

COURSE OVERVIEW:
READING THE MOVIES: FILM AS LITERATURE & ART
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Students will explore the history and the art of film, developing a vocabulary and set of skills for the close reading and critical analysis of movies. Students will examine a variety of classic films as works of literature and art, analyzing the medium of film as a unique mode of story-telling, and building an understanding of the medium's history. Students will also investigate the ways in which movies reflect and respond to their cultural and historical contexts, with particular focus on Hollywood and the films of the United States. In addition to participating in class discussions, students will write regularly in response to film. Works studied include films by Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, Billy Wilder, Orson Welles, Erroll Morris, the Coen Brothers, and many others—plus representatives of key genres such as the western, film noir, the documentary, the screwball comedy, and more.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the end of this course, students should be able to...

1. understand and employ a basic vocabulary of film-making (including camera angles, camera shots, editing techniques, etc.) as they apply to the final product of the film. Students should be able to apply these terms to their own critical readings of film.
2. demonstrate understanding of the history of American film-making.
3. articulate the ways in which film reflects and responds to a variety of cultural contexts. Some contexts we will explore include the American Dream, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and the 1970s.
4. recognize the elements that contribute, across a large body of work, to the style, vision, and voice of a single director. Students will choose from a variety of influential directors for close study. Students should be able to articulate the "auteur" theory of filmmaking, providing examples.
5. recognize and articulate the elements, traditions, and tropes that make up distinct film genres, such as the western, film noir, and screwball comedy.
6. explore and articulate connections between film and literature.
7. write in response to film. Students will write a series of shorter movie "reviews," as well as research-based close reading and critical analysis.

Note: The sequence that follows represents, more or less, my ideal syllabus. It is very much subject to change, abbreviation, etc., as we go through the year. Although this is a film course and our examples will come from the movies, the critical viewing skills practiced here will also apply to a range of media, allowing students to more consciously engage with such pervasive elements of our culture as advertising and television. Two units—one on propaganda, the other on reality television—will explicitly allow students to apply their lessons in film studies to other arenas of the media. Though our syllabus will focus in particular on the history of film in the United States, we will also take into account, in less depth, significant developments in film around the world.

On the workload: Movies will be watched in class. Homework assignments will be very manageable, given the elective nature of the course; assignments must, however, be completed on time to receive credit. For larger writing assignments (one per semester), students will be given significant class time to research, write, and conference. During movie screenings, students should be actively engaged with the movies, with their minds switched *on* at all times; participation in the screenings and in class discussions will be a crucial part of the class.

Almost all of the films on this list are approved and appropriate for general audiences. Students will be required to obtain parental permission to view the small handful of more explicit (R rated) films included on the syllabus.

It is my hope that our time together this year will change the way that you watch movies. I am absolutely looking forward to learning together in this class.

KEY QUESTIONS

Why do we watch the movies?

What does it mean to “read” a film?

What skills and vocabulary are necessary for a critical reading of film?

How has film been shaped by—and how, in turn, has film helped shape—American culture?

What are key moments, figures, films, trends, and themes in the history of American film-making?

How does the tradition of American filmmaking fit into broader developments in film worldwide?

These are the overarching, opening questions. Additional questions are included in the unit descriptions below.

KEY UNITS

UNIT ONE: **WHY DO WE WATCH?**

- Students discuss their favorite movies and consider out loud why we watch movies in the first place. What do we like about movies? What do they offer that other media / forms of entertainment don't? What social and personal functions do movies perform for us?
- FILM: *The Purple Rose of Cairo*
- READING: James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (excerpt)
- READING: James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (excerpt)

UNIT TWO: **INTRO TO "READING FILM"**

- What are the literary, dramatic, and cinematic elements of film? What does it mean to "read" a film, as opposed to, say, a book or a play? Students develop a shared vocabulary for critical viewing and analysis.
- SHORT CLIPS: *E.T.*; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*; *Touch of Evil*; *Citizen Kane*; *The Fast and the Furious*; *Erin Brockovich*; *Philadelphia*, *Harold and Maude*; *Raising Arizona*; etc.

UNIT THREE: **THREE CLOSE READINGS**

- Students practice close, critical analysis of three classic films, discussing and analyzing each film's literary, dramatic, and cinematic elements, and assessing how these elements contribute to the meaning and effect of the film as a whole.
- FILM: *Psycho*
- FILM: *E.T.*
- FILM: *Citizen Kane*
- READINGS: Jorge Luis Borges, "An Overwhelming Film"; A.C. Bradley, "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy" (brief excerpt); other readings TBA

UNIT FOUR: **WRITING THE MOVIE REVIEW**

- Students read movie reviews by professional critics, and write their own. What makes an effective review? Students are required to demonstrate, in writing, an informed, synthesized use of the film terms from our "reading film" unit.
- READINGS: reviews by Roger Ebert, Pauline Kael, others. Students bring in their own examples of effective reviews from the internet or newspaper.

