

PROF. NICK DAVIS

nicholas-davis@northwestern.edu

University Hall 307

Office Hours: Tues 11-12, Wed 2-3, or by appointment

Introduction to *Film and Its Literatures*



(English 214 – Winter 2015 – MWF 1-1:50pm, Fisk Hall 217 + weekly discussion sections)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course harbors two primary objectives: 1) to acquaint students with vocabularies and frameworks of argument that are required to analyze a film sequence in terms specific to that medium; and 2) to expose students to a broad range of written texts crucial to the study of cinema, including those written by historians, theorists, artists, popular reviewers, industry professionals, censorship boards, fiction writers, poets, dramatists, and public intellectuals. By absorbing techniques of film analysis, students will learn to craft essay-length interpretations of major cinematic texts. Moreover, they will gain a valuable fluency in how to watch, dissect, and debate films at a time when they retain enormous cultural sway, both as entertainment vehicles and as venues for sustaining or contesting cultural narratives. Meanwhile, through a series of critical and creative writing exercises, participants in this course will learn not just to interpret but to simulate and expand upon an eclectic array of literary and scholarly texts that have inspired or been inspired by the movies. As readers and as writers, then, students will come to appreciate key distinctions but also important overlaps among film history, film theory, film reviewing, and film analysis, tracing how each practice has changed over time and from varying social perspectives. This course presumes no prior coursework in film studies.

KEY OBJECTIVES

Through reading, viewing, lectures, and discussions, you will gain new levels of fluency in thinking about film in its formal aspects, its thematic nuances, and its historical and industrial contexts. You will also learn to confront a wide range of written texts, across an imaginative, historical, theoretical, journalistic, and institutional spectrum, and to derive important, arguable insights from these film-related documents. Via careful critical writing, you will generate your own questions, articulate detailed interpretations, and cultivate your skills of crafting college-level prose. You will glean experience as a library researcher and an informed film reviewer. I hope you will see how these skills feed each other, testing assumptions you brought to the class in all these areas, and that you will consider more advanced courses in English or in film studies.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Assigned readings will all be available on the Canvas site for the course. Please note that many texts on the syllabus are either short film reviews or excerpts of longer works; this approach allows me to expose you to a wider diversity of materials, and leaves you room to go further into what interests you. With good time management, you should have no trouble managing the load.

Assigned films can be streamed for viewing on the Canvas site. Where possible, I have also filed requests for DVDs of our course films to be placed on Course Reserve at the library. If you desire easier access to the movies you are writing about and/or a cleaner image than streaming technology may allow, the majority of our films are available for inexpensive rental on Amazon Instant, iTunes, Netflix, or Hulu Plus, and/or for purchase on DVD or Blu-ray. Given these abundant means of accessing these films, troubles with Canvas are no excuse for missing a film.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

You will submit **one early essay (5pp.)** and **one final paper (7-8pp.)** on the dates indicated, with guidelines distributed in advance. Rewrites will not be allowed. The final paper substitutes for an exam, challenging you to posit and contextualize original arguments at a high level.

Along the way, you will also compose **three shorter assignments (2-3pp.)** related to reviewing films (Weeks 4-7), researching and summarizing academic articles (Weeks 4-7), and distilling and applying ideas in a cinematic manifesto (Week 8). These are all key skills for film scholars.

Your TAs and I may solicit short, informal responses or administer a quiz in any given week.

LECTURE ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

Your attentive, informed presence at lectures is crucial to absorbing and exchanging ideas and to achieving a high final grade. I will expect to converse with you occasionally during lectures: answering questions, soliciting reactions to specific film scenes and written passages, etc. For these reasons, it is important that you arrive to each lecture having already read and viewed the assigned material for that session, and that you remain alert, engaged, and respectful of others.

SECTION ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

Your TAs will announce their own policies and standards for participation. Please note you cannot miss more than **one section** without diminishing your grade, except in emergencies, or in extraordinary circumstances cleared ahead of time with your TA.

