

## THE ART OF FILM

ENGL 388-01/ FILM 301-01      Tuesday and Thursday, 6:00-8:05 PM  
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W. Taylor  
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MW, 12-1  
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**Description:** Introductory study of film art and criticism

**Text:** *Understanding Movies*, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition, by Louis Giannetti

**Objectives:** The fundamental objective of this course is that you learn to perceive, understand, and evaluate films more effectively, with greater assurance, validity, and pleasure. To achieve this objective, we will study the basic principles and techniques of film art, with emphasis upon the complementary contributions of the director, the cinematographer, the editor, and the screenwriter.

In a ten-week quarter, we have time to deal with only seven films, including the one for the final exam. These particular films have been chosen primarily because of their importance in the history of film. Each one is essential viewing for anyone interested in film study, but each has also been chosen for its value in illustrating a particular aspect of film art treated by the textbook. The topics and the films are:

Chapter One, "Photography":	<i>Barry Lyndon</i> (Stanley Kubrick)
Chapter Two, "Mise en Scène":	<i>Blade Runner</i> (Ridley Scott)
Chapter Three, "Movement":	<i>La Dolce Vita</i> (Federico Fellini)
Chapter Four, "Editing":	<i>Bonnie and Clyde</i> (Arthur Penn)
Chapter Five, "Sound":	<i>Singin' in the Rain</i> (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly)
Chapter Nine, "Writing":	<i>Schindler's List</i> (Steven Spielberg)

Film for the Final Exam, to be announced

### **The Films:**

*Barry Lyndon*: Like many of Stanley Kubrick's films, this one met with much hostility when it was released in 1975. It was often attacked for being too beautiful. One critic proclaimed, "It takes more than pretty pictures to make a movie!" Five years later, that critic and most others were calling the film a masterpiece. Visually, in my opinion, it is one of the two most beautiful films ever made, but those "pretty pictures" stand in vivid contrast to the misanthropic irony of Kubrick's social satire.

*Blade Runner*: This film, though it has been very popular, demands much more of its audience than most movies do, and can be viewed on several levels, from a sci-fi detective thriller, to a speculative vision of the near-future, to a philosophical and theological meditation on the nature of the human. It is also a brilliant depiction of a strange dystopian world dominated by advanced technology and genetic engineering and by the virtual breakdown of a decaying urban ecosystem.

*La Dolce Vita*: When this film was released in 1960, its depiction of the decadent life style of the Italian “jet set” was widely condemned as a salacious, immoral work. People asked with a leer whether you had seen it yet. Today, that seems very strange, because most viewers now find it to be exactly the opposite—that is, a highly moral condemnation of exactly the sort of immorality the film itself was accused of!

*Bonnie and Clyde*: Upon the release of this film in 1967, Joseph Morgenstern wrote in *Newsweek*, “Last week this magazine said that ‘Bonnie and Clyde,’ a tale of two young bank robbers in the 1930s, turns into a ‘squalid shoot-‘em for the moron trade’ because it does not know what to make of its own violence. I am sorry to say I consider that review grossly unfair and regrettably inaccurate. I am sorrier to say I wrote it.” In his reconsideration, Morgenstern found that the film had profound things to say about violence in our society. What he did not recognize is that the film introduced into American movies a new style of editing that has proved enormously influential to the present day, and is considered one of the great turning points in the development of American cinema.

*Singin’ in the Rain*: Apparently a frivolous bit of musical nonsense, this film about the coming of sound to Hollywood was voted the tenth best film ever made in *Sight and Sound* magazine’s poll of international film critics in 2002, and the fifth best film ever made in America by the American Film Institute in 2007. What makes it so great?

*Schindler’s List*: Beyond questions of its artistry, this film deals with perhaps the single most dreadful topic in the most dreadful of centuries, the twentieth, and deals with it more successfully than one would have thought possible. Ironically, the social significance of the subject and the horror of the real events depicted are likely to obscure, for many viewers, the artistry of the film. Some people have maintained that if this subject is presented realistically, no one could watch it with pleasure, and it would therefore fail as art, but if it is done with beauty, to provide us with the distance we must have to endure contemplating it, then it will be false. I grant the power of the dilemma, but I believe yet, after years of trying to deal with this problem, that there is nothing in human experience that cannot be treated in art. For me, *Schindler’s List* confirms this; for some others, it proves the opposite. In 2007, The American Film Institute voted it the eighth best film ever made in America. We will use it to revisit all of the topics we have studied in the course.

