

The Cinematic Essay

Film Studies Program
Vanderbilt University
Film 288-01
W. 12:30-3:00, BT 015

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Screening Times

Sunday 6-8:30 p.m. or Tuesday 6-8:30 p.m.

There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.

Werner Herzog lecture at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (1999)

The essay (film)...strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint...the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, is self-reflective and self reflexive. It also questions the subject positions of the filmmaker and audience as well as the audiovisual medium itself – whether film, video, or digital electronic.

Nora Alter "The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film" (1996)

...cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language...The cinema is now moving towards a form which is making it such a precise language that it will soon be possible to write ideas directly onto film.

Alexandre Astruc, "The birth of a New Avant-Garde" (1948)

Course Description

In this interdisciplinary class we will explore the hybrid cinematic "genre" where fact and fiction are intertwined and the viewer and maker interact in a time-based world of subjectivity, reflexivity and abstraction. In this class we will cover theoretical readings and construct two cinematic essays. This is an interdisciplinary production and theory class that welcomes students from all areas. In addition to readings, and production of work we will look at films by Bill Brown, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Ross McElwee, Harum Farocki, Werner Herzog, Jonas Mekas and other well known filmmakers who have explored the cinematic essay.

Assignments:

Class time will be used for discussion, presentations, screenings and student critiques. Students will be responsible for creative projects, weekly readings, weekly screenings as well as weekly written responses related to the readings and films. The major project/reading assignments and their critique dates are listed in the semester outline below.

Critiques:

In-class critiques are an extremely useful resource for the development of ideas, and your full participation is absolutely required. We will discuss methods for quality critiques and students will be encouraged to direct the critique. Sharing your work

with the class will give you a chance to articulate ideas about your work and to get feedback from your peers. Grades will be assigned to each of the creative projects based on personal growth, strength of concept, group participation, ability to defend choices, motivation, and enthusiasm.

Required Texts:

Currently there are six weeks in which readings are due. Depending on our class discussions readings will be occasionally changed, swapped, and added as late as one class period in advance. Should you ever miss class, it is your responsibility to find out from another student in the class whether any changes to the readings or films were made to the syllabus that day. Each article that is assigned will be available to download on OAK.

Weekly writing: Every week you are expected to write a short critical response on each article/essay/chapter and at-least one-discussion topic in the form of statement or question for the class unless stated otherwise. Additionally, every week you are to write a one-paragraph response and discussion question in relation to the weekly film screened in or outside of class. You are expected to have read as well as be prepared to discuss each article/essay/interview the week after they are assigned.

Response requirements for the weekly readings:

- A short critical statement consisting of a general description of what you think each essay and/or theorist is arguing and/or discussing, as well as a short statement based on a question you pose related to the readings. The question can detail your personal interaction to the reading: what you find confusing, what you find striking, yet this part of your critical statement is not supposed to be a moment for you to judge the validity of the theorists concepts and ideas. It is rather an opportunity for you to pose a thought/thoughts you have related to these theories/ideas.
- Your **Critical statement** must be e-mailed to me no later than **10pm Tuesday evenings**.
- Your statement must be in a word document and in this exact format: Last name-course week. For example: smith-weekone, smith-weektwo
- PLEASE NOTE: Under no circumstances will I accept late responses.
- Please bring in a printed version of your responses to each class session

Response Requirements for the weekly film:

- Your response should consist of your general thoughts about the weekly film and it's relationship to our current and/or past readings.
- One discussion point related to the film.
- Your **FILM response and discussion point** must be e-mailed to me no later than **10pm Tuesday evenings**.
- Your film response must be in a word document and be in this exact format: Last name-course week-movie title. For example: smith-weekone-cableguy
- PLEASE NOTE: Time permitting some films will be screened during the second section of our class period, instead of our weekly evening screenings. If we run out of time the remainder of the film will be screened during our designated weekly screening times.

Notes on Reading and Writing:

- Your weekly responses are to be treated like critically engaged journal entries. With that said, you still will be graded based on your interaction with the material at hand so tread lightly but tread with curiosity, energy and thought. For example, if the material is challenging or confusing, state why with examples.

- Length does not always equate to greatness.
- **Response to the readings and films:** Read with a pencil: mark your text with notes to yourself, indicators of points that seem important, examples from your own viewing experiences. Notes will make it much easier to write your critical statement.
- I cannot stress this too strongly: **Take notes at the screenings**. What you do on paper while the film is running makes an indelible impression on your future thinking about a film.

Grading for Weekly responses: Weekly responses (film and readings) count for 25% of your overall grade. Responses are worth 5 points each.

