
FILM THEORY & CRITICISM



Film Theory & Criticism | **FILM 4390** | **CRN: 27554** | **Spring, 2019**

Psychology Building 307

Monday/Wednesday, 12:00-1:20pm

Instructor: Greg Beam

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Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday, 10:30-11:30am, 1:30-2:30pm | Worrell 114

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course aims to help the student view, discuss, and write about films with greater acuity, nuance, and depth. Building on the subjects covered in Introduction to the Art of the Motion Picture, we will investigate the nature of film as an art form, explore the role of the critic (i.e. what it means to assess a film's quality), and apply a variety of theoretical frameworks to the discussion of film. The material we consider will include mainstream Hollywood movies, foreign films, and so-called 'art' films, and we will address both scholarly and popular modes of criticism.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To build a deeper and more specific understanding of the formal elements of film, and to be able to identify, articulate, and evaluate the use of those elements in a variety of genres and styles.
- To investigate the philosophical dimensions and implications of film, including the ethics of film (and filmmaking), the ontology of the cinema, and how the creation of film reflects the pursuit of knowledge.
- To learn how to view films from a variety of critical perspectives.
- To develop deep critical thinking and communication skills, both written and spoken, relating to the arts in general and film in particular.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Thorough understanding of the formal elements of cinema, cinematic genres, auteur theory, and the philosophical and cultural dimensions of film, demonstrated through the successful completion of a series of study guides.
- The ability to evaluate and critique a film from a clear critical perspective, demonstrated through a well-researched and precisely argued essay.
- The ability to prepare and deliver, with clarity and confidence, a well-researched and revealing presentation on a topic related to the cinema.

MATERIALS

Reading: A course packet is available at the UTEP printing center, adjacent to the library. Any additional readings will be posted to Blackboard.

Films: You should register for an account with Kanopy, a free (and excellent) streaming service. You can sign up using your university library credentials and stream a vast array of

films, including hundreds of classics and selections from the Criterion Collection, on your TV, computer, tablet, or phone.

On-line: You must have an active UTEP email address and check it regularly. You should also have regular access to Blackboard. These will be my primary means of communicating with you outside of class. Any announcements that pertain to the whole class will be sent via Blackboard and email. If I need to reach you individually, I will do so via email.

Please note that I will not respond to emails sent from personal email accounts. If you want to contact me, use your UTEP email address.

SUBJECT MATTER

Some of the films and readings used in this course touch on mature subject matters, including violence, abuse, sexual activity, and verbal obscenity. Consequently, much of the discussion in class will involve references to adult subject matter and strong language. I will do my best to give you a heads up about any troubling material that may appear in our weekly viewings, and I will endeavor to address difficult subjects with an appropriate degree of sensitivity.

If you have concerns about viewing or discussing specific subjects, please see me to discuss possible accommodations. I expect all discussions, including any that may occur outside of class, to be conducted in a respectful and professional manner.

ATTENDANCE

Attendance is expected at all class sessions. I will be passing around a sign-in sheet at each class session. While attendance and participation do not constitute a percentage of your final grade, absences or consistent tardiness will hurt your final grade. Conversely, exceptional attendance and enthusiastic participation may result in extra credit.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Any incident of academic dishonesty will result in a grade of zero on the assignment and possible disciplinary action. This includes cheating and plagiarism. Please check the EPCC Student Handbook for more information on academic dishonesty, and if you're in doubt about whether your use of a source is acceptable, don't hesitate to check with me.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

The use of cell phones/smart phones/iPads/tablets/lap tops is distracting for you, me, and your classmates and is therefore forbidden. Please take notes on paper unless you have a documented need to do otherwise.

