Godard, Fassbinder, Wenders, Lynch or Von Trier).

## Skills

31. AS specifications must require students to develop the skills to:

- analyse and interpret films critically, communicating ideas effectively through discursive argument
- be able to synthesise knowledge
- compare at least two films as stipulated by the awarding organisation (see paragraph 6)
- apply the key critical approaches to film identified for AS and use subject-specific terminology (as incorporated in paragraphs 11-30) accurately.

32. AS specifications must also require students to apply knowledge and understanding of key elements of film (cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound and editing) and narrative construction, as set out in paragraph 26, to the production of either an extract from a film or from a screenplay to a brief set by the awarding organisation. Film and screenplay extracts must be individually produced<sup>15</sup>. Work will include:

- Production: an extract from a film or screenplay:
  - either an extract from a film or from a screenplay, which highlights narrative construction<sup>16</sup> within a film sequence. The screenplay will be accompanied by a digitally photographed storyboard of a key section from the complete screenplay to illustrate how the screenplay would be realised.

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<sup>15</sup> Unassessed students may act in, or appear in, the film extract.

<sup>16</sup> "narrative construction within a film sequence": the emphasis of production work at AS is on applying knowledge and understanding of how the different elements of film can be used to construct a narrative within a sequence.

- Analysis and evaluation
  - an evaluative analysis of the production in relation to other films or screenplays.

33. A level specifications must require students to develop the skills to:

- analyse, interpret and compare films critically, communicating ideas effectively through discursive argument
- be able to synthesise complex areas of knowledge
- apply the key critical approaches identified for A level and use subject-specific terminology (as incorporated in paragraphs 11-30) accurately.

34. A level specifications must require students to apply knowledge and understanding of the short film and its distinctive narrative form, as set out in paragraph 27, to the production of either a short film or a screenplay to a brief set by the awarding organisation. Film and screenplay must be individually produced<sup>17</sup>. Work will include:

- Production: a short film or a screenplay
  - a production consisting of either a short film or a screenplay for a short film<sup>18</sup> to a brief set by the awarding organisation. The screenplay will be accompanied by a digitally photographed storyboard of a key section from the complete screenplay to illustrate how the screenplay would be realised.

Analysis and evaluation

- an evaluative analysis of the production in relation to other films or screenplays.

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<sup>17</sup> Unassessed students may act in, or appear in, the film extract.

<sup>18</sup> A level production: the emphasis of the production at A level is on applying knowledge and understanding of the short film and its distinctive narrative form. A complete narrative, rather than the sequence stipulated for AS, is therefore required.



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