

FMS 461: Film Theory and Criticism
Spring 2009
Monday: Film Screenings – 6:30-9:00 pm
Wednesday: Class Meeting – 6:30-9:00 pm
FMS Conference Room

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Course Texts (additional course readings made available as electronic texts)

Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Reinventing Film Studies* (New York: Arnold, 2000).
John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, eds. *Film Studies: Critical Approaches* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000).

Course Description and Goals

This course will examine the major positions and issues in film theory with an eye to understanding connections between the early days of film and contemporary approaches to understanding film. While film production methods have experienced incredible advances in the last decade, contemporary film technique finds many threads back to approaches developed throughout the history of film. Since the 1970s, film scholars have developed and modified a range of compelling critical methods for the study of media texts: psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism, cultural studies, queer theory, audience/star studies, postcolonialism, genre analysis, among many others. These critical methods are not, however, set in stone—they require consistent and informed reassessment to remain as viable and engaged ways of thinking about film and other media texts.

Through analysis and re-examination of the major areas of film theory and criticism, this course will help to situate you as informed, critically engaged readers/viewers of global media texts and practices. In addition to the approaches listed above, we will also focus on realism, formalism auteur criticism, genre criticism, and theories of spectatorship and reception. Through the combination of the “heavy hitters” of film theoretical approaches and the more contemporary lenses developed since the 1970s, this course should provide you with the tools necessary to interpret films as collaborative art works, as technical artifacts, as sociocultural and ideological productions, and as products of a globalized media world.

Assignments

Participation/Discussion Boards	15%
Critical Response Papers (2-3 pp. each)	20%; 5% each
Discussion Leading	15%
Oral Presentation	15%
Film Essay (10-12 pp. each)	35%

Discussion Boards: students will be asked to respond to discussion board prompts on the Blackboard coursesite associated with this course, and then post response(s) to another colleague’s post. The goal here is to prepare you for that week’s in-class discussion and will have a direct correlation with your participation grade. There will be 10 of these throughout the semester.

Discussion Leading: students will sign up at the beginning of the semester to lead discussion in one class session. Leading discussion means:

1. reading the essay(s) marked with an asterisk for the class session in which you will lead discussion, and then reading them a second time,
2. preparing a 1-page handout (typed) with enough copies for your colleagues, which should include an outline/summary of the main points of the essay(s) assigned for that particular class session and a set of 3 – 4 critical, open-ended questions meant to facilitate class discussion,
3. drawing some broad connections to the content of our course, and/or to other readings assigned for that day, and
4. working collaboratively with the person giving an oral presentation to negotiate points of overlap

Oral Presentation: each student will participate in a solo oral presentation (suggested length: 15 minutes). Students will choose a particular essay or grouping of essays from the week's critical and theoretical material and provide an overview and analysis of them in relation to the films under discussion. Presenters should deal with critical positions, historical development of theoretical discourses, and close readings of particular films (with clips where appropriate) and should provide additional questions for class discussion. The oral presentation should not occur on the same day that you are responsible for leading discussion.

Response Papers: students will submit short (2-3 page) responses to the film and/or readings studied in the lead-up to the week the response paper is due. You will be asked to focus on course readings and films screened as part of class. Responses incorporating more than one text/approach should draw points of comparison or consider ways the articles contribute to your interpretations of course films. These should not involve doing any external research.

Film Essay: students will write one major paper employing a particular critical methodology (or combination of methods) to analyze a film studied in class (or one that you choose in consultation with me). All written work submitted for the course must be typed, double-spaced, 12 pt font, with 1" margins. I require a write-up of an essay proposal in which you outline the subject and critical approach your essay will take, as well as list any outside sources you've already located. You may consult with me, briefly or in office hours, regarding your ideas for the essay. Optional thesis statements can be submitted until one week before the essay due date.

Exam: the midterm will evaluate your knowledge and application of course materials. It will consist of essay questions asking you to define and apply particular areas of film theory and criticism. The midterm will be given as a take-home exam, picked up at the end of one class session, and due one week later at the beginning of that class session.

