

Professor Nick Rombes
231 Briggs

Office Hours: W 12:00-2:00; F 12:00-1:00
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ENGLISH 255: STUDIES IN FILM

Film—by its very nature—depends on illusion and on the blurred boundary between the real and the not-real. This semester, we will explore films that take this boundary between reality and illusion as their subject matter. We will pay special attention to films that either directly or indirectly ask us to notice that we are watching a film, whether it be through Edward Norton in *Fight Club* as he looks directly into the camera (and directly at us, the audience) or through films that use the medium to explore the ways in which reality itself is constructed. In movies such as these, the illusion of a coherent alternate reality that films typically create breaks down, inviting us to ponder the very devices that get us to buy into the world of the movie in the first place.

Because films can be very powerful and seductive cultural agents that help to shape and modify how we think about identity, gender, race, and politics, it is important to look critically at how they cast their spells on us. To that end, we will consider the ways that traditional Hollywood cinema actually depends on the very concealment of the many choices that go into making a film. We will explore what one film theorist describes as classical Hollywood's "systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie's narrative." Our discussion will include both popular and classic films from the early twentieth century to the present, with special attention being paid to recent post-Hollywood films (by Julie Taymor, Spike Lee, Jim Jarmusch, Lars von Trier, and others) that actively call into question and deconstruct the boundary between the real and the illusory. But before we get to this recent, postmodern cinema, we will look at some earlier alternatives to the Hollywood spell, including the Soviet Montage movement (1920s), the Italian Neorealist movement (1940s), and the French New Wave (1950s). The course will end with a consideration of how new digital technologies—such as DVDs—alter the relationship between the viewer and the film text.

Our class time will be spent in a mixture of critical discussion of the readings and viewing of film clips. Students do not need a formal background in film theory or the history of film.

Required Texts:

Robert Ray. *A Certain Tendency in the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Dead Man*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.

Amy Taubin. *Taxi Driver*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.

Course packet, available at the bookstore.

Useful Websites:

Google Images

<http://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en>

CTHEORY, edited by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker:

www.ctheory.net

Internet Movie Database:

www.imdb.com

Senses of Cinema:

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/>

Voice of the Shuttle, woven by Alan Liu:

<http://vos.ucsb.edu/>

Columbia Guide to Online Style:

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos/idx_basic.html

Assignments:

Paper 1:	How a film reveals its style (3-5 pp.)	15%
Paper 2:	Analysis of screen space, with research and MLA style Works Cited (8-10 pp.)	20%
Paper 3:	Paper or Media Project (i.e., a website, digital film, screenplay, etc.) on a topic you develop either alone or in a group	25%
Midterm:		20%
Short write-ups:		20%

Attendance

I expect you to attend all classes and arrive on time. Because the class meets only once per week, missing one class is the equivalent of missing a full week. I reserve the right to lower your final grade by one or more letters if you miss two or more classes.

Content

Some of the films we will be studying this semester are rated R, and touch directly on issues of ethnicity, violence, etc. Please be aware of this going into the class.

Viewings

Each week, we will discuss the readings and look at some film clips. In addition, you will be watching five films (indicated with an * on the schedule that follows) outside of class (I will make the movies available in the library, or you may rent them on your own).

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

Part One: Realism and Its Discontents

Week 1 9-9	Introduction	Lumiere, Melies, and Porter: Realism and its Alternatives
Week 2 9-16	Read:	Ray, ch. 1: "A Certain Tendency of the American Cinema," pp. 25-69 "The Production Code," (packet)
	Clips:	The Maltese Falcon (John Huston, 1941)
Week 3 9-23	Read:	Ray, ch. 5: "The Dissolution of the Homogeneous Audience and Hollywood's Response," pp. 129-52 Manovich, "The Screen and the User," (coursepack)
	Clips:	Touch of Evil (Orson Welles, 1958)

Part Two: Alternatives to the Classical Hollywood Style

Week 4
9-30

Read: Cook, "Soviet Silent Cinema and the Theory of Montage," (coursepack)
Manovich, "Database Cinema: Greenaway and Vertov," (handout)

Clips: **Man with the Movie Camera** (Dziga Vertov, 1929)
Battleship Potemkin (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)

Week 5
10-7

Read: Cook, "Wartime and Postwar Cinema: Italy and the United States, 1940-1951," (coursepack)

Clips: **Rome, Open City** (Roberto Rossellini, 1945)
The Naked City (Jules Dassin, 1948)

Paper 1 Due

Week 6
10-14

Read: Ray, ch. 8: "The 1960s: Frontier Metaphors, Developing Self-Consciousness, and New Waves," pp. 248-95

Film: * **Cleo from 5 to 7** (Agnes Varda, 1962)

Part Three: Post-Vietnam Hollywood and its Incoherent Texts

Week 7
10-21

Read: Taubin, *Taxi Driver*

Film: * **Taxi Driver** (Martin Scorsese, 1976)

Week 8
10-28

Midterm Exam

Week 9

Read: Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*

Film: * **Dead Man** (Jim Jarmusch, 1995)

Part Four: Digital and the Hyperreal

Week 10
11-11 Read: Harper, "DVD: The Shift to Film's New Modernity," (coursepack)
Rombes, "Professor DVD," (handout)

Paper Number 2 Due

Week 11
11-18 Read: Guerrero, "A Circus of Dreams and Lies: The Black Film Wave at Middle
Age," (coursepack)

Film: * **Bamboozled** (Spike Lee, 2001)

Week 12
11-25 Read: Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"
(coursepack)

Clips: Dogma 95 movement
Lars von Trier
Harmony Korine

Week 13
12-2 Read: Trifonova, "Time and Point of View in Contemporary Cinema,"
(coursepack)

Film: * **Donnie Darko** (Richard Kelly, 2001)

Week 14
12-9 FINALS WEEK