

Englit 0400
Spring 2004
Allen, G.

Lit 0400

**Intro to Film
ENGLIT 0400**

**Spring 2004
CRN 21068**

"What is Cinema?"

"You must unlearn what you have learned."
- Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

LAWRN 209: Monday and Wednesday 9:00 AM – 10:50 AM

Instructor: **Gregory Allen**
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Early on within the history of filmmaking, cinema was often coined "the universal language" and was thought to be the bridge that would break down cultural barriers for many nations. Ironically, in 1927 with *The Jazz Singer* and the introduction of sync-sound to motion pictures, these idealistic notions were quickly abandoned. Cinema was no longer merely a silent mode reliant on the visual image and pantomime, but once again a medium, like the written and oral text, bound by notions of language. And yet, while we will be screening some foreign films – films that were produced outside of an American system – I don't want us to regard a film's language as whatever particular language the majority of the actor's speak – be it French, Spanish, or even English. Rather, I want us to focus on the aspects of movie language that are universal – what I have come to regard as the *cinematic*. Though the entire course will be an exploration of this notion of the *cinematic* or perhaps more aptly, *cinematicity*, I will briefly define it here as those aspects of a particular text that completely and utterly rely on conventions of the cinema, i.e., pacing, narrative structure, shot composition, editing style, usage of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, etc. I realize that this definition may be of little value right now, but certainly, by the end of the course it will all make perfect sense. At least, that is the goal.

Beginning with a basic understanding of the apparatus of cinema in its relation to film, video, and digital technologies we will proceed to screen, discuss, and critically consider a host of motion pictures that take us from the beginnings of film history through the silent era to the introduction of the "talkies" and color on to films that are more complex and experimental or mainstream. Will we consider questions like: What is so independent about independent cinema? How useful is the term "experimental" when discussing the *avant-garde*? And can documentary film ever *really* achieve accuracy, truth, and objectivity that somehow transcends ideological agenda? While this analysis will take its cues

primarily from the standpoint of American cinema, we will take periodic breaks to consider films that arise out of a different national discourse.

But it simply isn't enough to limit a discussion of cinematicity to film and motion pictures. Television commercials, MTV, reality television, and even the way we have come to tell stories to each other have all been informed by an ever more dominant awareness of the ways in which images can be arranged and rearranged to influence and inform meaning. And so, at various points throughout the semester I will be referencing clips and outside texts of all sorts to consider this phenomenon, as a way of renegotiating our own understanding of the cinematic.

As you may have already noticed, I have requested that a published screenplay be one of our required texts. Now this may strike you as odd, a text that requires reading as opposed to watching. But consider this: we will not be *watching* films, but rather, we will be *reading* them. Contrary to popular opinion, films are not simply a mindless medium of mass consumption meant to be processed for 90 to 120 minutes and then forgotten. From their invention, films have existed as a cultural checkpoint and some even have served as vehicles for social, political, and ideological change. In addition, it is a rare film that is meant to be viewed only once. In fact, most films only gain meaning and importance after multiple viewings, lending to the opinion that films are meant to be read and studied over and over again, and not simply watched.

In keeping with this, it is my hope that through gaining a basic understanding of narrative by way of screenplay conventions, we will also gain a better understanding of how the cinematic narrative works. It seems to me, though you are free to disagree, that American viewers typically approach the cinema as a mode of storytelling – that is, a way of conveying narrative. But at some point, I hope that we can come to challenge this assumption. Is cinema simply another way of telling stories? Is cinema only as good as its narrative? While these questions are of central concern to me, I encourage you throughout the course to pose questions of your own that might fuel and facilitate a more engaged participation in class discussions and assignments, and inform the readings of the various films and film clips that we will be responsible for viewing, along with certain other texts.

I am available for further discussion and will be more than happy to assist you with any questions or concerns that you might have or that may arise during the semester. I look forward to learning more about you through your work in this class, and I'm eager for us to exchange ideas and benefit from each other's input. Good luck!

COURSE TEXTS – REQUIRED

Barsam, Richard. *Looking at Movies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004.

ISBN: 0393974367

Kaufmann, Charlie and Donald. *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press, 2003.

ISBN: 1557045801 or 1557045119

GRADING POLICY

Your grade will be determined by 5 quizzes, a short group presentation, a midterm on various terms and vocabulary, an essay, and a final multiple choice test. But this is not as cumbersome as it seems. There are opportunities for extra credit on quizzes, and I've included a breakdown that will give you a sense of how everything weighs together:

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| • 5 Quizzes | 20% |
| • Group Presentation | 10% |
| • Midterm (Vocabulary, Terms, Auteurs) | 15% |
| • Essay (Minimum 7 pages) | 15% |
| • Final | 30% |
| • Homework | 10% |

A final word about the group presentation: Each session I will feature what I have termed the "auteur of the week". Typically, this will be a key filmmaker that we have studied or is relevant to what we have studied that you will be encouraged with 3 or 4 other classmates to do outside research on and present a brief synopsis to the class of that research, not to exceed 5 minutes, in addition to a clip of their work and the significance of that clip. You are encouraged to be as creative as you like, so long as your work does not exceed 5 minutes. I am merely interested in the possibility of this process bringing particular aspects to the class that I might otherwise not have thought of. Each group will be responsible for turning in a 4 page brief research paper, fully cited, in addition to their presentation for grading purposes. The group should also provide a list of typed discussion questions for the presentation, and typed quiz questions that I can include in subsequent quizzes regarding that particular "auteur".