**Procedures**: The classes will be conducted primarily through discussion: discussion of the text, of the video clips shown in class, and of the films. I will give brief explanations of difficult topics in the text, illustrating as many points as possible with clips from films on video. You will write a one-page essay on an assigned question for each film, due the day we begin discussing

the film. There will be an in-class, objective mid-quarter exam, on the material covered up to that point in the text, and a take-home essay final exam, a full analysis and interpretation of a film to be assigned late in the term. (See the schedule below.)

You will rent each film and view it, on your own or in small groups of your devising, before the day we are scheduled to discuss it. This is a slightly inconvenient way to handle the film viewing, but it is necessary. We cannot watch them in class—*Barry Lyndon* is three hours long! And I cannot put copies in the library because it is illegal, even copies I have myself purchased. Five of the six films are in the library, but only one copy of each, on either VHS or DVD.

So you must rent the videos. Plan on looking for each one early enough to find it, view it, and write your essay before the day it is to be discussed in class. I suggest that you get to know the other members of the class as quickly as possible and watch the films in groups. It's more fun that way, anyhow, and more instructive, because you can talk about the film with other people immediately after seeing it.

It would be a good idea to plan for the whole quarter now. Probably the best resource is Netflix, which many of my film students have been using with good success. In the local area, I would suggest Broadway Video (near the corner of Broadway and Republican) and Island Video (31<sup>st</sup> and E. Madison; they also have a store in Greenwood). The best store in town is Scarecrow Video, on Roosevelt Way NE, between 50<sup>th</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup>. There are Hollywood and Blockbuster stores everywhere, but don't expect too much of them; their staff often does not know what they have, even when they check on their computer. It's best to look on their shelves yourself. The Maltese Falcon is excellent, on Aurora, out by Oak Tree Cinema. No doubt there are many other good ones, but these are the ones I used before I joined Netflix. Now I use only Scarecrow, in an emergency. Most of these films are classics and should be relatively easy to find.

Studying films on video is an imperfect procedure, because the video screen is so far inferior to a theater screen, even with the superior picture provided by DVD, Blu-ray and HDTV. However, the convenience and the control which video provides more than compensate for its disadvantages, especially when you want to pause for thought, or replay particular scenes, or even view the entire film a second time. You will want to do all of those things.

I will provide study questions for each film, and in our discussion of its cinematic techniques, we will focus mainly on the topics we have covered in the text up to that time.

We will take a brief cell phone break at about 7:00 pm. Please turn off your phone during class.

### **Summary of Requirements:**

1. Check your e-mail every day. I will frequently send you information and study materials.
2. For each class, read the assigned pages in the text.
3. Watch the films, in accordance with the attached schedule.
4. Write a one page essay on an assigned topic for each film, due at the start of class on the day we begin discussing that film. The essays must be submitted on time. Late papers are

- of little value after the class has spent two hours discussing the film. To start the discussion, I will ask two or three people to read their papers aloud to the class.
5. Participate in the class discussions of the textbook, video clips, and films. Involvement in the discussions is an *essential* requirement, accounting for 20% of the course grade.
  6. Take an objective, mid-term exam on the terms, concepts, and techniques covered in the first four chapters of the text. Knowledge of this material is essential to further study of film.
  7. Write a take-home final exam, which will be a full analysis and interpretation of an assigned film. It will be due on the regularly scheduled Final Exam day, Thursday, March 18, 6:00 PM, in the classroom, or earlier, in my mailbox in the English Department.

### **Rationale:**

There are many possible ways to study movies. One obvious approach is historical. Another is "genre," the different *types* of movies, such as documentary, animation, narrative, underground, etc. Another is to study the films of "Great Directors." Still others are to select by theme, or topic, or country of origin. All of these are quite valid, and over the years, I have tried most of them. Courses of all these types are now being added to the new Film Studies curriculum. However, in this foundational course, I have found it most effective to approach the subject in terms of the basic principles and techniques of film art. How do movies work? What do filmmakers *do* to produce the desired effects in a viewer? This means looking at the film from all sides, but primarily from the points of view of four people: the director, the cinematographer, the editor, and the screenwriter, and I have chosen a text which uses this approach.

