
Form, Style, and Meaning in Cinema

Spring 2003

Cinema 101/English 271

TuTh 9:35-10:45

King 343

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This course focuses on the movie as text, primarily, though not exclusively, on fictional narrative movies. For our purposes in this course, "film" refers to the medium, "movie" refers to a particular work, and "cinema" refers to the whole of filmmaking, distribution, viewing, and response, both as an individual and cultural phenomenon. Our goal is to understand how movies "mean." To do this we are going to explore not only the movie as a work of art and craft but the ways in which we as conscious viewers can make sense of a work, how we come to understand the meaning of a movie in coherent and specific terms.

While we will refer to the context and cultural situation of cinema, our concentration for this semester is on individual movies, and in the second module, a genre, a group of related movies, the Western. It's not that other ways of understanding cinema are less important, but rather than being attuned to style, form, and meaning in individual movies is the basis of our work in cinema studies. As a discipline in the humanities, Cinema Studies begins with particular works as communications from one person, or a group of human beings to other human beings. My own view is that each movie constitutes a mode of consciousness.

Thus we will focus on the form of a movie--its organization and structure--and style, the way in which that form is realized in particular ways. While we'll be concerned with technical issues (cinematography, editing, sound, etc.) it's important to remember that technical work, style, and form as such have relatively little intrinsic meaning--the way the movie makers employ them and we receive them is what gives them significance.

I assume that all of you have grown up watching movies, thus in a sense you already know how to watch and interpret them. Our goal in this course is to name things you already see and here, become more conscious of the ways in which a movie is put together as a work of art, and in doing so become more conscious of the assumptions each of us makes about movies and their meanings. In this sense, the course is not just an exploration of the movie as text, but the viewer as a creator of meaning.

The book for this course is **Louis Giannetti, Understanding Movies** (ninth edition) "LG" on the syllabus. All other readings are on eres.

Schedule

Week/ Date	Topic	Readings	Showings All Showings on Wednesday in Mudd 050 from 7- 10 p.m. Unless Otherwise Indicated
Week 1 2/3	What is cinema?	LG Chapter 11 Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" Arnheim, "The Complete Film"	<u>The Purple Rose of Cairo</u> <u>Dog Star Man</u>
Week 2 2/10	Narrative	LG Chapters 7 & 8	<u>Meshes of the Afternoon</u> <u>The Sweet Hereafter</u>
Week 3 2/17	The Documentar y Film	Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary"	Sunday Mudd 050 7-10 <u>Nanook of the North</u> <u>Nobody's Business</u> Wednesday <u>The Thin Blue Line</u> <u>Man with a Movie Camera</u> <u>Duck Amuck</u>
Week 4 Feb. 24	Photography Movement, Editing	LG Chapters 1, 3 & 4 Robert Rosenblum, "Annie Hall: It Wasn't the Film He Set Out to Make"	<u>Magnolia</u>
Week 5 March 3	Mise-en- scène, Sound, Acting	LG Chapters 2, 5 & 6	Sunday Mudd 050 7-10 <u>The King of Comedy</u> Wednesday <u>Medium Cool</u>
Week 6 March 10			
Week 7 March 17		Break	
Week 8 March 31	The Movies as Industry and Apparatus	Walter Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Bordwell/Thompson, Chapter One	<u>Vertigo</u>
Week 9 April 7	Genre: The Western	Rick Altman, "Cinema and Genre" Leo Braudy "Genre: The Convention of Connection" Edward Buscombe, "The Western" Robert Warshow "Chronicle: The Western"	Sunday Mudd 050 7-10 <u>The Searchers</u> Wednesday <u>Taxi Driver</u>
Week 10 April 14			Sunday Mudd 050 7-10 <u>The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance</u> Wednesday <u>Lone Star</u>
Week 11 April 21			Sunday Mudd 050 7-10 <u>Yojimbo</u> Wednesday <u>Dead Man</u>
Week 12 April 28 Week 13 May 5	What is Cinema?		Sunday Mudd 050 7-10 <u>Rear Window</u>

General Rules and Instructions

Attendance Policy

I expect you to attend class. I take attendance. We only have 24 meetings during the semester, it isn't hard to show up. I expect you to keep track of your own attendance; "I didn't realize I'd missed that many classes" is not an excuse.

You get 1 unexcused absence, which an absence for reasons other than illness or family emergency. "I forgot," "I hadn't read the material," "I was working on a paper for another class," "I'm in a production of The Sunshine Boys and we had rehearsal," "my fish was depressed," "I don't do Thursdays" etc.etc. etc. are not excusable absences. After 1 unexcused absence your grade starts to go down.

After a total of 6 unexcused absences, you will have missed 25% of the course. After a total of 6 unexcused absences, don't bother to come back, because you've just No Entry-ed the course.

Incompletes Policy

Academic or emergency incompletes are yours to take if you choose, as long as you are in good standing in the course. You don't need to tell me the story, unless you want to; I trust that you wouldn't take an incomplete without a good reason. "Good Standing" means that you have completed all the work assigned for the first module and at least some of the work for the second.

Outside class discussion groups.

You must form a small discussion group (3-4 people) which meets each week outside of class to discuss the assignments. Each week the group will post a question/comment on Blackboard.

How I comment on your written work.

