

Fish Tank

(2009, Andrea Arnold, UK)

Component 1: Varieties of film and filmmaking (AL)

Component 2: European film (AS)

Core Study Areas

Key Elements of Film Form

Meaning & Response

The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area

Narrative

Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

Fish Tank presents opportunities to study a British film by a female director. It offers aesthetic and thematic links with films from Component 1 and Component 2 which focus on representations of gender and youth.

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and timings/links

Mia's second attempt to free the horse 9:12- 13:09

Dancing together 1:50: 1:52:21

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Sequence begins with a back-shot of Mia on the balcony. She is positioned centrally within the frame looking out beyond the housing estate. The back-shot builds enigma, and foreshadows her attempts to free the horse.
- The high-angle affords Mia a view of the estate, the children playing in the yard and on the balconies and highlights the idea that her opportunities in life are limited.
- Close-up shots inside the flat reinforce the idea that there is limited space for Mia, her

sister and mother and this enhances their frustration and lack of communication, whilst precipitating conflict between them.

- Wide-shots of the outdoor space, where the horse is tethered, contrast with the close-up shots and angles of Mia and her sister inside their small flat, highlighting the idea of space and freedom.
- Tracking shots follow Mia as she runs away from the boys and the dog, with the hand-held camera contributing to the conflict and dramatic tension of this moment in the narrative
- Filming with the natural lighting enhances the realism of the story, its setting and characters.
- Wide-shots capturing the housing estates, almost like a postcard. This suggests the significance of the location and setting to the narrative, reinforcing the film's overall realism.
- A back-shot of Mia's mother Joanne near the balcony replicates a similar shot of Mia in an earlier sequence.
- During the sequence, framing alternates between two-shots of the sisters and a medium shot of Joanne, and a two-shot of Mia and Joanne, with Tyler behind her sister. These shots generate meanings about the relationship between the sisters and their mother as a struggling single parent.
- Framing of the characters effectively communicates the dynamic and conflict within this family.
- After several shots capturing Mia with Tyler and then her mother, all three are framed together through a wide-shot, thus suggesting a moment in the narrative when the family comes together.
- Lighting is natural (daytime), working effectively with the setting and the characters.

Mise-en-Scène

- Mia wearing a hoody – urban dress code for youth.
- Mia's house is untidy and cluttered, suggesting the chaos and lack of order in their lives/ Mia's life.
- The lack of tidiness is captured when Mia goes

through the drawers looking for a hammer, as an array of objects is thrown together.

- Mia's sister Tyler has nothing more to do than watch daytime television.
- Framing Joanne by her balcony captures her frustrations and struggles as a single mum on a housing estate.
- Joanne is wearing a cardigan over her pyjamas, suggesting her low mood and inability to cope. She has been crying and her make-up is smudged.
- The image on the back wall is colourful, connoting a time and place where things may be better for Mia and her family, whilst it is also ironic.

Editing

- The long-take at the beginning suggests that Mia is reflecting on her life and opportunities when she looks out from her balcony.
- The pace of the editing quickens when she runs inside, searching for a hammer to free the horse. This adrenalin suggests her own attempts to be free from her environment and circumstances.
- Mia is gentle and compassionate when she reaches the horse and the mood and pace are sustained until the boys turn up and then there are quick cuts as Mia fights to free herself.
- The editing picks up its pace to create panic and suspense when the dog starts barking at Mia.
- A steady controlled pace of editing enables the shots to sustain the characters in the frame and show how they interact and communicate with each other.
- The balanced pace contributes to the narrative's sense of resolution at this moment of the story.

Sound

- Inside the flat, the diegetic sounds of daytime television reinforce the realism of the setting
- Diegetic sounds heighten the tension and sense of danger, when Mia fights with the boys about freeing the horse. This accumulates when the dog starts barking
- Mia's breathing is captured as she runs away, putting the spectator in her position and turning up the tension and dramatic qualities of the sequence.
- Diegetic sound of music (Mia's) is played by Joanne.
- This soundtrack plays a pivotal part in developing the narrative because it offers a space for the characters to communicate.