DEADLINES

Work must arrive by the **day, time, and method** specified on this syllabus. Late assignments will be docked one point (A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) for late arrival *on* the due date, and a full letter (A to B, B+ to C+, etc.) for each subsequent day they are late. Papers arriving three days late will earn a “zero,” with the possible outcome of failure for the course. Extensions cannot be granted except in personal emergencies or when requested well in advance of the deadlines.

OFFICE HOURS

Please note my office hours, listed on the first page of this syllabus. Please come to them! They offer a great chance for me to meet you and to provide personalized feedback and encouragement, which I eagerly wish to do. Your TA will also hold her or his own office hours.

FEEDBACK ON YOUR WORK

You should expect clear, helpful **comments** on your formal assignments, especially graded papers. If you ever have trouble grasping these comments, or if you disagree strongly with something that the TA or I have said, please visit our office hours and/or contact us by e-mail.

I encourage you to **discuss** your ideas about readings, lectures, or paper topics with your TA or with me, either in office hours or over e-mail. The more involved you are in the course and the more you take pride in your writing, thinking, and conversation, the more likely it is that you will enjoy and profit from the experience of the class—which is meant to prompt eager exploration!

One **exception**: please do not ask for feedback about full drafts of your papers. Besides the shortage of available time to fulfill such requests, learning to paraphrase your own arguments and to frame your own questions is an important part of the learning process. (Friends in lecture or section and/or tutors at the Writing Place are terrific candidates for responding to full drafts.)

GRADES

At the end of the semester, your TAs and I will consult about final grades for each of you, according to these likely percentages: Paper #1 (15%), shorter writing assignments (45% total), participation (20%), and the final essay (20%). “Participation” encompasses engagement at lectures but especially in sections (to include pertinent contributions *and* focused listening), clear communication with your TA and me, and diligence in following the itinerary of assignments. Do not assume your participation grade is an “A” by dint of showing up; we are serious in expecting your vocal, diligent, and consistent dedication to the class and to your fellow students.

PLAGIARISM & ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Any student engaging in any plagiarist practice is automatically vulnerable to a range of severe punishments, as determined by the instructors of this course in dialogue with the office of the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies. Official college policies are available here: <http://www.wcas.northwestern.edu/advising/academic.html>. Your possession of this syllabus hereafter presumes your familiarity with the definition of plagiarism, your awareness of possible penalties, and your agreement *not* to perpetrate these offenses as a participant in this course.

PROVISIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with verified disabilities requiring special accommodations should speak confidentially to me, your TA, and the AccessibleNU Office (7-5530) early in the quarter, as early as possible.

MORE OF WHAT’S HOT

Bringing texts to lecture and section; taking notes in lecture; writing in the margins of your texts, while you read and during lecture/section; prepping questions in advance; peer-editing each other’s papers; responding to in-class prompts; writing about topics that truly engage you.

MORE OF WHAT’S NOT

Laptop-based distractions; texting; cell phones; chatter; skipping lecture; discourteous e-mails to me or your TA. Rude behavior in any of these areas can lower your participation grade.

Please contact Professor Davis and/or your TA if you have any questions about any of the above.

Weekly Schedule of Lecture Topics

Read or view assigned texts **in advance** of the lecture indicated, and **in the order** indicated.

Week One: Foundations and Formal Analysis

- Mon 1/5:** Worksheets: Cinematography/Mise-en-Scène; Editing/Montage; Sound/Music
- Wed 1/7:** *Corner in Wheat* (D.W. Griffith, US, 1909, 14min)
The Immigrant (Charlie Chaplin, US, 1917, 25min)
 Hart Crane, “Chaplinesque”
 Valeria Belletti, from *Adventures of a Hollywood Secretary*
- Fri 1/9:** No Lecture

Week Two: Cinematic Effects and Social Discourse

- Mon 1/12:** Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)
The Fall of the House of Usher (Watson & Webber, US, 1928, 12min)
The Fall of the House of Usher (Jean Epstein, France, 1928, 65min)
- Wed 1/14:** Robert Sklar, from *Movie-Made America*
 H.L. Mencken, from *Appendix from Moronia*
 Hugo Münsterberg, “The Function of the Photoplay”
- Fri 1/16:** *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, USSR, 1925, excerpt)
L’Atalante (Jean Vigo, France, 1934, excerpt)
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, Germany, 1919, excerpt)
 Siegfried Kracauer, from *From Caligari to Hitler*

