ENGL 251
Introduction to Film Theory
Georgetown University
Spring 2014

Instructor Information

Instructor: Caetlin Benson-Allott
Office Location: 322 New North
E-mail: cb529@georgetown.edu
Office Hours: Tuesdays 11:00am – 1:00pm and by appointment

Course Information

Screening Location: Car Barn 204
Screening Times: Mondays 6:30 – 9:00pm
Seminar Location: Car Barn 204
Seminar Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30 – 10:45am

Course Description/Overview

When is the last time you saw a film? “Well, that depends,” you might be thinking, “What do you mean by film?” Film can refer to a strip of celluloid, a sequence of still images projected rapidly to give the illusion of motion, a 90-120 minute motion picture, or a thin layer covering the surface of something. “Introduction to Film Theory” is itself a film in that last sense, because it is going to cover all ways these different meanings of film have helped filmmakers, critics, and philosophers explain what motion pictures are, how they work, and what they make us feel. If you want to know why a movie makes you cry, even when you don’t want to cry, film theory is going to tackle that question. If you want to know whether iTunes videos still count as film, it will answer that too (or at least try to). If you want to know what is so special about motion pictures—why we love them, learn from them, and even revile them—then “Introduction to Film Theory” can help. It surveys the history and major approaches to studying film, including ontology, semiotics, materialism, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist and queer theory, genre theory, and phenomenology.

Those are big words for big schools of thought, but we will scrutinize each in turn as we watch thought-provoking films (there’s that word again) from the history of world cinema and try to puzzle out how it is that movies can change the way we feel about our world.

In order to guide our study, this class is broken into five thematic units: “The Basic – Form, Apparatus, Narrative,” “Epistemology and Meaning,” “Ontology and Essence,” “Artists and Audiences,” and “Genre.” “The Basics” will apprise us of some scholarly ways to talk about what we see on screen, how it gets on screen, and how it is organized as an experience. This last question leads us into the issues of “Epistemology and Meaning,” or how we learn things from projected light waves and amplified sound waves. “Ontology and Essence” asks what is unique about the ways that film creates meaning. What qualities are unique to film as opposed to other media? “Artists and Audiences” asks who makes a film, the people in
the room with the camera or the people in the room with the projector (or video monitor or computer). Finally, “Genre” tackles the tricky question of how audiences and artists categorize films in order to understand their dialogue with each other and the world. Reading films according to genre is a type of theory, a type we practice almost every day, and by ending our course with “genre theory,” we will be able to look back at other ways that film theory informs our day to day experiences of motion pictures.

Throughout the course, you will have the opportunity to share your insights and your progress towards our course goals through discussion, in-class presentations, and written essays. I hope you will find the prompts for these exciting and stimulating, but theory is a process of pushing beyond the insights of our predecessors. I therefore challenge you to come to me with other proposals about how you want to share your ideas regarding what film is and how it works.

Course Goals

“Introduction to Film Theory” is designed to initiate you in the scholarly analysis of motion pictures as it has developed historically, philosophically, and methodologically. Specifically, it will:

1. Acquaint you with the basic vocabulary of film studies and film theory and help you use that language to articulate your observations about motion pictures
2. Engage you critically with foundational texts from classic, modern, and contemporary film theory and the international film canon
3. Develop your abilities to discuss and write critically about philosophy
4. Deepen your enjoyment and appreciation of film and video as art forms and experiences

Course Resources

Course Website

- Blackboard - [https://campus.georgetown.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp](https://campus.georgetown.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp)

Required Course Texts

- Course readings available on Blackboard
- Films on reserve in the Gelardin Media Center, Lauinger Library (see schedule below)