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-383-7335 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE: *What is Cinema?: The Apparatus of Film & Video in the Digital Age*

The Shorts of the Lumiere Brothers
2 or 3 Episodes of Project Greenlight

Read: Chapter 1: What is a Movie?

WEEK TWO: *Silence is Golden: The Emergence of the Studio System from the Silent Era*

2 or 3 Shorts of Charlie Chaplin
The Great Dictator, Charlie Chaplin

Auteur of the Week: Charlie Chaplin

Read: Appendix: Overview of Hollywood Production Systems

Read: "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" by Andre Bazin (handout)

WEEK THREE: *If He Hadn't Opened His Big Mouth: The Transition to the "Talkies"*

The Jazz Singer, Alan Crosland

Auteur of the Week: D.W. Griffith

Read: Chapter 7: Sound

Read: Adaptation Screenplay

WEEK FOUR: *Hollywood Ending: The Narrative Formula of the Motion Picture Adaptation*, Spike Jonze

Auteur of the Week: Jean-Luc Godard

Read: Chapter 2: Form and Narrative

Read: Excerpts from Screenplay by Syd Field and Story by Robert McKee
(excerpts on reserve)

WEEK FIVE: *A Cut Above the Rest: The Emergence of the Director's Film*

Rope, Alfred Hitchcock

Auteur of the Week: Alfred Hitchcock

Read: Chapter 3: *Mise-en-Scene* and Design

WEEK SIX: *How They Love Him When He's Dead: The Conventions of the Studio System*

Citizen Kane, Orson Welles

Auteur of the Week: Orson Welles

Read: "Citizen Kane: At Least it was His" by Harlan Lebo (essay on reserve)

Read: Chapter Four: Cinematography

Read: Chapter Six: Editing

WEEK SEVEN: *The Genius of the System, or the Man Who Blew Too Much?: Godard and the New Wave*

Breathless, Jean Luc Godard

Read: "An Exile in Paradise" by Richard Brody

Read: "The French New Wave" from Film: An International History of the Medium by Robert Sklar

Auteur of the Week: Francois Truffaut

WEEK EIGHT: *What is Cinema?: Textual Analysis, Review, Maintenance, & Miscellaneous Catch-Up*

TAKE MIDTERM THIS WEEK.

Various Clips: The Graduate, Pulp Fiction, Austin Powers: Goldmember, Once Upon a Time in America

Read: "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" by Francois Truffaut (essay on reserve)

Read: "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" by Andrew Sarris (essay on reserve)

WEEK NINE: *Rebel Without a Crew: What is Independent Cinema?*

El Mariachi, Robert Rodriguez

Auteur of the Week: Robert Rodriguez

Read: Chapter 8: Writing About Movies

Read: Excerpt from "Rebel Without a Crew" by Robert Rodriguez (essay on reserve)

WEEK TEN: *Canonical Fact or Pulp Fiction?: Experiments in the Hollywood Mainstream*

Kill Bill: Volume One, Quentin Tarantino

Auteur of the Week: Quentin Tarantino

FIRST ESSAY DUE THIS WEEK.

WEEK ELEVEN: *Artistic License Revoked: What is Experimental Film?*

Meshes in the Afternoon, Maya Deren

Un Chien Andalou, Luis Bunuel

Crimes of the Future, David Cronenberg

Auteur of the Week: David Cronenberg

Read: Excerpt from An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film by Maya Deren (on reserve)

Read: "The Film Director as Philosopher: An Interview with David Cronenberg" by Richard Porton (essay on reserve)

WEEK TWELVE: *True Lies or False Truth: What is Reel Ideology in Documentary Film?*

Bowling for Columbine, Michael Moore

Auteur of the Week: Michael Moore

Read: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin (essay on reserve)

WEEK THIRTEEN: *The Movie Brats: From the Film School Generation to Student Cinema*

2 or 3 Unspecified Student Shorts (Point Park Students)

Masters of the Game Part One, Gregory Allen

The Wraith Named Ace, Joe Feaster

Read: "When the Avant-Garde Fell Behind: Reconsidering Cronenberg's Crimes of the Future in terms of Student Cinema" (www.sprocketguild.org)

Read: Excerpt from The Movie Brats by Lynda Myles

WEEK FOURTEEN: *Sham or Shamylan: Is He the Next Spielberg? And If So, So What?*

Unbreakable, M. Night Shyamalan

Read: "Fractured Fairy Tale" by Benjamin Svetkey, Entertainment Weekly, December 1, 2000 (article on reserve)

Read: "Out of This World" by Jeff Giles, Time Magazine, August 5, 2002

Read: Unspecified Unbreakable Essay (TBA)