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ENGL 382-01, Film Theory, Fall 2009

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FILM THEORY
ENGL 382

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Semester: Fall 2009

Course Description

It has been over a century since the first grainy images flickered on a silent screen. Legend has it that at an early screening in Paris, spectators were so stunned by the image of a life-sized train hurtling toward them that they shrieked and ducked for cover. Since then, films have intrigued and frustrated, perplexed and inspired billions of viewers around the world. The issues that preoccupied the earliest film theorists continue to puzzle later generations: What is cinema? Is it an art? Is it a language? Is the filmed world realistic or artificial? In addition, since the 1960s, other important issues have been considered: What do movies reveal about the underlying ideologies of the cultures that produce them? How do they manipulate audience beliefs? How do they address, exploit, and satisfy various audience desires?

Offered as a directed inquiry, this course provides a comprehensive history of film theory as it has developed over the "century of cinema." We will begin with classical film theorists, such as Rudolph Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, and André Bazin, evaluating the twin concerns of cinema's relation to reality and its status as art. Then, we will direct our attention to writers who challenged the classical tradition and destabilized the meaning of such terms as art, nature, reality, illusion, author, work, and artist. Assessing the semiotic turn in film theory, we will analyze the influence of new interpretive approaches, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and critical race theory. Finally, we will focus on the latest developments in contemporary film theory, tracing in particular the role of globalization and digitization. We will end by reflecting on the future of film and film theory in an age of new media.

While more-or-less chronological, the course does not present the evolution of film theory merely as a linear progression of ideas and movements. International in scope, our study of film theories and theorists will stress the links between developments in cinematic thought, from such countries as France and the United States to Russia and Italy to Brazil and India. As a synaesthetic medium that has produced a tremendously heterogeneous body of texts, cinema demands multiple frameworks of understanding; this course is designed to offer a wide-ranging introduction to those frameworks within the complex and evolving body of film theory.

Standard of Work: Since this course is being offered as a directed inquiry, you will be expected to keep up with the readings and screenings as they appear in the schedule. Essentially, this course is an independent study; of course, we will meet often to discuss your progress.

Course Policies

Late Work: I do not accept late work. If you do not plan on being here when an assignment is due, it must be in my mailbox before the deadline. You will receive a zero on an assignment if it is not turned in when it is due. Please note that you are required to complete all assignments in order to receive a passing grade.

Consultation: I'll be happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you have about the class. Feel free to stop by during my office hours. If those times don't work, I can make an appointment to meet with you at a time that is mutually convenient. If you have questions about an assignment, do not wait until the last minute. Remember, I want you to do well in the class and am always willing to work with you.

Email: It is always preferable to meet in person to discuss any questions or concerns, since the impersonal medium of electronic communication is a poor substitute for a genuine face-to-face conversation. However, I'm available by email for simple queries (expect a response during business hours: 9am-5pm Monday-Friday). Please regard email correspondence as formal communication. It is always best to ask specific rather than general questions in an email and abide by rules of professional etiquette. It is not advisable to email me the evening before an assignment is due asking for help because there is very little I can do at that point; besides, last-minute emails are very unprofessional. Email is absolutely not the medium for negotiating special requests or addressing grade concerns; those issues must be handled in person.

Format of Assignments: All written assignments need to be typed and double spaced, in 12 pt. font, using Times New Roman, with one-inch margins on all sides. The format and citations must conform to MLA specifications, or the assignment may not be accepted. You do not need a title page; instead, include your name, my name, course name/number, and date in the top left corner of the first page. Be sure to number and staple your pages; also, proofread your work before printing up the final draft. I do not accept any assignments via email. A paper copy is expected at the beginning of class on the day the assignment is due.

Plagiarism: Borrowing of ideas or language from other sources (including published material, other student papers, the internet or other electronic resources, etc.) must be carefully documented. Plagiarism is considered a serious breach of academic integrity and is a major violation of the Rhodes Honor Code; suspected cases will be referred to the Honor Council. If you are ever uncertain about whether something in your assignment constitutes a violation, please contact me.

Disability Issues: Students with documented disabilities may be entitled to specific accommodations. Please contact the office of Student Disability Services for more information. In every case, it is your responsibility to provide me with an official letter from SDS.

Course Evaluation

Grade Distribution

Discussion	20%	200 points
Response Papers	40%	400 points
Research Paper	40%	400 points
Total	100%	1000 points

Assignments

Discussion: Since this course is a directed inquiry, we will meet several times over the course of the semester for discussions. You will need to come prepared to talk about the readings and their relationship to the screenings.

Response Papers: You will write four response papers over the course of the semester. These short papers (2-3 pages each) will evaluate your understanding of the theoretical material and your ability to use it for film analysis. Prompts for response papers are provided in the schedule.