Course Assignments and Grading Scheme

Course Assignments

- Attendance and Class Participation: Our class time is devoted to talking through the assigned readings and screenings in order to work collectively toward our course goals. I expect you to come to class with observations about the assigned material and to be willing to share them with the class. In exchange, I will make sure this classroom is a
safe space where everyone's ideas are respected and developed. **Attendance is mandatory at all screenings and seminars. I also require everyone to come to my office hours at least once over the course of the semester.** Office hours are an important component of your educational experience at Georgetown; they are your opportunity to address interests and concerns to your professor and your professor’s opportunity to get to know you as an individual. I therefore consider them an integral part of our course. If you have a conflict with my regularly scheduled office hours, please email me. I would be happy to set up another time to talk. (10%)

- **Scene Presentation with Partner:** Choose one scene from the weekly film screening and come to class with your partner that Thursday with three prepared questions that will help us use that scene to analyze the essay. In order for me to get your scene cued and your questions printed for the class, you must email the scene’s start and stop times and the questions to me by midnight on Wednesday. (10%)

- **Q&A Essay (2-3 pages):** Craft a dialogue between a talk show host, a student, a director, or another interlocutor of your fancy and one of the theorists we’ve read thus far this semester. Use the dialogue to allow the theorist to gloss and expand on the implications of the ideas s/he presents in our assigned reading. (25%)

- **National Film Registry Essay (3-4 pages):** Choose one film from our syllabus and write a memo to the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress explaining what about its artistic contributions or innovations marks this film as deserving of preservation for posterity. In order to make your case, you will need to close read a scene using one of the theorists we have discussed thus far this semester (and not the theorist you wrote about in your Q&A essay). You may choose to use more than one theorist to develop your ideas, but your essay should clearly demonstrate how theory can help viewers understand the artistic merits of a given film. (25%)

- **Reconsideration Essay (6-7 pages):** At the conclusion of the semester, I will ask you to choose one additional essay from *Film Theory and Criticism* and use two or more essays from our syllabus to explore that author's unique contributions to film theory. What does he or she reveal about the nature of film, filmic meaning, film practice, or film reception? How do his or her ideas build on others'? And “so what”? What does this essay contribute to our understanding of film? Why do its insights matter? (30%)

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**Grading System**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Numeric Scale</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>94 - 100</td>
<td>Outstanding/Superlative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-93</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87-89</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-86</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>Pretty Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77-79</td>
<td>Above average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>73-76</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70-72</td>
<td>Below average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>65-69</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-64</td>
<td>Failure</td>
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</table>
For a more detailed description of how these expectations apply to formal essays, see the grading rubric attached to this syllabus.

Late Essay

Forty-eight hour extensions on essays may be granted if they are requested at least forty-eight hours in advance.

Course Policies

All assignments are due at the beginning of class on the date noted in the course schedule. Thereafter papers will be docked one third of a grade for each day late.

You are expected to attend all scheduled screenings and seminar meetings. Attendance will be taken when class starts, and your final grade will reflect your attendance record. Every student will be granted two absences per semester (including sporting events, illnesses, and extra-curricular commitments). Thereafter your participation grade will be lowered by one third of a grade for each absence. If special circumstances arise, please email or speak to me as soon as possible.

Please note that you will need to take notes during all screenings. I implore you: please do not find out the hard way that watching a film for fun is different than watching a film for class. You need to record your observations about images and sounds as they happen, or it will be very hard to describe this audio-visual evidence convincingly later on. In addition, please note that some of the films we will be screening this semester contain graphic representations of violence or sexual activity; some were rated R upon original release. If this presents a problem for you, I would like to address it, but you must speak with me about your concerns before the end of the first week of class.