ACCOMMODATIONS STATEMENT

The Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) at UTEP provides students who require them with accommodations and support services to help them pursue their academic, graduation, and career goals. If you are dealing with any kind mental, physical, emotional, or sensory disability—whether permanent or temporary—you are encouraged to contact them for a confidential consultation. For more information, visit <https://www.utep.edu/student-affairs/cass/> or consult the Student Handbook.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

STUDY GUIDES

Four times in the semester, you will complete an online study guide in response to the readings and viewings. The first study guide will cover the glossary of film terms found in the 'Readings' folder on Blackboard and the formal elements of film (mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, performance). The second will cover narrative, genre, and authorship. The third will address the philosophical dimensions of film. The fourth will address psychological and sociological critical perspectives (e.g. Marxist criticism, feminist theory, race critical theory, queer theory).

ESSAY

You will submit one paper of 1800-2500 words at the end of the semester. This essay should constitute a significant piece of criticism on a film, filmmaker, or set of films or a deep investigation of a major topic in film theory. A proposal—with the topic you want to investigate, a tentative thesis, and a brief description of the content—will be due midway through the semester.

Essay Prompts:

1. Select a major topic covered in the course (e.g. the formal elements of film, genre, the notion of the auteur, artistic intent, ethical concerns surrounding films and filmmakers) and investigate/interrogate this topic through a close examination of a film or small set of films.
2. Compose an in-depth article about a single film or multiple works by a single filmmaker, addressing the film's artistic qualities while expressing an identifiable cultural, social, political, or philosophical point-of-view. The tone of this article may be strictly academic or geared toward a 'high-end' mainstream publication such as Harper's or The New Yorker.
3. Write a retrospective on an older film, offering a fresh take on the material in light of recent developments in art or culture. How has the film's reception endured or changed over time? Do we perceive the film today differently than when it was released?
4. Construct a video essay (approximately 8-12 minutes) that explores any of the above topics. While a video essay may contain considerably less text than a written essay, it should be still have an identifiable perspective, a clear and interesting thesis, and a logical structure. The principal difference is that much of the evidence/support will come through the video selections themselves. Where 'style' and 'mechanics' in a written essay pertain to the effectiveness of the language, in a video essay they will apply mostly to the editing and the quality of any accompanying audio or titles.

FINAL PRESENTATION

Each student will be assigned to a group of 3-5 students, forming a film club. Each club will be assigned a topic/theme and select a slate of 3 films related to that theme to view outside of class. Each group will deliver a final presentation on their topic during the final-exam period.

GRADING	
ASSIGNMENTS	POSSIBLE POINTS
Study Guides:	40
Paper:	40
Final Presentation:	20
TOTAL:	100

A = 91-100 points

B = 81-90 points

C = 71-80 points

D = 61-70 points

F = 0-60 points

COURSE SCHEDULE FOR FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM (Subject to Change)

Class Meeting	Reading	Viewing (very much subject to change)	Assignments
Week 1: “What Makes a Movie?” - Exploring the material (and immaterial) aspects of film Monday, Jan. 21 - NO CLASS (Martin Luther King Day) Wednesday, Jan. 23	Film Glossary (88-92)	<i>Various</i>	
Week 2: “First Impressions” - Capturing reality and creating realities Monday, Jan. 28 Wednesday, Jan. 30	“Basic Concepts,” Siegfried Kracauer (1-8) “On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,” Christian Metz (9-17)	<i>Blade Runner, 2001:</i> <i>A Space Odyssey,</i> <i>Children of Men</i>	
Week 3: “When Is a Bird Not a Bird?” - Creating meaning with match cuts, motifs, and other devices Monday, Feb. 4 Wednesday, Feb. 6	“On Editing,” Vsevelod Pudovkin (16-19) “The Collision of Ideas,” Sergei Eisenstein (20-21)	<i>Blade Runner, 2001:</i> <i>A Space Odyssey,</i> <i>Children of Men</i>	
Week 4: “Character Is Destiny” - The role of the performer Monday, Feb. 11 Wednesday, Feb. 13	“Sights and Sounds,” “Photograph and Screen,” “Audience, Artist, and Star,” Stanley Cavell (29-35)	<i>Blade Runner, 2001:</i> <i>A Space Odyssey,</i> <i>Children of Men</i>	Study Guide 1 due Sunday, Feb. 17, by end of day
Week 5: “The Stories of Our Lives” - Some takes on narrative structure Monday, Feb. 18 Wednesday, Feb. 20	“The emotional arcs of stories are dominated by six basic shapes,” Andrew Reagan et al. (On Blackboard)	<i>Blade Runner, 2001:</i> <i>A Space Odyssey,</i> <i>Children of Men</i>	
Week 6: “Films of a Feather” - Genres and modes Monday, Feb. 25 Wednesday, Feb. 27	“Modes and Norms,” David Bordwell (22-28) “Genre and Critical Methodology,” Andrew Tudor (36-40)	<i>The Searchers</i>	
Week 7: “Rawhide and Robes” - The social implications of genre Monday, Mar. 4 Wednesday, Mar. 6	“The Romans in Films,” Roland Barthes (68-69) “American Tragedy,” Gilberto Perez (41-54)	<i>The Searchers</i>	