- As the music is more than background, the characters are swayed away by the harmony, trying to work with its rhythms. The pace and rhythm enables this dysfunctional family to move together, in step and tune with the music, at least momentarily.
- Sound plays a pivotal role, it becomes a narrative device.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- Representations of a strong female lead. A working class female youth with limited opportunities but equally with aspirations for something more than her present circumstances.
- Mia is a rounded and complex character and therefore she goes against stereotypical representations of youth as perhaps we find in some British urban films, for example with *Kidulthood*.
- *Fish Tank* explores representations of working class life within a dysfunctional family, whilst it also shows the challenges facing a single mum like Joanne.
- Representations of male characters are also realistic and not stereotyped. Connor's character suggests that he has positive qualities (whilst at the same time he is cheating on his partner and on Joanne).
- Regional identity is prominent through the representations of life on a housing estate on the outskirts of East London and Essex.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual Style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

- The film establishes a strong sense of realism and authenticity through the characters, the everyday events and situations and the significance given to settings and locations.
- The 'look and feel' of *Fish Tank* develops the visual style of realism we see in British Social Realism, the British New Wave of the 1960s and 'kitchen sink dramas', with the absence of gloss or glamour seen in mainstream Hollywood films.
- *Fish Tank* makes use of the visual styles associated with many contemporary British films within the tradition of Social Realism, including those by Ken Loach and Mike Leigh where ordinary characters and everyday settings are central to the narrative.

- The horse is a recurring motif which highlights notions of entrapment and freedom.
- The balcony in Mia's flat is a motif which suggests the boundary between her limited world and new opportunities beyond it.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- *Fish Tank* continues the tradition of British cinema since the 1990s with its strong focus on social issues: family, the absence of fathers and single parenting (Connor is also an absent father).
- Social class is significant: Joanne is not employed and living on a housing estate, whilst Connor is a manager who can provide money for both Mia and her family and his own, so might be regarded as marginally middle-class.
- *Fish Tank* focuses on social issues from the perspective of youth within an urban context (Mia is referred to a Pupil Referral Unit).
- The film examines the impact of these social issues on the characters, all of whom turn to alcohol as a means for coping.
- *Fish Tank* belongs to the tradition of British films since the 1990s which contribute to debates about social issues ('broken Britain') such as family life and unemployment in Britain, for example *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty*, *Billy Elliot*, *Ladybird*.

Historical

- Within the film – hip-hop music/ culture; its appeal for Mia's generation.
- Urban environment reflects life on housing estate in Essex.
- *Fish Tank* reflects representations of social and political issues which other films explore at the time: *Harry Brown* (2009), *Looking for Eric* (2009), *Shifty* (2009) *Wild Bill* (2010).
- *Fish Tank* is distinctive in developing a strong female lead from which to explore social and political issues.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - STARTING POINTS

Narrative & Ideology

- Dramatic tension centres around conflict: Mia's struggle for freedom conflicts with her environment and circumstances.
- Joanne's struggles as a single mum and her need for love and happiness conflict with her role as mother and lead to neglect.
- Narrative patterning is indicated in the cinematography when Mia and then Joanne are framed in a wide-shot, looking outside balcony.
- Connor's own secrets and circumstances lead to the ambivalent role he plays in Mia's life creating psychological intensity and insight.
- Binary oppositions emerge through Connor's presence and the absence of Mia's real dad.
- Music becomes a pivotal 'narrative' device in developing plot and character (Mia goes to an abandoned flat to express herself when dancing).
- When Mia, Tyler and Joanne dance at the end, music contributes to the narrative's attempt to bring resolution.
- *Fish Tank* resists stereotyping characters like Mia and Joanne. Mia's character is complex and the film resists representing her as a rebellious youth who is destructive and careless without developing her character and exploring her emotions.
- Having a female director brings a new perspective to the social themes and representations of youth, gender, family life and parenting.
- *Fish Tank* challenges dominant views and ideologies of youth as difficult or deviant and steers the spectator to see events from Mia's perspective.
- Arnold's representation of Mia enables the film's resolution to be hopeful and positive, in spite of its strong realism and complex circumstances.