Course Expectations

• I expect you to
  • Be on time to class, attend all class meetings, and attend office hours at least once over the course of the semester.
  • Do all of the readings assigned for each class meeting.
  • Participate actively in discussions. To do this, you must bring to class your questions, ideas, and a copy of each assigned reading in the format you find most conducive for taking notes.
  • Check in regularly on our Blackboard site for course readings, assignments, and announcements.
• You can expect me to
  • Respond to emails within 24 hours.
  • Provide detailed feedback on your essays and ideas. If you’d like more feedback on any of the work you do for this course, please come see me in office hours.
  • Hold regular office hours that are reserved for you.
Last but not least, please note that cell phones, PDAs, tablets, and laptops are not allowed during screenings. You may use your laptop to take notes in seminar until and unless it distracts you, other students, or your instructor from participating fully. At that point, I will require that you leave your computer at home for the rest of the semester.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct, a.k.a. plagiarism, a.k.a. submitting someone else’s work as your own, will not be tolerated in this class and will result in course failure or worse. For a more detailed explanation of Georgetown’s Academic Integrity Policy, see http://www.library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/academic-integrity/refresher-tipsheet. For the complete Georgetown Honor Code, see http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/.

Academic Resource Center

If you are working with the Academic Resource Center for disability or academic support and require modification of seating, testing, or other course requirements, please see me during office hours to make appropriate arrangements. You can contact the ARC at (202) 687-8354 or http://ldss.georgetown.edu/ for more information.

Course Schedule

Week One: Introduction
Thursday, January 9th: In-class screening of Bobby Peers, “Sniffer”

Week Two: The Basics – Form, Apparatus, Narrative
No screening—please watch Battleship Potemkin (ENG BAT) on DVD or Blackboard Sharestream
Tuesday, January 14th: Class Cancelled
Please read through the Yale Film Analysis website (http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/) and bring to class on Thursday a one- to two-page (double spaced) analysis of how four formal elements from the composition of Battleship Potemkin affect its impact on you the viewer.
Thursday, January 16th: Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures”; Sergei Eisenstein, “Beyond the Shot”

Week Three: The Basics – Form, Apparatus, Narrative
Screening: Andy Warhol, “Screen Test 3: Edie Sedgwick”(NX512.W37T56 2009); Peeping Tom (ENG PEE),
Tuesday, January 21st: Sigfried Kracauer, “Basic Concepts”; Christian Metz, “Identification, Mirror” and “The Passion for Perceiving”
Thursday, January 23rd: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
Sign up for Scene Presentations

Week Four: The Basics – Form, Apparatus, Narrative
Screening: Sullivans’s Travels (ENG SUL)
Thursday, January 30th: David Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema” (Bb)

**Week Five: Epistemology and Meaning**
Screening: *Blow Up* (ENG BLO)
Q&A Essay Due

Thursday, February 6th: Stephen Prince, “The Discourse of Pictures”

**Week Six: Epistemology and Meaning**
Screening: Stan Brakhage, “Mothlight” (ENG BYB); Paul Sharits, “Bad Burns” (PN1995.9.E96T74 2009); Marcell Iványi: “Wind (Szél); Germany Year Zero (ITA GER)

Tuesday, February 11th: André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”; Rudolph Arnheim, “The Complete Film”
Thursday, February 13th: Gilles Deleuze, “The Origin of the Crisis”

**Week Seven: Epistemology and Meaning**
Screening: *Strange Days* (ENG STR)
Tuesday, February 18th: Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus”; Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” (Bb)
Thursday, February 20th: Noël Carroll, “Jean-Louis Baudry and ‘The Apparatus’”

**Week Eight: Ontology and Essence**
Screening: Bill Viola, “Reflecting Pool” and “Migration” (ENG BIL); *Russian Ark* (RUS RUS)
Thursday, February 27th: John Belton, “Technology and Aesthetics of Film Sound”

**Week Nine: Ontology and Essence**
Screening: *Duel* (ENG DUE)
Tuesday, March 4th: Richard Matheson, “Duel” (Bb); Dudley Andrew, “Adaptation”
Thursday, March 6th: Tom Gunning, “Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System”

SPRING BREAK

**Week Ten: Ontology and Essence**
Tuesday, March 18th: Alan Cholodenko, “The Crypt, the Haunted House, of Cinema” (Bb)
Thursday, March 20th: Class Cancelled

**Week Eleven: Artists and Audiences**
Screening: *The Searchers* (ENG SEA)
National Film Registry Essay Due
Thursday, March 27th: Peter Wollen, “The Auteur Theory”