Class Participation: This class is a highly interactive course, in which its foundation is based on our in-class group discussions. The content and quality of these discussions depends on the content and quality of your critical responses. For you to do well in this course you simply have to be engaged in your written work, creative projects and our daily class discussions. **Each class you are expected to come prepared with a copy of that day's reading and response**, as well as a pen or pencil and notebook.

Note: We are investigating theoretical production in this class. This type of interaction is based on debate and discussion. Whether you feel like you have a mastery of the material at hand or a loss of understanding of the material, your participation is always encouraged and expected. Participation gives you a chance to develop and articulate ideas about the material and its interaction with the world around us.

Class Expectations:

- Show up prepared and on time
- Turn in assignments on time
- Participate consistently in class
- Respect your peers during presentations, group discussion and when critiquing another's work
- Attend all classes and critiques prepared for discussion, active participation and creative thinking.
- **Laptop computers, cell phones, text messaging are banned during lectures and screenings.** Please take notes the old fashioned way. Why? See this study on the "mental price" of multi-tasking: <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/2009/multitask-research-release-082409.html>
- I will not tolerate plagiarism or other violations of Vanderbilt's Honor System. For more information, see: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/chapter2.html
- A student who sleeps through class will be marked absent. Attendance does not count towards your participation grade.
- **Students with disabilities:** We are committed to accommodating students who have special instructional needs. If you need course accommodations due to a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me and/or the EAD (2-4705) as soon as possible.
- **Religious Holidays:** Students who expect to miss classes, project screenings, or any other assignments as a consequence of their religious observance should provide me with notice of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent in the first two weeks of the semester.

Class Attendance: This course requires a tremendous amount of in-class work, therefore it is highly recommended that you do not miss class...ever. Students who

accumulate 3 or more absences will have their grade lowered by one letter grade. In addition absences, whether excused or unexcused will negatively impact your participation grade.

Lateness: Everyday we have a lot of material to go through, please come alert and on time. Points will be deducted from your participation grade if you are late more than four times.

Class Goals:

- Gain basic knowledge and understanding of the cinematic essay.
- Solidify as well as reassess opinions related to what cinema is, what it can be.
- Gain production experience

Class Notes:

- Any problems, issues, concerns related to the class, the readings, the class in general, are expected to be brought up to the professor throughout the semester.
- This class works as a weekly co-operative academic environment. Therefore it is essential that if you are personally struggling in this course or if there is material that you want to be addressed that you bring it up to the professor during the semester not after.

General grading rubric:

- A = full, thoughtful engagement with readings, the highest level of attention to both craft and conceptual development in projects, active participation in class discussions, and the highest level of personal initiative in furthering one's own learning.
- B = engagement with readings and assignments, active participation in class discussions, and evidence of independent research.
- C = adequate engagement with readings and assignments, spotty discussion participation, lack of initiative regarding analyzing reading assignments or conducting independent research
- D = serious lack of effort in craft and conceptual development of artwork, no in-class participation, listless intellectual attitude
- F = failure to meet basic requirements for completion of the course.

Evaluation:

Class Participation: 50%

- In Class Discussion/mini projects: 25%
- Reading Responses: 25%

Projects: 50%

- Project One: 25%
- Project Two: 25%

Project Assignments

Mini Project I – Montaigne

Assigned Week 1

Due Week 2

Instead of writing a critical response to Montaigne's essay, I would like you to write a movie scenario either based on, inspired by, or directly linked to his essay. As you read the essay, what do you visualize? Would you have title-screens, voice-over, use still photographs? How would you make this essay into a movie? This project will be due Tuesday evening with the other critical responses.

Mini Project II – Place/ Environmental photo essay

Assigned Week 3

Due Week 4

For this assignment you are to make a three to five-minute photomontage of somewhere and or somebody in downtown Nashville.

Decide on a strategy that you use to link your images. A filmic strategy may include color, lighting, focal length (close up, wide-shot etc.), shape, action in frame, logical or narrative connections, any number of contrasts or similarities. You can use your photographs as way to document an actual place or create an imaginary place. You can record an atmospheric experience or detail an event. You can create a real or constructed travelogue experience from one place to the next.

In addition to creating and posting this project on the blog, you must e-mail me a written description of what this project is about. Discuss the strategies you decided on. Talk about your experience making this work. On Wednesday during class, you will present your photomontage to the class. You are required to:

- Edit photos in either iMovie, iPhoto or FCP
- Post montage on our class blog by Tuesday Sept. 13th.
- E-mail me a written description of what this project is about (Tuesday, Sept. 13)
- Give a short in-class presentation on the montage.

