

# [Spectatorship]

## PART 2 – FILM THEORIES

Problematic ideological approaches	Post-structuralism and the death of the author	Stuart Hall: reception theory revolution	Beyond Lacan and psychoanalysis: intellectual versus emotional engagement	Passive and active spectator positioning
<p>What links a huge swathe of 1970s theory (Barthes, Propp, Mulvey, Althusser, Adorno) was an intention to produce a single unifying explanation for the kinds of meanings that film produced. The following four points provide an overriding explanation pre-1970:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Much film writing in the 1980s and beyond sought to foreground a more nuanced and flexible set of arguments regarding film viewing to those linguistic, Marxian and psychoanalytic frameworks identified above – prompted in part by the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida – the post-structuralist theorists of the period overturned the generalised analysis provided by pre-1980s film writers. Post-structuralist critiques of Lacan, Levi-Strauss, formalism and Marxism centre around the following observations:</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>One of the most important critiques of structuralism was Stuart Hall in his highly influential 1973 essay <b>'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse'</b> suggesting that audience engagement is hugely varied and complex.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>filmmaker encoding is carefully controlled with deliberate intended meaning.</li><li>however, this does not mean that all viewers will interpret messages in identical ways.</li><li>Hall believes that widespread use of media <b>stereotypes</b> exist because Black people don't have the economic power to control film production and have limited capacity to offer alternate models to negative representation – particularly, towards Black masculinity.</li><li>Hall believes audiences can resist stereotypical representation with their chosen reading of the film/media text.</li><li>the <b>'situated logics'</b> of individual readers plays a vital role in guiding audience interpretation.</li></ul></li><li>Audiences can produce the following types of film readings:</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Extensive criticism has been directed at the psychoanalytic approach, particularly by Lacan and Metz, that cinema spectatorship always aligns with screen-based leads who make good our real-world human failings.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Shaviro and Hall argue that film spectators respond to narratives in many unpredictable ways<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>contemporary film authors now use a range of storytelling devices that deliberately orchestrate spectator ambiguity.</li><li>Jill Nelmes differentiates between passive viewing experience induced by mainstream cinema and more nuanced experiences of independent film spectatorship.</li><li>Mainstream film (Nelmes argues) offers us "even more spectacular forms of visual and aural cinema" – consider: Marvel CGI.</li><li>Richard Wollheim calls these 'central imagining' experiences where the spectator is passively locked into a franchise/genre-based cinematic rollercoaster – leads to uniform response for all viewers.</li><li>'Independent cinema' is more likely to produce spectator ambiguity and 'a-central imagining effects' – morally liminal spaces where audiences evaluate character action across complex narrative arcs- resists easy resolution of mainstream cinema with complex antagonists and flawed lead characters.</li></ul></li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Formalist and linguistic frameworks</b> – these conceived of film as a kind of language – film form microcodes such as shot types creating a universally understood range of effects that viewers absorb through spectatorship – the idea that film form creates a fixed range of meanings.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Structuralist, linguistic, psychoanalytic and Marxian approaches are overly deterministic</b> – all approaches assume that spectators read films in the same way – intersectional demographics are ignored by pre-1980s writers when assessing film spectatorship – post-structuralists suggest that our individual experiences (backgrounds, political biases and life experiences) play a significant role in helping us to decode the meanings of cinema stories.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Psychoanalytic and Marxist thinking focuses on authorship rather than spectatorship</b> – the analytical force of much pre-1980s film theory centred on the authors of films as the ultimate creators of meaning – psychoanalytic analysis often focused on biographies of directors in a bid to understand the hidden meanings that those authors encoded when making films – authors do shape film meaning, but post-structuralists argue not all film spectators decode those meanings in the way they were intended.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The idea that film provides a compensatory pleasure, some writers argue, provides an overly pessimistic view of the way we interact with film.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Anti-hero protagonists</b> – repulse film spectators while inviting audiences to align themselves with them – morally ambiguous may be embraced or rejected by audience.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Structuralist theorists</b> – these suggest that films construct narratives and characters that draw from a fixed range of storytelling structures (Levi-Strauss' binary oppositions) – oppositional characters, conflicting stylistic features – Propp's ideas regarding character archetypes have been applied to suggest that films universally draw upon a fixed range of character types whose narrative functions are predetermined.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Psychoanalytic and Marxist thinking focuses on authorship rather than spectatorship</b> – the analytical force of much pre-1980s film theory centred on the authors of films as the ultimate creators of meaning – psychoanalytic analysis often focused on biographies of directors in a bid to understand the hidden meanings that those authors encoded when making films – authors do shape film meaning, but post-structuralists argue not all film spectators decode those meanings in the way they were intended.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Dominant readings</b> – audiences knowingly decode films as intended by the author and accept ideological meanings produced. Audiences are passive when making a dominant reading.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Taking this cue from the philosophical writing of Gilles Deleuze, the film theorist Steven Shaviro, reminds us that spectatorship offers us more than just compensatory character alignments.