Policies/Needs

Attendance and Late Work: Regular attendance and participation is crucial to your success in this course. **Since we meet only once per week to discuss reading and viewing materials, it is essential that you attend all course meetings.** Please consult with me in advance if you must miss class, and make arrangements to get notes or other missed material from a classmate. With two absences, your participation grade decreases by two letter grades for each additional absence. If you miss four or more classes, you will not pass the course. Late assignments will be penalized. You must complete all assignments to pass the course.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity: The aim of education is the intellectual, personal, social, and ethical development of the individual. The educational process is ideally conducted in an environment that encourages reasoned discourse, intellectual honesty, openness to constructive change and respect for the rights of all individuals. Self-discipline and a respect for the rights of others in the university community are necessary for the fulfillment of such goals.

According to the Student Academic Integrity Policy, every assignment that the student completes must be her/his own work and created specifically (only) for this class. Plagiarism is punishable by the university and ultimately may result in a failing grade for the assignment or for the entire course. Information on this policy can be found at:

- http://www.asu.edu/studentaffairs/studentlife/judicial/academic_integrity.htm

Special Needs: If you are in need of special accommodation for assignments or exams, please communicate this to the instructor at the beginning of the semester to assure that your needs are met. In order to guarantee the necessary accommodation, you must present documentation from the Disability Resource Center, located in Mathews Center.

Problems: If anything is interfering with your work in the course, talk to me immediately. Problems can be addressed, but the end of the semester is probably too late to do so.

Course Syllabus

****Please use the online course syllabus on our Blackboard coursesite (<http://myasucourses.asu.edu>) for any active links to the required readings and websites listed in the print version of this syllabus.****

[RFS = *Reinventing Film Studies*; FS = *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*]

Week 1 Introduction to Film Theory and Criticism. What is and Why Theory?

- 01/21: **Readings Due:**
 1. Jules Romains, "The Crowd at the Cinematograph" (PDF/handout)
 2. J. Lye, "Ideology and Film: A Brief Guide (1997)" (Web)

Week 2 Taking Stock of Film Studies

- 01/26: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Decasia: The State of Decay* (US, Bill Morrison, 2002, 67 min.)
- 01/28: **Readings Due:**
 1. Dyer, "Introduction to Film Studies" (FS: 1-8)
 2. Nowell-Smith, "How Films Mean" (RFS: 8-17)
 3. Kolker, "The Film Text and Film Form" (FS: 9-27)

4. Gorbman, "Film Music" (FS: 41-48)

myASU/Blackboard Assignment:

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Week 3 Early Silent Film Theory

- 02/02: **Film Screening:**
 1. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Germany, Robert Wiene, 1919/20, 71 min.)
- 02/04: **Readings Due:**
 1. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" (PDF)
 2. Arnheim, "The Artistry of Silent Film" (PDF)
 3. Minden, "Politics and the Silent Cinema: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Battleship Potemkin*" (PDF)

Critical Response 1 Due.

Week 4 Russian Formalism/Soviet Montage

- 02/09: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Battleship Potemkin* (Soviet Union, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925, 75 min.)
 2. *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Soviet Union, Dziga Vertov, 1929, 68 min.)
- 02/11: **Readings Due:**
 1. Christie, "Formalism and Neo-Formalism" (FS: 56-64)
 2. Pudovkin, "On Editing" (PDF)
 3. Eisenstein, "Dramaturgy of Film Form" (PDF)
 4. Balaz, "The Close-Up," (PDF) "The Face of Man" (PDF)
 5. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" (RFS: 332-350)

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Week 5 Film Realism

- 02/16: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Umberto D.* (Italy, Vittorio de Sica, 1952, 91 min.)
- 02/18: **Readings Due:**

1. Kracauer, : "The Establishment of Physical Existence," (PDF)
2. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction, (PDF)
3. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," (PDF) "The Myth of Total Cinema," (PDF) "de Sica: Metteur-en-Scène" (PDF)

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Week 6 The *Auteur* and *Auteur* Theory

