

Contemporary American Film

14-16 Week College Class

Instructor: Jennifer Van Sijll
Lecture Hours: 3
Units: 3

Contact: vansijll@cinematicstorytelling.com
Office Hours: TBA

Required Texts

1. Van Sijll, Jennifer. *Cinematic Storytelling*. Wiese, 2005
2. Boggs, Joseph, and Daniel Petrie. *The Art of Watching Film*. Mayfield, 2000.
Reader: Collection of Articles on Reserve at library. Includes *Dramatica* and other readings.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Analyzes modern American films with particular attention to storytelling techniques, genre, cinematic rendering and thematic meaning. Films will be examined against the backdrop of their specific historical-socio-political context.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Students will learn how to write critically about film. They will learn how to recognize different film genres, storytelling structures, and filming techniques. The students will be graded on these skills through written essays and exams. More specifically they will learn how to:

1. Describe the difference between the literary techniques employed by the novel and those employed by screenplay. This includes understanding dramatic tools like plot, subplot, theme, 3-act structure, and the narrator.
2. Describe filming techniques used to dramatize a story. These include the use of sound, lighting, camera, motion, editing as well as the graphic elements within the film frame.
3. Identify both what a theme is and how it is incorporated into a film.
4. Write a critical essay using these aspects and connect them with the theme and subject matter of the film.

COURSE CONTENT

Week 1

a) Introduction

What makes a movie different from other art forms?

How do you read a movie if there is no text?

Comparison of movies to books, plays and other literary forms.

The Novel's Narrator versus Film's Cinematic Scenarios.

Screening: Clips from *Dances with Wolves* / *House of Sand and Fog*

Handouts: Script and novel excerpts.

b) Narrative versus Episodic Story Structure

Story structure. Handout: Syd Field's Paradigm

c) Advocacy and screenwriting: Entertainment or Inculcation?

Handouts: From *Dramatica*: "Theme and Encoding" and "Grand Argument Story"

Week 2 Space, Frame, Shape, Editing

Screening: *The Piano*

Text reading: *Cinematic Storytelling*. Chapter 1-4

Optional reading: *The Art of Watching Films* Chapter 2

Handout: *Dramatica* Reading (Distributed Class 1)

Discussion: *Dramatica* reading. How is theme expressed non-verbally?

Films as modern day fables? Morality tales?

Week 3 Editing / Sound and Theme

Screening: *Barton Fink*.

(Guest Speaker)

Text Reading: *Cinematic Storytelling*, Chapters 4,5,6,7,8.

Optional Reading: *The Art of Watching Films* Chapter 8

Week 4 Camera Lenses, Camera Position. Camera Motion, Lighting, Color and Theme

Screening: *The Professional*

Text Reading: *Cinematic Storytelling* 9,10, 11, 12, 13

Optional Reading: *The Art of Watching Films* Chapter 5

Week 5 Props, Wardrobe, Locations, Natural Environment and Theme

Screening: *Ed Wood*

Text Reading: *Cinematic Storytelling* 14, 15, 16, 17

Optional Reading: *The Art of Watching Films* Chapter 4 Page 108.

Clips from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Dolores Claiborne*

Week 6 **a) Mid-term Exam: View Short**

Discuss how theme, character and ideas are suggested cinematically.

(Exam 90 minutes)

b) Signage, Semiotics

Excerpt from Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*.

Week 7 Critical Analysis / Film Reviews

Film and Social/Political Advocacy (Bio Pic)

Screening: *People vs. Larry Flynt*

Reading: TBA

Reading: Online Appendix <<http://www.mhhe.com/awf6>>

(Writing a Film Analysis and Selected Bibliography and Study Materials)

Week 8 Genre: Plot and Production Value

Screening: *Sixth Sense*

Optional Reading: *The Art of Watching Films* Chapter 4

Week 9	<u>Film and Social/Political Advocacy (Auteur Theory: Writer/Directors)</u> Screening: <i>Boys N the Hood</i> . Reading: <i>The Art of Watching Films</i> Chapter 11 Reading: TBA
Week 10	<u>Film and Social Political Advocacy (Adaptations)</u> Film: <i>One True Thing</i> Reading: <i>The Art of Watching Films</i> Chapter 13 Reading: TBA Essay #1 Due
Week 11	<u>Film and Social Political Advocacy (Adaptations)</u> Film: <i>The House of Sand and Fog</i> Reading: <i>The Art of Watching Films</i> Chapter 13 Continued Reading: TBA
Week 12	<u>Film and Social/Political Advocacy (Global Subjects)</u> Screening: <i>Hotel Rwanda</i> Reading: TBA
Week 13	<u>a) Directing and Acting</u> John Sayles, Woody Allen, Jim Jarmusch and James Cameron, Alfred Hitchcock. Realism, Theatricality and changing styles. Discussion, film clips. Reading: <i>The Art of Watching Films</i> Chapter 11 <u>b) Discussion of Essay # 2</u>
Week 14	<u>Censorship</u> Reading: <i>The Art of Watching Films</i> Chapter Screening: <i>Kinsey</i> Essay #2 Due
Week 15	<u>New Technologies, Distribution and Financing</u> Series of Clips
Week 16	<u>Final Exam</u>