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Narrative irony</b> – directors can construct actions that aren't meant to be taken seriously by audiences but requires them to decode sophisticated layers of meaning.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Marxian/post-Marxian theoretical frameworks</b> – central to Marxian thinking lies the assumption that a specific set of ideas or ideologies are nurtured by society and that those ideas usually reinforce the power of social elites – some Marxists argue that films, as produced by the financial might of Hollywood, produce stories that demanise or marginalise key social groups – filmmaking to Marxists is conventionally controlled by those social elites who are rich enough to finance production – as a result, elite views tend to be represented by film narratives.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>The style and content of filmmaking is too varied to support a unified film theory</b> – pre-1980s film theory sought to locate a grand unifying explanation that could be applied to films – application of those ideas to the real output of film world is hugely problematic in that real films vary enormously in terms of style and content (example: mainstream and independent cinema) – to apply the same analytic models to all films misses much of the distinctiveness of individual products.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Negotiated readings</b> – audiences produce a negotiated reading if the author's message is acknowledged in general terms, but experiences of readers also lead them to question or resist some aspects of the text – audiences are both passive and active when making negotiated readings.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Cinema might indeed bewitch the spectator with moments of desire and fantasy, yet film is also attracts because it provokes a rainbow of emotional responses.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Multi-protagonist casts</b> – narratives that focus on a single heroic character are often resisted in independent cinema, replaced instead with narrative action that dissipates across multi-protagonist ensembles. The lack of a single character focus produces complex character alignments – audiences might find that they align with secondary characters or those that mirror their demographic.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Psychoanalytic film criticism</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>links between film spectatorship and the workings of the sub-conscious</li><li>film viewing produces the same sorts of states we experience while dreaming</li><li>other psychoanalytic critics focus attention on film as an expression of sub-conscious desires of their directors and writers</li><li>psychoanalytic theorists argue that films compel audiences to experience those desires and wish fulfilments in a way that aligns the spectator with the inner world of the film's author.</li><li>we are positioned as voyeurs: we don't watch films – we interpolate their sub-conscious meanderings .</li><li>we align ourselves with the sub-conscious desires of a film's creators as expressed through the storylines and characters they construct for the cinematic screen..</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Pre-1980s approaches emphasise intellectual analysis over emotional engagement</b> – the act of film spectatorship is an emotional experience – moments of joy, fear or surprise that cinema spectatorship induces are often sidelined by theoretical schools pre-1980 in favour of complex intellectual assessments – such approaches do not reflect the way that ordinary viewers interact with cinema narratives.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Oppositional readings</b> – audiences understand the author's message but also challenge the ideas produced as a result of their experiences or beliefs – audiences are active when they resist the ideological thrust of the text.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Shaviro's view of film spectatorship recognises that cinemagoers engage with films because they provoke and resolve fears, because they provide us with moments of romantic excess or comedic release.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Unresolved narratives</b> – mainstream cinema produces clear-cut resolutions, the narratives of independent films can produce muddled moral meanings.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Lacan's 'Alignment and desire'</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Lacan's psychoanalytic approach outlined what he called the 'mirror stage' – a crucial moment in the development of infants where children initially comprehend that they are independent and separate from the wider world.</li><li>For Lacan, it is during the pre-language stage that we start to develop our sense of self-identity – the mirror stage expels us from the pre-conscious warmth of babyhood.</li><li>Lacan further suggests that we experience that transition as a disruptive loss: an unconscious yearning to return to dormant infancy, to perceive ourselves as incomplete, and an overwhelming desire to copy adult role models who are prominent in childhood years (often unfulfilled).</li><li>the hypnotic power of cinema induces two pleasures, according to Metz and Lacan) – voyeurism (losing our sense of self to watching others like a new-born infant), identification (sub-consciously align ourselves with on-screen characters – wish fulfilment).</li><li>Metz and Lacan believe that cinema spectatorship is underscored by a desire to bridge the gap between our real and ideal selves – cinema assumes a perfected version of our less than perfect real-world lives through character alignment.</li></ul></li></ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To explain the effects of cinema as an experience of compensatory wish fulfilment, misses much of the varied emotional gratifications that film spectatorship provides.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Character backstory and deconstructed characterisation</b> – separation of protagonist and antagonist moralities is more clearly evidenced in mainstream cinema than independent film – characters are morally realigned by narrative events of independent film – less than straightforward.</li></ul>
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Bricolage, pastiche or intertextuality – postmodern narrative devices are not unique to indie cinema</b> – intertextuality (referencing other media texts rewards knowing audiences), bricolage and pastiche (referencing aesthetic styles from other genres or time periods prompts audience nostalgia) – meanings can be misconstrued by audiences without prior knowledge.</li></ul>