UNIT FIVE: **THE BIRTH OF FILM**

- What were the historical and technical origins of "moving pictures"? How did these origins translate into the major pastime and industry that we know now as "the movies"?
- Students study the origins of moving pictures, and the early role of movies in American life in particular, with short clips. Topics for presentation and discussion include the first films of the Lumière Brothers; the origins of the movies in American popular culture, from Kinetoscope to nickelodean; and excerpts from landmark films, including D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.

UNIT SIX: “COMEDY’S GREATEST ERA”

- Students explore the work of two early giants of comedy: Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin.
- FILMS (Keaton): *The Navigator* or *The General*; excerpts from *Steamboat Bill Jr.*
- FILMS (Chaplin): excerpts from *Modern Times*; *The Great Dictator*
- READING: James Agee, “Comedy’s Greatest Era” (excerpts)
- ALSO RECOMMENDED: *Safety Last* (Harold Lloyd)

UNIT SEVEN: THE AMERICAN DREAM: COMPETING VISIONS

- How did two distinct film worlds—the 1930s films of Frank Capra, and the gangster films of the same decade—reflect competing visions of the “American Dream”? What do these very different films on American Dreaming share in common? What makes them different? How did this theme reflect larger cultural trends of the era? How has this “dialogue” on the American Dream continued to inform our movies, and our national myth-making, ever since? We will also consider another 1930s popular phenomenon—the Depression-era musicals of Busby Berkeley—as a third window into American culture, the American psyche, and the appeal of Hollywood.
- FILMS: (Capra): *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*.
- FILMS: (Gangster): *Little Caesar* and/or *Scarface* (1933 version)
- FILM (Berkeley): *Gold-diggers of 1933*. Additional excerpts.
- READINGS: *The Great Gatsby* (excerpt); contemporary reviews
- MAYBE ALSO: *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Luhrmann)

UNIT EIGHT: THE AMERICAN DREAM, CONTINUED: FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA’S *THE GODFATHER*

- We expand on earlier themes by viewing and discussing Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*, Parts I and II. (We’ll watch Part I now, and return to Part II later this year.)
- FILM: *The Godfather*
- FILM: *The Godfather II*

INTERLUDE: THE FIRST CARTOONS

INTERLUDE: PROPAGANDA AND THE BIG SCREEN

UNIT NINE: GENRE, PART ONE: THE WESTERN

- What makes a Western a Western? What are the characteristics of the Western hero? What are the characteristics of the Western visual aesthetic and iconography? How has the Western genre reflected, helped shape, and even challenged America’s national mythology?
- FILMS: Viewing will include two of the following, TBA: *Stagecoach*, *High Noon*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, *Shane*
- READINGS: Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (excerpt); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (excerpts)

UNIT TEN: **GENRE, PART TWO: THE HARDBOILED DETECTIVE**

- In what ways is the Western's "frontier" hero reworked in the form of American film's other leading gunman: the hardboiled detective? What are the qualities of the hardboiled detective as hero? How does the detective movie genre build on the detective fiction of the same era? How do these films compare to the gangster films of previous units?
- FILM: *The Big Sleep*. Also recommended: *The Maltese Falcon*.
- READINGS: Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (excerpt) and "The Simple Art of Murder" (excerpt)

UNIT ELEVEN: **GENRE, PART THREE: FILM NOIR**

- What makes a film noir? What are the characteristics of the noir hero? What are the characteristics of the film noir visual aesthetic and iconography? How has the noir reflected, helped shape, and even challenged America's national mythology?
- FILMS: *Double Indemnity*. Also recommended: *Out of the Past*.
- READINGS: James M. Cain, *Paris Review* interview (excerpt) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (excerpts)

UNIT TWELVE: **GENRE, PART FOUR: THE SCREWBALL COMEDY**

- What are the essential ingredients of the screwball comedy? What are the essential characteristics of the screwball heroine/hero? In what ways has the screwball comedy influenced later filmmaking? Where is the screwball comedy today?
- FILM: *The Philadelphia Story*. Also recommended: *Bringing Up Baby*; *His Girl Friday*.

UNIT THIRTEEN: **THREE COMEDIES**

- FILM: *Raising Arizona*
- FILM: *Some Like It Hot*
- FILM: *Tootsie*

INTERLUDE/GUEST: **RICH AMBERG (SCREENWRITER)**

- Class visit from screenwriter Rich Amberg. Students will have the opportunity to speak with a professional in the business of screenwriting, learning about the complex process a film or television series undergoes from the script to the screen. Students will be able to ask a professional screenwriter questions about the craft and business of the screenplay. (Rich Amberg wrote the 2011 movie *Best Player* for Nickelodeon and teaches screenwriting.)

UNIT FOURTEEN: **REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE IN AMERICAN FILM**

- How have minorities, particularly African Americans, been represented throughout the history of American filmmaking? How have stereotypes been employed to shape national images and narratives of race in America? What roles have black and other minority actors, actresses, and filmmakers played in the history of film? How have those roles been restricted by the dominant Hollywood culture, and in what ways have those restrictions been overcome? How far have we come, and how far do we still need to go?