GRADED ASSIGNMENTS

1. Mid-term: In class.

Topic: Cinematic Storytelling. Define and identify cinematic storytelling tools.

2. Analysis of published film review.

Read Gloria Steinem's critical review of *The People Vs. Larry Flynt*. Write a critical analysis of a review. See *Assignment handout*.

3. Analysis of Thematic Emphasis

Choose any of the films we have studied this semester and analyze how the writer and director express a coherent theme to their audiences. See *Assignment handout*.

4. **Final Exam:** Students will view a film in class and write an analysis of the film's messaging systems and theme.

Assignment Weight

Midterm: 20%

Analysis of Published Review: 30%

Analysis of Thematic Emphasis: 30%

Final Exam: 20%

Required Texts

1. Van Sijll, Jennifer. *Cinematic Storytelling*. Wiese, 2005. Available at www.mwp.com.

2. Boggs, Joseph, and Daniel Petrie. *The Art of Watching Film*. Mayfield, 2000.

Reader: Collection of Articles on Reserve at library. Includes *Dramatica* and other readings.

Reference Sources:

Phillips, Melanie Anne & Chris Huntley. *Dramatica: A New Theory of Story*. Screenplay Systems, 1994.

Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies*. Prentice Hall, 2002.

Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film Art*. McGraw Hill, 1997.

Readings

Students will need to purchase both required books. Please bring *Cinematic Storytelling* to classes 2-6 as some of the discussion and clips will be based on the book.

Assignment Instructions

You will receive specific assignment instructions for each essay. This will include grading criteria.

Copies of All Essays and Assignments

Please keep copies of your returned mid-term and essays. If there is any discrepancy at the end of the semester, students can bring their work to the instructor to assure the correct grades have been entered. Keeping a copy of all work is the students' responsibility and insurance policy.

Late Essays

Late essays will be graded down. Please consult with instructor if you need to hand your essay in late.

Conferences, Office Hours and Passing Grades

Please Note: If for any reason a student is concerned about passing the class, please schedule an appointment with me so we can immediately address any grade issues. Please do this **early** in the semester, before the mid-term, so we have time to address any problems. If you have an emergency, or need to set up an appointment, you can call me at home.

If you have questions about assignments or course content, please set up an appointment during my posted office hours.

Structure of the Class

We will divide our class into:

1. Lecture
2. Screening
3. Discussion

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is when an author copies work from another source and presents it as his/her own. All work turned in must be original. If you plagiarize, you will receive an F on the assignment and will not be allowed to redo it. Please make sure you read the College's plagiarism policy. If you have any questions consult "Academic Regulations and Standards," or call me.

Disability Statement

Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me at the beginning of the semester to discuss specific needs. Students should also notify DISC (Disability Instructional Support Center) to arrange any accommodations that might be needed.

Additional Resources List

Web Resources

Facts and Reviews

Clamen's Movie Information Collection (Full listing of over 100 Film Related Links)
Film.com (Film Essays and Reviews)
Images: A Journal of Film and Popular Culture
Internet Movie Data Base (www. IMDB.com) Movie Facts and links to reviews
Salon
Siskel and Ebert
Roger Ebert on Movies (Chicago Sun-Times)
Recent Reviews on rec.arts.movies.reviews
(US) National Film Registry (List of Films)

Revenues

Movie Web (US Canada Box Office Totals- Recent)
Box Office Guru (Current and historical)
World Wide Box Office Totals

Scripts

www.drewsscriptorama.com (free current downloadable feature scripts)
www.dailyscript.com (free current downloadable feature scripts)

Scripts for Purchase

Hollywood Book & Poster
Script City and Samuel French

Film Viewing List: Contemporary Films 1990-2005 (In order of Class Viewing)

1. *The Piano* (1993)
2. *Barton Fink*
3. *The Professional* (1994)
4. *Ed Wood* (1994)
5. *People Versus Larry Flynt* (1996)
6. *The Sixth Sense* (1999)
7. *Boys N the Hood*
8. *One True Thing*
9. *House of Sand and Fog* (2004)
10. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004)
11. *Kinsey*