# [Contemporary American Cinema Since 2005]

## PART 3 – CONTEXTS & FORMS

Spectacle-based cinematic appeals	Family and home: a reappraisal of gender in contemporary American film	Outsiders and conflict: a reappraisal of race	Independent American Film	Transcending as narrative subversion	Trans-coding in independent films
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contemporary cinemas are under increasing threat from <b>digital streaming services</b>:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>technologies (flat-screen TVs, elaborate home projection systems, surround sound set-ups) recreate big screen experiences at home</li> <li>digital streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple+, Disney+ have given contemporary audiences unlimited access to extended libraries of film back catalogues for cheap(ish) subscription costs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Major production studios have sought to counter increased competition for home viewing services by focusing their output on content best experienced on big screens:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mainstream film market is rich in output that induces <b>spectacle-based narrative pleasures</b> (science fiction or fantasy-oriented settings to immerse audiences in image-rich experiences.</li> <li><b>spectacle-driven output</b> means it's not unusual for big blockbuster releases to include over 2,000 individual visual effects (implication: elaborate post-production processes with thousands of personnel involved).</li> <li>effects construct <b>photo-real cinematic universes</b> via computer-generated imagery, digital painting and the use of complex miniatures and virtual sets.</li> <li><b>effects-driven cinema</b> of contemporary Hollywood isn't just restricted to science fiction or fantasy-based output – most films deploy an invisible range of post-production digital touch-ups that darken shadows or recolour individual frames to ensure <b>palette consistency</b> across a product.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Hollywood's reappraisal of gender</b> – previously, male lone-wolf male hero protagonists challenged by more flexible adaptation of traditional gender-based stereotypes – that defy and stretch traditional gender roles.</li> <li><b>Second Wave Feminism</b> – women's liberation movements of 1960s and 70s questioned idea that woman's primary ideal role was connected to child rearing and running family home – sought equality in education, home and employment – questioned routine objectification of female body in media/film – female action heroes is a manifestation of a second-wave repositioning.</li> <li><b>Third Wave Feminism</b> – where second wavers sought equality of the sexes, third wavers embraced traditional female values in addition to second wave's radicalism – choose to be mothers and/or nurture career-driven aspirations.</li> <li><b>Fourth Wave Feminism</b> – buoyed by social media, early 2000s feminist movement had a radical agenda – #metoo movement – prompted by Harvey Weinstein scandal – social media use to draw attention to persistent, often invisible acts of everyday sexism – questions objectification sanctioned by third wavers and draws attention to difficulties women face in career development – only two directors on syllabus are women, suggesting that study continues to reflect a masculine view of womanhood.</li> <li><b>Gender fluidity</b> – LGBTQ+ groups are slowly gaining mainstream acceptance in US, with a range of non-heteronormative storylines beginning to appear in mainstream film output as well as that of independent film.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Sharper focus of contemporary race-based representation</b> – once marginalized as maverick voices such as Spike Lee have now been ingratiated into the mainstream – 12 Years a Slave, Hidden Figures, The Help, Get Out – all explore America's problematic treatment of non-white communities – and Black Panther broke the billion-dollar box-office mark with a BAME dominant franchise outing.</li> <li><b>Post 9/11 considerations</b> – most potent news imagery of 21<sup>st</sup> century (Twin Towers 2001 attack) – Bush invades Iraq in 2003 – cinematic treatments of war often critical of effects of invasion and the jingoistic rhetoric of the period.</li> <li><b>Hurricane Katrina</b> – catastrophic category 4 storm that devastated New Orleans in 2005 killing over 1,000 largely Black community inhabitants – Bush's delayed military response widely criticized as institutionally racist – Beasts of the Southern Wild uses Louisiana setting with parallels.</li> <li><b>Changing political landscape of America</b> – Obama's rise to POTUS in 2008 brought Black power to mainstream US politics and the White backlash with Trump in 2020 has produced a more racially aware cinematic response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>The independent label</b> – broad label as financial independent film production is very rare – most independent producers form strategic pacts with Hollywood majors to ensure theatrical distribution and help mitigate huge costs of making and marketing film.</li> <li><b>Hollywood's co-dependent production financing model</b> – conglomerates such as Disney and Universal have exclusive access to their work from commercially mainstream output despite conglomerate ownership of their production           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Coen Brothers work under the Mike Zoss Productions label, yet their films are given a global high-profile distribution presence via their links with Paramount.</li> <li>Independent labelling helps to determine a set of predefined expectations for spectators, helping to infer that films contain a critical viewpoint or are style using a non-mainstream aesthetic.</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>High profile auteurs and 'alternative' filmmakers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the 'independent' labelling acts as a unique selling point to differentiate their work from commercially mainstream output despite conglomerate ownership of their production</li> <li>The Coen Brothers work under the Mike Zoss Productions label, yet their films are given a global high-profile distribution presence via their links with Paramount.</li> <li>Independent labelling helps to determine a set of predefined expectations for spectators, helping to infer that films contain a critical viewpoint or are style using a non-mainstream aesthetic.