Week Three: Cinema, Modernism, and Moral Implications

- Mon 1/19:** No Lecture – Martin Luther King, Jr., Day
- Wed 1/21:** *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl-Theodor Dreyer, Denmark, 1928, excerpt)
 H.D., “*The Passion of Joan of Arc*”
 H.D., from *Selected Poems*
- Fri 1/23:** Motion Picture Production Code (1930)
Paper #1 due to your TA in discussion section

Week Four: American Monuments

- Mon 1/26:** *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, US, 1933, 100 min)
 William Troy, “*King Kong*”
 Cecelia Ager, “*King Kong*”
- Wed 1/28:** F. Scott Fitzgerald, from *The Great Gatsby*
 F. Scott Fitzgerald, from *The Love of the Last Tycoon*
- Fri 1/30:** Nathanael West, from *The Day of the Locust*

Week Five: Legacies of “Classical” Hollywood

- Mon 2/2:** *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, US, 1941, 100 min)
- Wed 2/4:** Otis Ferguson, review of *The Maltese Falcon*
James Agee, review of *The Maltese Falcon*
Kenneth Anger, from *Hollywood Babylon*
William Mooney, “Sex, Booze, and the Code”
- Fri 2/6:** William Luhr, “Tracking *The Maltese Falcon*”
Robert Kolker, from *A Cinema of Loneliness*
Review or Research Assignment due over Canvas by 5pm

Week Six: Theories, Hierarchies, Identifications

- Mon 2/9:** Andre Bazin, from *What Is Cinema?*
- Wed 2/11:** *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, US, 1948, 86 min)
Andrew Sarris, from *The American Cinema*
Andrew Sarris, “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”
- Fri 2/13:** Joan Didion, from *Play It As It Lays*
Adrienne Kennedy, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*

Week Seven: Film and Film Writing as Cultural Critique

- Mon 2/16:** Frank O’Hara, “Four Little Elegies,” “Steps,” “Ave Maria” and
“Lana Turner Has Collapsed”
Manny Farber, “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art”
- Wed 2/18:** *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, US, 1967; 111 min)
Pauline Kael, “*Bonnie and Clyde*”
- Fri 2/20:** J. Hoberman, from *The Dream Life*
James Baldwin, from *The Devil Finds Work*
Review or Research Assignment due over Canvas by 5pm

Week Eight: Politicizing Cinema

- Mon 2/23:** *Borom Sarret* (Ousmane Sembene, Senegal, 1963, 20 min)
Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema”
- Wed 2/25:** *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, US, 1983, excerpt)
Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
- Fri 2/27:** *Looking for Langston* (Isaac Julien, UK, 1989, 44 min)
B. Ruby Rich, “New Queer Cinema”
Manifesto Summary and Response due in section to your TA

Week Nine: Millennium Approaches

- Mon 3/2:** *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, US, 1994, 154 min)
bell hooks, “Cool Cynicism: *Pulp Fiction*”
- Wed 3/4:** Steve Erickson, from *Zeroville*
Marisha Pessl, from *Night Film*
- Fri 3/6:** Dudley Andrew, from *What Cinema Is!*
David Denby, from *Do the Movies Have a Future?*
J. Hoberman, from *Film After Film*

Week Ten: The Final Frontier?

- Mon 3/9:** Mark Harris, “The Birdcage”
C. Van Jordan, from *The Cineaste*
Next Floor (Denis Villeneuve, Canada, 2008, 11 min)
Gravity (Alfonso Cuarón, US/UK/Mexico, 2013, 91 min)
Final Paper Proposal due over Canvas by 5pm

Exam Week

- Wed 3/18: Final Paper due over Canvas by 12pm (noon)**
May address a film not on our syllabus, with TA and instructor approval.
Please fill out CTEC evaluations in as much detail as possible