- 02/23: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Hiroshima mon amour* (France, Alain Resnais, 1959, 90 min.)
- 02/25: **Readings Due:**
 1. Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (PDF)
 2. Wollen, "The Auteur Theory" (PDF)
 3. Ropars-Wuilleumier, "How History Begets Meaning: Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (PDF)

Critical Response 2 Due

Week 7 Approaches to Film Genre

- 03/02: **Film Screening:**
 1. *The Hitch-Hiker* (US, Ida Lupino, 1953, 71 min.)
- 03/04: **Readings Due:**
 1. Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre" (RFS: 221-243);
 2. Neale, "Definitions of Genre" (PDF) "Dimensions of Genre" (PDF)
 3. Brégent-Heald, "Dark Limbo: *Film Noir* and the North American Borders" (PDF)

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Week 8 Spring Break (No Class)

Week 9 Ideology, Class, and Industry

- 03/16: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Stella Dallas* (US, King Vidor, 1937, 106 min.)

- 03/18: **Readings Due:**
 1. Commolli and Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (PDF)
 2. Gaines, "Dream/Factory" (RFS: 100-113)
 3. Kleinhan, "Marxism and Film" (FS: 104-114)
 4. Curran, "Stella at the Movies: Class, Critical Spectatorship, and Melodrama in *Stella Dallas*" (PDF)

Critical Response 3 Due

Week 10 Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Aesthetics

- 03/23: **Film Screening:**
 1. *The Stepford Wives* (US, Bryan Forbes, 1975, 115 min.)
- 03/25: **Readings Due:**
 1. Creed, "Film and Psychoanalysis" (FS: 75-88)
 2. White, "Feminism and Film" (FS: 115-132)
 3. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (PDF)
 4. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" (PDF)

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Week 11 Queer Cinema

- 03/30: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Watermelon Woman* (US, Cheryl Dunye, 1996, 90 min.)
 2. *Looking for Langston* (US, Isaac Julien, 1988, 45 min.)
- 04/01: **Readings Due:**
 1. Smelik, "Gay and Lesbian Cinema" (FS: 133-145)
 2. Doty, "Queer Theory" (FS: 146-150)
 3. Diawara, "The Absent One: The Avant-Garde and the Black Imaginary in *Looking for Langston*" (PDF)

Film Essay Proposal Due

myASU/Blackboard Assignment:

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Week 12 Film Bodies and Performance

- 04/06: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Safe* (US, Todd Haynes, 1995, 119 min.)
- 04/08: **Readings Due:**
 1. Geraghty, "Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance" (RFS: 183-202)
 2. McDonald, "Film Acting" (FS: 28-33)

Critical Response 4 Due

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Week 13 Cultural Studies, Film Audiences, and Reception

- 04/13: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Thelma and Louise* (US, Ridley Scott, 1991, 129 min.)
- 04/15: **Readings Due:**
 1. Perkins, "Who (and What) Is It For?" (RFS 76-96)
 2. Turner, "Cultural Studies and Film" (FS: 193-199)
 3. Gripsrud, "Film Audiences," (FS: 200-209)
 4. Jenkins, "Reception Theory and Audience Research: The Mystery of the Vampire's Kiss" (RFS: 165-182)

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Week 14 Globalization, Documentary, and Third Cinema

- 04/20: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (US, Senegal, Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982, 40 min.)
 2. *Tale of Love* (US/Vietnam, Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1995, 108 min.)
- 04/22: **Readings Due:**
 1. Stam and Shohat, "Film Theory and Spectatorship in the Age of the 'Posts'" (RFS: 381-401)
 2. Chow, "Film and Cultural Identity" (FS: 167-173)
 3. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest for Meaning" (PDF)
 4. Solanas and Getino. "Towards a Third Cinema" (PDF) (Web)

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Week 15 Cult Cinema and the Ends/Limits of Cinema

- 04/27: **Film Screening:**
 1. *Mulholland Drive* (US, David Lynch, 2001, 145 min.)
- 04/29: **Readings Due:**
 1. Sconce, " 'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style" (PDF)
 2. Friedberg, "The End of Cinema: Multimedia and Technological Change" (RFS: 438-452)

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Week 16 Finals Week

- 05/##: **Film Essay Due**