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Hollywood control over film production market</b> – Hollywood retains control of the independent film production market – film academics like Geoff King argue that the 'independent' label does not allude to use of independent finance to make films but describes a specific aesthetic style or type of narrative content that is distinctive from mainstream cinema.           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>prickly central characters and less likely to offer fantastical reconciliatory dynamics to wash away unfavourable elements of a character.</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>A subjective narrative style</b> – detailed explorations of marginalized characters who live in equally marginalized worlds – focuses on class or race-based portrayals – often using victim-based characters to assert sympathetic portraits.</li> <li><b>Outsider character alignment</b> – independent films align spectators with marginalized protagonists – positioning viewers to understand better the circumstances or experiences of those characters.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Character countertypes</b> – counter-typical representations, when a character inverts or reverses stereotypical expectations           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No Country for Old Men – counter-types are used to outline an alternative to action-based hypermasculinity – with Sheriff Bell's cowardice inverting the heroic lawman stereotype that we so often find in both Western and Crime genres.</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>Deconstructed stereotypes</b> – when stereotypical characters are used but are subsequently placed within narratives that explore in detail the causes and significance of the negative behaviours associated with the stereotype.           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bohhood invokes the 'teenage slacker' stereotype but contextualises the character within a detailed exploration of the boy's family history to reveal a sense of the character's fragility rather than his villainy.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contemporary Blockbusters are organized around <b>convergent marketing strategies</b> – driven by budgets that often exceed production spends:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>films increasingly driven by <b>franchise-oriented storytelling</b> (sequels, serialized output, spin-offs) to engage inherited audiences and exploit fan-based interest to generate ready-made profits.</li> <li>Major Hollywood studios look to film projects that can be recycled into commercial opportunities for <b>ancillary subsidiaries</b>.</li> <li>Filmmakers use a variety of <b>projection-based innovations</b> to enhance the experience of watching films in cinema auditoriums (3D projection started in late 1940s           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>now, filmmakers like James Cameron use <b>3D technology</b> in the production process as well to maximise its potential when exhibited – Blu-Ray also provide 3D viewing experiences unlike streaming services).</li> <li>recent interest in 3D has waned, especially from Christopher Nolan, who prefers <b>IMAX 65mm film format</b> that enables cinematographers to capture unparalleled set detail in long sequences. (Dunkirk, The Dark Knight Rises) as well as JJ Abrams' Star Wars: The Force Awakens).</li> <li>Which maximized colour/detail-oriented 65mm filming during Rey's Millennium Falcon escape.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Redefined masculinity</b> – masculine values have also been realigned – versatile male characters feature in contemporary film that openly reject macho hero values offered by traditional media products – outdated toxic masculinity challenged in Boyhood – social attitudes regarding masculinity explored through broken and dysfunctional male leads in NCJM – none of whom provide an affirmation of traditional male heroism.</li> <li><b>Masculine backlash</b> – Nolan's Inception reaffirms masculine hegemony by marginalizing female characters to secondary roles and reinforcing traditional masculine power as dominant.</li> <li><b>Contemporary American films also construct ironic masculine identities</b> – contemporary films generate characters with traditional attitudes but undercut outdated presentations with humour.</li> </ul>	<p>While Black representations in American film have increased, the complete lack of nominations for non-white filmmakers in the leading categories of 2015 Oscars exemplifies the extent of the problems that Black filmmakers face today – the omission of Selma led to accusations that Hollywood was institutionally racist.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>The co-dependent production model enables that 'independent spirit' of filmmakers to make a commercial presence and their vision:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sundance organization in mid-1980s produced something of a mini-revolution for independent film</li> <li>enabling truly independent filmmakers to find audiences and to finance productions without the help of major Hollywood studios</li> <li>aim: find new talent, give a window to showcase projects (Winter's Bone, Beasts of the Southern Wild and Whiplash all won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize)</li> <li>Sundance Institute provide filmmakers with finance to make projects, helping a number of 'outsider' films get made.</li> <li>Independent film has expanded as a result of digital technology – outsider voices can make and assemble films cheaply – streaming services like HBO, Netflix and Channel 4 have widened distribution outlets that independent producers can use beyond major Hollywood conglomerates.</li> <li>new streaming services have provided finance to independent filmmakers in a bid to provide a staple stream of innovative content that can satisfy the needs of discerning subscription paying customers.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Use documentary realism</b> – independent films are often based within settings that audiences are familiar with while also using camera and editing styles that emphasise cinematic realism.</li> </ul>	<p>Labelling films as 'independent' produces a guarantee to audiences that the film will include ideologically challenging content, and may provide portrayals of key social/economic inequalities in contemporary America – Stuart Hall calls these elements – stereotype trans-coding – character-based representations are given critical depth or are associated with values/experiences that force audiences to rethink their assumptions.</p>

