

EngLit 0530
Summer 2003
Allen, G.

Film Analysis
ENGLIT 0530

Summer 2003
CRN 06190

"How to Read a Film for All it's Worth"

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

LAWRN 207: MW Noon – 3:50 PM

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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, Italian, 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.

Film Analysis introduces students to the critical study of cinema as an art form; it is a challenging, intensive course designed specifically for students with a strong commitment to film studies. Film Analysis sets the foundation for further study in film, providing concepts and vocabulary essential for thinking and writing seriously about cinema. Emphasis will be placed on the interaction between film technique (mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, sound) and film narrative (the stories motion pictures tell). We will call the interaction of technique and narrative the film's style, and we will examine a number of different film styles, including that specific type associated with Hollywood cinema. We will see that Hollywood style is only one way of making films among many other possibilities, even if it may be the style most students are already familiar with. One goal of the course is to have students develop skills that will enable them to experience film as a complex art capable of multiple modes of expression, where

critical analysis can help to uncover pleasure even in the unfamiliar or the off-putting. In the end, it is the aim of this course to facilitate an understanding of cinema by way of analysis within the context of a much larger cinematic tradition.

Beginning with a basic overview of various film scenes and sequences in their dynamic relation to cinematic traditions we will proceed to discuss the apparatus of cinema in its relation to film, video, and digital technologies. But it simply isn't enough to limit a discussion of the *cinematic* 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. While these methods have generically been termed *media*, it is useful to recognize the underlying film traditions and techniques from which these *media* borrow. 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 whether it is presented by media that is specifically celluloid, or some other form – after all, in today's age, even most films are viewed as either videos or DVD's, and thus on a television screen.

But consider this: we will not simply be *watching* films, but rather, *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? Hence, some of our analysis will concern films disinterested in conveying 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

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. 6th Ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2001.

ISBN: 0072317256

GRADING POLICY

Your grade will be determined by 4 quizzes (textbook readings and films), some homework, a short group presentation, a midterm on various terms and vocabulary (textbook readings), an essay, and a final. But this is not as cumbersome as it seems. There are opportunities for extra credit, and I've included a breakdown that will give you a sense of how everything weighs together:

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| • 4 Quizzes (Textbook, Films) | 20% |
| • Group Presentation | 5% |
| • Midterm (Vocabulary, Terms, Textbook) | 20% |
| • Essay (Minimum 5 pages) | 15% |
| • Final (1 Essay, 1 Film Analysis) | 35% |
| • Homework | 5% |
| • Extra Credit: Analysis of "Outside" film | 5% (maximum) |

A final word about the group presentation: You will be encouraged with 2 or 3 other classmates to do an outside viewing of a film of your choice and present a brief analysis of a scene or sequence that you believe best demonstrates what the film is up to in terms of its cinematic approach, not to exceed 10 minutes. You are encouraged to be as creative as you like, so long as your work does not exceed 10 minutes, and so long as you take note of things like cinematography, camera angles, mise-en-scene, shots, editing, use of sound, etc. I am very interested in the possibility of this process bringing particular aspects to the class that I might otherwise not have thought of. Please note that for extra credit "Outside" refers to those films that I have included on the "Outside" viewing list, not just a film of your choice.

CLASS SCHEDULE

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

Monday: Pulp Fiction, Menace II Society, Road to Perdition, The Graduate

Wednesday: Requiem for a Dream

Homework: Compose an analysis of Requiem for a Dream (Due Wednesday); Read Chapters 6-7 (Reading Chapter 11 may assist with assignment)

Outside Viewing: Pi

WEEK TWO: *Anatomy of a Movie: The Shot, The Scene, The Sequence*

Monday: Rope

Wednesday: Timecode

Outside Viewing: Breathless

Homework: **Quiz #1 on Monday**
Read Chapters 3, 8-9

WEEK THREE: *Screen Play: Narrative & Nonlinear Storytelling*

Wednesday: Memento

Outside Viewing: American History X, Adaptation, Annie Hall

Homework: **Quiz #2 on Wednesday**
Read a screenplay an unproduced screenplay online a write an analysis of it, attending to whether or not it conforms with Field and McKee's theories. (www.script-o-rama.com)

WEEK FOUR: *Representation and Reality: The Documentary & Experimental Cinema*

Monday: Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse

Wednesday: Meshes in the Afternoon, Maya Deren Run Lola, Run

Outside Viewing: Wavelength, Bowling for Columbine, Scorpio Rising, Passion, Contempt

Midterm: Take Test on Monday, Essay due on Wednesday

Homework: Read Chapters 5

WEEK FIVE: *Signature Filmmaking: Animation & Auteur Theory*

Monday: Robotech: The New Generation
(Episodes 1-5); The Animatrix (One
Episode)

Wednesday: Citizen Kane

Outside Viewing: Akira, Ninja Scroll, Psycho, The
Animatrix

Homework: **Quiz #3 on Monday**
Read Chapter 4

WEEK SIX: *Inexpensive Tastes: Genre & Independent Cinema*

Monday: Unbreakable

Homework: Read Chapters 1,10

Wednesday: El Mariachi

Outside Viewing: The Blair Witch Project, Clerks, Dr. No,
The Bicycle Thief, Full Frontal,
Bamboozled, Signs

Quiz #4 on Monday