

## **Preparation for Ken Nolley's session on active film watching (March 21)**

If it is at all possible for people to do so, I should like for everyone to see *The Ballad of Little Joe* (1995), directed by Maggie Greenwald. I am placing the dvd on reserve in the Hatfield library. It is also available on dvd from Netflix. And it appears that it can be streamed on VUDU, iTunes, You Tube, and perhaps other venues. We will use this film as the basis for our examination and discussion.

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Traditional cinema works hard to make you forget its constructive processes, creating the illusion that the string of highly contrived and constructed images unrolling before you is simply natural and real. It does this through multiple strategies both of inclusion and exclusion, drawing you into the perspectives of characters in the stories, allowing you selective access to its fictive world through the eyes of its fictive participants, and moving freely between various subjective positions with godlike freedom. Here are a few basic rules to keep in mind as you try to see more of the fingerprints of the filmmakers, more of the off-screen manipulation, more of the play of larger strategies that shape the particular story you are watching.

1. Every shot implies and implicates the camera that makes the shot possible. Therefore, it is worth trying to see and think about the strategies that dictate the shape and flow of the images through which the story is told.
2. The camera often adopts and reproduces that point of view of its fictional characters, favoring and privileging the view of some and denying the audience the point of view of others.
3. Remember that while the framing of every shot allows the audience to see certain things, it also excludes much more than it can include. Every decision to point the camera in one direction is a refusal to turn it in any other direction.
4. The process of cutting shots together through editing or *montage* profoundly shapes the experience of the audience and largely controls the emotional access the audience has to the story and its characters.
5. The soundtrack is also constructed and highly controlled. Characters say what the screenwriter has written, and their speech is intelligible or not at the will of the filmmakers. Thus, just as it was with shots, the soundtrack is controlled to exclude certain sounds and speech just as it includes others.
6. Some sounds, such as non-diegetic music (music that does not arise directly from events depicted on the screen) are added simply to manipulate your emotions.
7. In traditional cinema, the very notion of what is "realistic" and "natural" is itself constructed. Most movies simply reproduce proven formulas to maintain their illusion, although some films challenge traditional norms in an effort to get us to see differently and thus to experience a different kind of reality.

A few more films about the west featuring women as central characters:

*Heartland* (1979) Richard Pearce

*Meek's Cutoff* (2010) Kelly Reichardt

*Certain Women* (2016) Kelly Reichardt