Research Paper (12-15 pages): The final project for the class is a research paper. Your paper will engage with a specific aspect of film theory; ideally, it will use a theoretical approach to analyze a cluster of films (based on auteur, genre, star, or any other combination). You will be required to research your topic comprehensively and cite at least six to eight external scholarly sources in your essay. Your paper will be evaluated on the originality of your critique, the rigor of your analysis, and the thoroughness of your research.

Grading Guidelines

A = 100-94; **A-** = 93-90; **B+** = 89-87; **B** = 86-84; **B-** = 83-80
C+ = 79-77; **C** = 76-74; **C-** = 73-70; **D+** = 69-67; **D** = 66-64; **D-** = 63-60; **F** < 60

A range (100-90): Excellent work; exemplary in argument and organization; professionally presented; free of mechanical errors.

B range (89-80): Good, solid work; substantive in argument and organization; meets all requirements, but needs some revisions; no more than five mechanical errors.

C range (79-70): Satisfactory work; addresses the assignment adequately, but requires some significant revisions of content and/or mechanics.

D range (69-60): Below average work; misses one or more central aspects of the assignment; inadequate focus and/or development; awkwardly written; requires extensive rewriting.

F range (< 60): Unacceptable work; fails to meet the requirements of the assignment; incomplete or irrelevant material; lack of focus or development.

Course Text

- Brady, Leo and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism*. 7th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.

Course Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1: What Is Cinema?

Readings: Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (665-85)

Week 2: Early Silents

Readings: Arnheim, "The Complete Film" (167-70) & "Film and Reality" (282-91)

Screenings: Lumière, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895); Lumière, *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895); Méliès, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902); Porter, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)

Week 3: Formalism

Readings: Pudovkin, "[On Editing]" (7-12)

Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot" & "The Dramaturgy of Film Form" (13-40)

Screening: Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

Week 4: Realism

Readings: Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (41-53) & "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (159-63)

Kracauer, "Basic Concepts" (147-58)

Screenings: De Sica, *The Bicycle Thief* (1948); Ozu, *Tokyo Story* (1953)

Week 5: Auteurism

Response Paper #1 due: Explore the differences between formalism and realism in classical film theory.

Readings: Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (451-54)

Wollen, "The Auteur Theory" (455-70)

Screenings: Hawks, *Bringing up Baby* (1938); Hawks, *The Big Sleep* (1946)

Week 6: Genre

Readings: Braudy, "Genre" (535-51)

Schatz, "Film Genre and the Genre Film" (564-75)

Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" (592-601)

Screenings: Hitchcock, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943); Capra, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Week 7: Star

Readings: Balász, "The Close-Up" & "The Face of Man" (273-81)

Barthes, "The Face of Garbo" (471-73)

Dyer, "From Stars" (480-85)

Naremore, "Katherine Hepburn in *Holiday*" (486-500)

Screenings: Goulding, *Grand Hotel* (1932); Cukor, *Holiday* (1938)

Week 8: Structuralism**Response Paper #2 due: Explore two-three films drawing on auteur or star or genre theory.**

Readings: Metz, "Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema" & "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film" (65-77)
 Harman, "Semiotics and the Cinema" (78-86)
 Comolli and Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (686-93)

Screening: Ford, *The Searchers* (1956)

Week 9: Psychoanalysis

Readings: Metz, "Identification, Mirror," "The Passion for Perceiving," & "Disavowal, Fetishism" (694-710)

Screening: Hitchcock, *Psycho* (1960)

Week 10: Spring Break**Week 11: Feminism**

Readings: Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (711-22)
 Modleski, "The Master's Dollhouse" (723-35)
 Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films" (627-48)

Screenings: Hitchcock, *Rear Window* (1954); Hitchcock, *Vertigo* (1958)

Week 12: Race

Readings: Stam and Spence, "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation" (751-66)
 Diawara, "Black Spectatorship" (767-75)

Screening: Lee, *Bamboozled* (2000)

Week 13: Globalization**Response Paper #3 due: Explore how the concept of the visual gaze functions at the intersection of gender and race.**

Readings: Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema(s)" (853-64)
 Dissanayake, "Issues in World Cinema" (877-85)

Screenings: Nair, *Mississippi Masala* (1991); Meirelles, *City of God* (2002)

Week 14: Digitization

Readings: Manovich, "Synthetic Realism and Its Discontents," "The Synthetic Image and Its Subject," & "Digital Cinema and the History of a Moving Image" (785-801)
 Allen, "The Impact of Digital Technologies on Film Aesthetics" (824-33)

Screenings: Spielberg, *Jurassic Park* (1993); Zemeckis, *Forrest Gump* (1994)

Week 15: The End of Cinema?**Response Paper #4 due: Assess the strength of Susan Sontag's "A Century of Cinema" (handout) in relation to contemporary cinema.**

Readings: Friedberg, "The End of Cinema" (802-13)

Screening: Tykwer, *Run Lola Run* (1998); Linklater, *Waking Life* (2001)

Week 16: Research Paper due