**Week Twelve: Artists and Audiences**
Screening: *Trekkies* (PN 1992.8 S74 T74 1999)
Tuesday, April 1st: Judith Mayne, “Spectatorship Reconsidered” (Bb); Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” (Bb)
Thursday, April 3rd: Henry Jenkins and John Tolloch, “Beyond the Star Trek Phenomenon” (Bb)

**Week Thirteen: Artists and Audiences/ Genre – Documentary**
Screening: *Paris is Burning* (HQ77.95 U6 P37 2005)
Tuesday, April 8th: Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship”; Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation”
Thursday, April 10th: Bill Nichols, “How Can We Define Documentary Film?” (Bb)

**Week Fourteen: Genre – Horror**
Screening: *Halloween* (ENG HAL)
Please note: This screening will not begin until 8:00 PM
Tuesday, April 15th: Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre”; Tania Modleski, “The Terror of Pleasure”
Thursday, April 17th: EASTER BREAK

**Week Fifteen: Genre – Horror**
No Screening—please rewatch *Halloween* on DVD or Blackboard Sharestream
Tuesday, April 22nd: EASTER BREAK
Thursday, April 24th: Linda Williams, “Film Bodies”; Cynthia Freeland, “Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films”

Reconsideration essays are due during our regularly scheduled exam period.
# Persuasive Essay Rubric

**Heidi Goodrich Andrade**

**Rubrics and Self-Assessment Project, Harvard University**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D-F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The claim</strong></td>
<td>I make a claim and explain why it is controversial.</td>
<td>I make a claim but don’t explain why it is controversial.</td>
<td>My claim is buried, confused and/or unclear.</td>
<td>I don’t say what my argument or claim is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons in support of the claim</strong></td>
<td>I give clear and accurate reasons in support of my claim.</td>
<td>I give reasons in support of my claim but I may overlook important reasons.</td>
<td>I give 1 or 2 weak reasons that don’t support my claim and/or irrelevant or confusing reasons.</td>
<td>I do not give convincing reasons in support of my claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons against the claim</strong></td>
<td>I discuss the reasons against my claim and explain why it is valid anyway.</td>
<td>I discuss the reasons against my claim but leave some reasons out and/or don’t explain why the claim still stands.</td>
<td>I say that there are reasons against the claim but I don’t discuss them.</td>
<td>I do not acknowledge or discuss the reasons against the claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>My writing has a compelling opening, an informative middle and a satisfying conclusion.</td>
<td>My writing has a beginning, middle and end. It marches along but doesn’t dance.</td>
<td>My writing is organized but sometimes gets off topic.</td>
<td>My writing is aimless and disorganized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voice and tone</strong></td>
<td>It sounds like I care about my argument. I show how I think and feel about it.</td>
<td>My tone is OK but my paper could have been written by anyone. I need to tell more about how I think and feel.</td>
<td>My writing is bland or pretentious. There is either no hint of a real person in it or it sounds like I’m a fake.</td>
<td>My writing is too formal or too informal. It sounds like I don’t like the topic of the essay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word choice</strong></td>
<td>The words I use are striking but natural, varied and vivid.</td>
<td>I make routine word choices.</td>
<td>The words I use are often dull or uninspired or sound like I am trying too hard to impress.</td>
<td>I use the same words over and over and over and over. Some words may be confusing to a reader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sentence fluency</strong></td>
<td>My sentences are clear, complete, and of varying lengths.</td>
<td>I have well-constructed sentences.</td>
<td>My sentences are sometimes awkward, and/or contain run-ons and fragments.</td>
<td>Many run-ons, fragments and awkward phrasings make my essay hard to read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
<td>I use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.</td>
<td>I generally use correct conventions. I have a couple of errors I should fix.</td>
<td>I have enough errors in my essay to distract a reader.</td>
<td>Numerous errors make my essay hard to read.</td>
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