- READING: Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (excerpt)
- CLIPS: *Small Steps, Big Strides: The Black Experience in Hollywood* (documentary) and/or *Classified X* (documentary)
- AUDIO CLIP: “Dangerous Minds,” *This American Life*

UNIT FIFTEEN: REPRESENTING REALITY: THE DOCUMENTARY MODE

- What are the ways in which nonfiction film represents reality on the screen? In this unit, students will encounter a variety of approaches to documentary filmmaking, expanding their film vocabulary to include the additional terminology and concerns unique to documentary filmmaking. Students will recognize and discuss the ways in which, even in nonfiction filmmaking, “reality” is carefully constructed by the filmmaker. Students will consider some of the aesthetic, narrative, and ethical choices that are part of the documentary process. This discussion will also provide an opportunity for the class to consider the ways in which “reality” is constructed in “reality TV” shows today.
- CLIPS: *Nanook of the North*; *Man with a Movie Camera*; the *Up* series; *Don’t Look Back*; *Bowling for Columbine*; *This is Spinal Tap*; *Atomic Café*
- FILMS: *The Thin Blue Line*; others TBA

UNIT SIXTEEN: REPRESENTING REALITY, PART TWO: THE REALITY TV PHENOMENON

- How does the phenomenon of reality television situate and recreate “reality”? How, if at all, does the reality TV tradition differ from documentary film traditions?
- TV SHOW: MTV’s *Two-a-Days* (pilot episode)

INTERLUDE/GUEST: ELISABETH HARRIS (FILMMAKER/PRODUCER)

> Class visit from documentary filmmaker and television producer Elisabeth Harris. Students will have the opportunity to speak with a professional filmmaker about her work, both in creating her own documentary projects and in producing television series and specials. (Elisabeth Harris directed the documentary *The Hermit of Manana* and has produced numerous programs and specials for CBS and PBS; her current project, *The Artist’s Remains*, tells the story of painter Elizabeth Rothstein.)

UNIT SEVENTEEN: HOLLYWOOD AND THE COLD WAR: THE END OF THE WORLD, THE RED SCARE, AND THE BLACKLIST

- How did the films of the Cold War era reflect and respond to that era’s national concerns? In what ways did science fiction offer an outlet for the fears of a fearful era? How did two very different films—one a comedy, the other a political thriller—manage to tell identical stories, in the same year, about Cold War politics and nuclear apocalypse? How did the political climate of America in the “Red Scare” affect the movies, movie-makers, and movie-making of the era?
- FILM: *Fail-Safe*
- FILM: *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb*
- FILM: *Them!*
- FILM: *Trumbo* (excerpts)
- ALSO RECOMMENDED: *The Front*

UNIT EIGHTEEN: **HITCHCOCK AND THE ART OF SUSPENSE**

- What are the elements of a Hitchcock film? What ingredients make Hitchcock the “Master of Suspense”? We will build upon our earlier viewing of *Psycho* by exploring one or more of the following films: *Rear Window*; *Strangers on a Train*; *Rope*.

UNIT NINETEEN: **TWO MORE COMEDIES**

- FILM: *The Producers*
- FILM: *Annie Hall*

UNIT TWENTY: **A PIVOTAL DECADE: THE FILMS OF THE SEVENTIES**

- Why did the 1970s represent a unique moment in the history of American film? What happened? What changed? What is the impact of the 1970s on contemporary filmmaking?
- FILM TBA
- CLIPS: *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* and/or *A Decade Under the Influence*

ADDITIONAL READINGS/PERSPECTIVES/CONSIDERATIONS

“Millennials seem to have little use for old movies” (*L.A. Times*)
“Why we are happy to be caught in a web of movie remakes” (*The Guardian*)
“At the movies, the women are gone” (NPR)
Interview, Paul Feig & Katie Dippold (*Studio 360*)
“*The Clock*: A 24-hour movie” (*Studio 360*)
And more, TBA!

MAJOR STUDENT PROJECTS

FIRST SEMESTER: **GENRE PAPER**: Students select a genre for more detailed study. In a major paper on a single genre, students will compare and contrast two films from a provided list. Possible topics include: The silent comedy; the Western; the film noir; the detective movie; the screwball comedy; the romantic comedy; science fiction. Students will be given some time to work on this paper in class.

SECOND SEMESTER: **STUDY OF A SINGLE DIRECTOR**: Students choose a single director for more detailed study. Students will write a research paper examining the career, style, and vision of the director of their choice. Possible topics include: Howard Hawks; Frank Capra; Billy Wilder; John Huston; Orson Welles; John Ford; Ida Lupino; Martin Scorsese; Sidney Lumet; Robert Altman; Spike Lee; the Coen Brothers; etc., etc., etc. Students will be given some time to work on this paper in class.