# Winter's Bone

(2010, Debra Granik)

## Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making

### Core Study Areas Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area AS – Spectatorship AL - Spectatorship & Ideology

### Rationale for study

- A highly evocative independently produced film that offers arresting visual images that shift from the mundane to the mythical. An interesting take on a quest narrative that remains true to its intentions. Much to analyse in terms of representations of communities and gender. The story of Ree, a 17 year old who must track down her meth-addicted father who has skipped bail before the bondsman repossesses the family homestead and timber acres to pay off his debt. Set in the unforgiving landscape of the Orzak mountains in Missouri, USA.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- 05.15-11.20. Establishes key ideas and themes. Structures of communities, rules of kinship and the start of Ree's journey. Ree's character and determination are clearly shown.
- 40.30-56.00. Teardrop brings news, sense of threat and highlights the meth problem. Ree's situation appears desperate. Appeals to community but she is rejected. Outside forces gain momentum with the appearance of the bondsman. Tone shifts considerably in this sequence with both the impressionistic

scene at the cattle market, followed by Ree's abduction and brutal beating at the hands of her kin. Teardrop redeems himself as her saviour. Examples of the dominant cinematography, mise-en-scène and shifting aesthetic are in this sequence.

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

#### Cinematography

- McDonough's camera, not entirely settled, gently shifting the frame and often more overtly peering around the corner, nosing into rooms or over a character's shoulder.
- Use of selective focus allows for all kind of rich details to emerge at the surface even when the camera isn't moving.
- Shot on RED cameras. 95% of filming is on hand held cameras building a scene from single perspectives.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- On location shooting in the Orzaks, landscape dominates. A cool frostbitten authenticity of winter combined with a beautiful bleakness of disintegrating landscapes. Local people cast in supporting roles with costumes sourced from real people. The presence of woodland reminds spectators of the key themes – the relevance of timber to this community as both a commodity and the 'larder' that provides food.
- A generally cool colour palette with flashes of vibrant or more expressionist colour at points of high emotion.
- Real/found locations e.g. the burnt out meth house.