The comments on your writing will be, as one former student put it, "ambiguous." I don't do much "this is good, that's bad" commenting. The comments I make will be directed to making you think about what you're writing about, raising issues you may want to consider in revising, or writing about in the next prep essay. I may not respond to all your short essays. For specific advice on how to revise, what to do with a particular argument, etc., we should set up a conference.

Grading

You won't receive any grades over the course of the semester. This isn't because the grade is unimportant (if it was unimportant we wouldn't give it,

would we?) but because the work in the course is part of a process, rather than a sequence of discrete units. If I'm trying to encourage you to use your writing to be experimental and speculative, leading to your final essay, it makes little sense to grade it along the way.

If you want a sense of how you're doing, you should feel free to come and speak to me about your work. I will be able to tell you if you are making what I see as reasonable progress, what things you may want to work on, what things you seem to be doing best. I won't be able to be extremely precise about a grade equivalent, however.

On a rough scale, though, I would say that if you are doing intelligent analytic paraphrase of the works we consider and/or are able to state your own views clearly, that is C-/C/ C+ work. If you are able to interpret the material we are working with, discuss not only what is "said" and how, but what might mean, you would be in the B-/B range. If in addition you can demonstrate a capacity for self-reflective inquiry (turning analysis and interpretation into a line of questions about the significance of your interpretations, thinking about your own way of thinking and what it means to think as you do) you would be in the B+ to A range. So these are the kinds of mental activity you will be doing in the course: analysis & response, interpretation, and inquiry, reflection and evaluation.

In general, I think of grades in the B/B- range as "normal" here at Oberlin. It's also important to remember that what I can grade is the work I can observe: essays, participation in discussion, etc. You may well get things out of the course that aren't measured or reflected in the grade.

Assignments

- * All assignments must be handed in on time.
- * Late assignments will be accepted at the discretion of the instructor.
- * Late assignments will be read and evaluated when I get the chance.
- * All assignments work must be handed to get credit for the course.

Short Essays

There are four short (600 words, 2-3 pages) essays for this course. These essays should involve a discussion of specific aspects of the film text and the real of style and form to meaning. They should not be simply analytical essays, though, but should address the importance of the the analysis you have done to understanding the movie.

I will assign each of you due dates for two short essay assignments each module. These essays will be posted on Blackboard. I encourage you to respond to what is said on Blackboard if you choose.

Depending on how things are going there might be a midterm exam.

Mid-Term Composition Project.

We don't have the equipment or time in this course for you to make a movie, but you can think about the composition of a film. This is a group project; the group should be 3-4 people. I'm asking you do do this as a group because movies are typically created by groups of people rather than by lone individuals.

In this project I'd like you to create a series of images (at least 12 and up to 36) which form a whole. You can do this in a number of ways. You can buy a disposable camera or two and take photos. You can also use found images. You should include sound, either on tape or through indications in an accompanying text. You will also need to write a short (2-3 pages) explanation of your project, what you were trying to accomplish, and who did what.

I'm open to people who have the knowledge making a moving image project (say on I-Movie) but 1) you have to provide **all** your own equipment 2) it **must** be a group project 3) **no** extensions for equipment failures or "it's turned into a 145 minute movie about the Thirty Years War and we're still trying to get that crane shot."

Final Essay

This essay should be about 1500 words (7 pages). The topic is open. More details will be provided in the second module, but the point of this essay is to integrate the issues and concerns we've discussed over the semester in an essay about one or more movies.

Movies

More factual information about cast, crew, and production is available on the Internet Movie Data Base: us.imdb.com

<p><u>The Purple Rose of Cairo</u> (Woody Allen, 1985; 82 min.)</p> <p><u>Dog Star Man</u> Part 1 (Stan Brakhage, 1962; 30 min)</p> <p><u>Meshes of the Afternoon</u> (Maya Deren, 1943; 18 min.)</p> <p><u>The Sweet Hereafter</u> (Atom Egoyan. 1997; 112 min.)</p> <p><u>Nanook of the North</u> (Robert Flaherty, 1922; 79 min.)</p> <p><u>Nobody's Business</u> (Alan Berliner, 1996; 60 min.)</p> <p><u>The Thin Blue Line</u> (Errol Morris, 1988; 103 min.)</p> <p><u>Man with a Movie Camera</u> (Dziga Vertov, 1929; 80 min.)</p> <p><u>Duck Amuck</u>, (Chuck Jones, 1953; 7 min.)</p> <p><u>Magnolia</u> (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2000; 191 min.)</p>	<p><u>The King of Comedy</u> (Martin Scorsese, 1983; 101 min.)</p> <p><u>Medium Cool</u> (Haskell Wexler, 1968; 110 min.)</p> <p><u>Vertigo</u> (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958; 124 min.)</p> <p><u>The Searchers</u> (John Ford; 1956, 119 min.)</p> <p><u>Taxi Driver</u> (Martin Scorsese, 1976; 115 min.)</p> <p><u>The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance</u> (John Ford, 1962, 122 min.)</p> <p><u>Lone Star</u> (John Sayles, 1996; 135 min.)</p> <p><u>Yojimbo</u> (Akira Kurasawa, 1961; 110 min.)</p> <p><u>Dead Man</u> (Jim Jarmusch, 1994; 121 min.)</p> <p><u>Rear Window</u> (Alfred Hitchcock 1954; 115 min.)</p>
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