Class Meeting	Reading	Viewing (very much subject to change)	Assignments
Week 8: “The Film of Tomorrow” - Auteur theory Monday, Mar. 11 Wednesday, Mar. 13	“Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” Andrew Sarris (55-57) “Circles and Squares,” Pauline Kael (Blackboard)	<i>Mulholland Drive</i>	
Week 9: SPRING BREAK		<i>Persona, Carnival of Souls, Mulholland Drive</i> Extra Credit: <i>Spring Breakers</i>	Response to <i>Spring Breakers</i> due Sunday, Mar. 24, by end of day for up to 5 points extra credit
Week 10: “The Shadows of Our Feelings” - Intent and interpretation Monday, Mar. 25 Wednesday, Mar. 27	“David Lynch Keeps His Head,” David Foster Wallace (Blackboard) “The Puzzle Box,” Laura Miller (Blackboard)	<i>Mulholland Drive</i>	Study Guide 2 due Sunday, Mar. 24, by end of day
Week 11: “It’s Not Your Film Anymore” - The question of adaptation Monday, Apr. 1 Wednesday, Apr. 3 - We will meet with Jacob Galindo, Instruction Librarian, at the library, room 204B	“John Ford’s <i>The Searchers</i> as an Allegory of the Philosophical Search,” Richard A. Gilmore (58-67)	<i>Adaptation</i>	
Week 12: “The Fly in the Bottle” - Modern and post-modern approaches to film Monday, Apr. 8 Wednesday, Apr. 10	“John Ford’s <i>The Searchers</i> as an Allegory of the Philosophical Search,” Richard A. Gilmore (58-67)	<i>Adaptation</i>	
Week 14: “Always Do the Right Thing” - Morality at the movies Monday, Apr. 15 Wednesday, Apr. 17	TBA	<i>The National Anthem</i>	Paper proposal due Sunday, Apr. 14, by end of day
Week 15: “Just a Cigar” - Psycho-social frameworks for interpreting films Monday, Apr. 22 Wednesday, Apr. 24	TBA	TBA	Study Guide 3 due Sunday, Apr. 21, by end of day

Class Meeting	Reading	Viewing (very much subject to change)	Assignments
Week 16: "Pleasure in Looking" - Feminist film and criticism Monday, Apr. 29 Wednesday, May 1	"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey (70-77)	TBA	
Week 16 "Staying Woke" - Issues of race and representation Monday, May 6 Wednesday, May 8	"Black Spectatorship and Problems of Identification and Resistance," Manthia Diawara (78-82) "Rebirth of a Nation," "Malcolm X'd Again," Armond White (83-87)	TBA	Paper due Sunday, May 12, by 5pm.
Finals Week: Presentations Final: Wednesday, May 15, 10:00am-12:45pm			Film clubs deliver final presentations; Study Guide 4 due Friday, May 17, by end of day