#### Editing

- Events take place over one week. Time is compressed in the first third and often feels repetitive and real. Later scenes mix dream and impressionistic moments in

- more heady and overlapping images.
- Long takes provide authenticity.
- Wipes and invisible editing.

### Sound

- Reclaims traditional music to challenge the negative 'hill billy/deliverance' knee jerk reaction to any narrative that dramatizes the lives of impoverished rural communities. The sound track and musical performances are achingly melancholic but affirm and validate the lives of marginal characters.
- Sections of 'empty' soundtrack that reinforce Ree's seemingly repetitive trudge to find someone who will lead her to her father. Limited non diegetic sound to give a realist tone.
- Shifts from quiet talking to loud screams.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- In part a revisionist assessment of the 'hillbilly' stereotype in rural communities.
- Strong female lead role. Ree is both a maternal figure to her siblings and the key active character who drives the narrative in her quest to find her father.
- Supporting female roles offer a strong representation of women as resourceful, stoic and problem solvers in the community who navigate male power.

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

- Highly expressive minimal aesthetic. The cold austere Missouri backcountry is imbued with a strange beauty and fascination for rural traditions shot at times as still images. The mise-en-scène cuts between natural, open, observational images and a heightened sense of the macabre in everyday objects (bottles lined up to shoot, fragmented close ups of a rocking horse)
- Close ups and obtuse angles heighten the mood in a style reminiscent of Sergio Leone's famous westerns. Teardrop's wordless stand-off with the sheriff is filmed through the wing mirror of his truck creating a blend of menace, self-destructiveness and an assertion of an ethic that is unrecognizable to city folk.
- The closing sequence in which Ree must travel on a midnight moonlight quest by boat to retrieve

a body (her father's) from the underworld draws on Greek mythology. The ordeal, and final task Ree must perform is shatteringly brutal but ultimately gives her the means to salvation. The aesthetics are highly symbolic.

- Matter-of-fact but ghoulish and visceral imagery of butchered meat and flayed animals serve to highlight both the harshness of the land and the resourcefulness of the Orzak people. Animals are a strong motif whether for food (deer) or to suggest vulnerability at loss of their habit (squirrels in trees, Ree giving up her horse) or as an ever present reminder of the history and heritage of the lives of mountain dwellers. Vivid and frightening cattle herding and charging at the auction and Ree's fevered dream of ravens are two key scenes that use aesthetics to dramatize key themes in the film.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- The community is blighted by rural poverty, lack of opportunity, low educational outcomes and a sense of separation of mainstream USA infrastructure. Secretive and inward looking with an emphasis on family loyalty and 'kin' based around patriarchal power but dependent upon strong, resilient women. Methamphetamine use and addiction has had devastating consequences on families and individuals. The reality of financial insecurity, violence, domestic abuse and mental illness is ever-present.

### Institutional

- <http://www.indiewire.com/2010/11/toolkit-case-study-how-indie-hit-winters-bone-came-to-be-244485/>
- Based on a novel of the same name by Daniel Woodrell. Produced by Granik and Anne Rosellini through their production company, Anonymous Content. After several attempts to raise finance, the film received half its \$2 million budget from a private equity deal which enabled it to go into production. Premiered at Sundance in 2010 and gained a distribution deal from Fortissimo Films. The film went on to take \$6 million at US box office making it an indie hit. The film brought Jennifer Lawrence to wider attention.

## SPECLIAIST STUDY AREA Spectatorship

### & Ideology - STARTING POINTS

- WB challenges the melodramatic escapism of contemporary Hollywood with its resistance to high-octane special effects and ironic hyperbolic violence.
- A hybrid of genres: building on our understanding of Noir and western genres, but offering up a quest/odyssey narrative steeped in mythology and dark fairy-tale. Full of mystery and suspense and a successful example of a coming-of-age movie.
- Granik takes the traditional masculine depiction of rural life and subverts it by framing everything that unfolds through Ree's piercing gaze. Granik noted that '(WB) is a feminist film about an anti-feminist world'.
- The viewer is positioned as an outsider in this film, out of place and feeling like an intruder. The film is a meditation on alienated relationships whether they are communal, familial or our own detachment from this part of America.