### **Three Cautions:**

(1) Movies are fun, or are supposed to be, but this is not as easy a course as its enjoyable subject matter might seem to promise. The text is excellent, but requires careful, time-consuming reading, even though we will be doing only six chapters of it. And seven films are a great many, when you are trying to understand each one as fully as possible. Furthermore, these particular films include some of the best ever made; they are very demanding. You'll find that you are looking with an intensity that will tax you, and you will often want to see a film more than once. Certainly, the film for the final exam you will need to watch several times. You may not believe that now, but you will quickly understand why it is necessary.

(2) I will presume each day that you have read the assignment in the text. I will not re-teach what I think the textbook has already taught satisfactorily. If you have questions about the text material, ask them. If you don't have *any* questions, then you probably didn't read the text carefully enough. We will discuss concepts which the text did *not* make clear to you, but we will spend most of our time looking at and discussing clips from films which *illustrate* the concepts and techniques treated by the text. Do not conclude, when you discover we are not discussing everything in the text, that keeping up in the text is not important. You must do the reading, and you must ask questions when you do not understand, or you are *certain* to have trouble with the mid-quarter exam and with the second half of the course.

(3) In this course you will be asked to look at things you have always ignored, be aware of things you have never seen, and develop skills you may never have heard of. You will find, especially at first, that your attention is so taken up with new activities that you will be somewhat distracted from those elements of film from which you have customarily derived most of your pleasure— such as the *story*! Don't let this disturb you. To enjoy movies in exactly the same ways you have always enjoyed them in the past does not require a course in the subject. Our purpose here is to *expand* the possibilities of your enjoyment and understanding, and acquiring new skills requires that you concentrate your attention on each one, in turn. Ultimately, you will experience a film from all of these perspectives simultaneously. At first, however, be prepared to feel some irritation at the fragmentation of your attention. This is a temporary condition. Trust me.

### **Plagiarism:**

I include the following note as a formal policy statement, required of all syllabi in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Plagiarism is the representation of the words or thoughts of another author as one's own.

I anticipate no such difficulty, but it does sometimes occur in this course, because so much material is available on the web about all of these films. Research in support of papers is laudable and to be encouraged. Be very careful, however, to document, not only actual quotes or paraphrases, but also all *ideas* taken from other sources, with or without the original language. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism, any instance of which will result in a failing grade and will be reported to the Dean.

### **Grades:**

Because of the time required outside of class to read the text and to view and study the films, there will be no term paper. You will be evaluated on your one-page essays, your classroom contributions, and the two exams. As emphasized above, engagement in the discussions is very important, but effective classroom performance involves more than just making noise. Participation which is outstanding in content, insight, discretion, and consideration of others can raise your score as much as a full letter grade for the quarter. Because the class discussions and the video clips are essential and indispensable elements of the course, I do take roll, and attendance is required. Absences in excess of 15% (three classes) will adversely affect your final grade. I cannot loan out tapes or disks of clips.

Class participation:	20%
One-page essays:	30
Mid-term exam:	20
Final essay:	30

### **Detailed Schedule for the Quarter:**

T 1/5	Intro; Chapter One, "Photography"
Th 1/7	Chapter One, "Photography" (2-48)
T 1/12	<i>Barry Lyndon</i> ; essay due
Th 1/14	Chapter Two, "Mise en Scene" (50-74)
T 1/19	Chapter Two, "Mise en Scene" (74-101)
Th 1/21	<i>Blade Runner</i> ; essay due
T 1/26	Chapter Three, "Movement" (104-124)
Th 1/28	Chapter Three, "Movement" (124-145)
T 2/2	<i>La Dolce Vita</i> ; essay due
Th 2/4	Chapter Four; "Editing" (148-186)
T 2/9	Chapter Four, "Editing" (186-224)
Th 2/11	Midterm Exam; more clips on editing
T 2/16	<i>Bonnie and Clyde</i> ; essay due
Th 2/18	Chapter Five, "Sound" (226-246)
T 2/23	Chapter Five, "Sound" (246-263)
Th 2/25	<i>Singin' in the Rain</i> ; essay due
T 3/2	Chapter 9, "Writing" (408-445)
Th 3/4	Videos
T 3/9	<i>Schindler's List</i> ; essay due; acting
Th 3/11	<u>Attendance is mandatory</u> ; acting (all film clips; no reading assignment); film for Final Exam assigned; evaluations
Th 6/8	Final Exam due at the scheduled exam time, 6:00 PM, in the classroom, or earlier, in my mailbox in the English Department