Notable Dates

- Assigned week 3 (Sept. 7)
- Project Due week 4 (Tuesday Sept. 13) – posted on blog.
- Written description due week 4 (Tuesday, Sept. 13 by 10pm)

Equipment

Point and Shoot Cameras

Project One – Reflexive Inquiry

Assigned Week 1

Final Due Week 8

For this assignment you are to create a three to five minute photo, sound and/or video essay detailing your own investigation of a cultural, political, or social issue on a small or large scale. This project can be about any issue that concerns you: poverty, crime, gentrification, racism, food politics, etc. or even your disinterest in such things. This piece must have:

- 1 reflexive voice – visual (titles) or sound (voice over) or video (performance)
- 1 or more media – photography, found footage, video, animation, stop-motion, drawing, different types of video, etc.

Notable Dates:

- Part 1 - Due by week 4 - an appointment with me to discuss your ideas for this project.
- Part 2 - Due week 5 (Tuesday, Sept. 20 by 10pm) - A written proposal: pitch and/or script of project
- Part 3 - Due week 8 (Tuesday, Oct. 11) - project posted on blog

Equipment

Vixia's, Kodak ZI8's, DSLR's 60D, 7D, Lumix, Zooms

Project Two – Autobiographical

Assigned Week 8

Final Due Week 15

For this assignment you are to make a five-minute autobiographical cinematic essay about an event, a person, a dream, or something that has occurred in your life. This piece must have:

- 1 or more tracks of audio that is non-diatetic
- 1 reflexive voice – visual (titles) or sound (voice over)
- 2 or more media – photography, found footage, video, animation, stop-motion, drawing, different types of video, etc.

Notable Dates:

- Part 1 - Due week 11 (Wednesday, Nov. 2) - written essay script to be reviewed by the class and a proposal for the visuals to be linked to the written essay.
- Part 2 - Due week 13 (Wednesday, Nov. 16)– rough cuts
- Part 3 - Due week 15 (Wednesday, Dec. 7) – project completed

Equipment

Vixia's, Kodak ZI8's, DSLR's 60D, 7D, Lumix, Zooms

Week One

Wednesday, August 24

- Syllabus
- In-class screening: ***Letters from Siberia*** (Chris Marker, 1957, 62 TRT)

Homework (Due August. 30)

- Set up individual meetings for project two (by week four Sept. 14)
- *The Essay Film* by Laura Rascaroli
- Excerpts from Montaigne's Essay *Use makes Perfect* Chapter VI/Book II
- *Bazin on Marker* by Andre Bazin
- *Mini Project I/Film Treatment on Montaigne*

SCREENING 8/28 & 8/30: **No Screening**

Week Two

Wednesday, August 31

- Montaigne Treatments
- Discussion of readings: Rascaroli, Bazin
- In-class screening: Magnum Photo Essays

Homework (Due Sept. 6)

- *Essay Questions* by Paul Arthur
- *The Birth of a New Avant-garde* by Alexandre Astruc
- Alexandre Astruc's Biography by Dudley Andrew
- *Speak, Hoyt-Schermerhorn: Doom and romance on a subway platform* by Jonathan Lethem

SCREENING 9/4 & 9/6: ***Six O'Clock News*** (Ross McElwee, 1996, 103 TRT)

Week Three

Wednesday, September 7

- Class Trip/mini project II

Homework (Due Sept. 13)

- *On Nature and form of the essay* by Georg Lukacs
- *The World of Tomorrow* by E.B. White

SCREENING 9/11 & 9/13: ***La Joli Mai*** (Chris Marker, 1963, 156 TRT)

Week Four

Wednesday, September 14

- Discussion of Readings
- Review class trip project
- In class screening: *Lessons of Darkness* (Werner Herzog, 1992, 50 TRT)

Homework

- *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin

SCREENING 9/18 & 9/20: **No Screening**

Week Five

Wednesday, September 21

- Discussion of Reading
- In-Class screening: *Night and Fog*

Homework

- *Essay as Form* by Adorno

SCREENING 9/25 & 9/27: ***Waltz with Bashir*** (Ari Folman, 2008, 86 TRT)

Week Six

Wednesday, September 28

- Discussion of Reading
- In-Class screening: *Videograms of a Revolution* (Harun Farocki, 1992)

Homework:

- Project I rough cuts
- *Cinema and the Novel* by Italo Calvino
- *Lightness* by Italo Calvino
- Excerpts from Italo Calvino

SCREENING 10/2 & 10/4: ***No Screening***

Week Seven

Wednesday, October 5

- Individual meetings for Project II

Homework:

- **NO READINGS**
- **Project II Due (work must be posted on class-blog October 11th)**

SCREENING 10/9 & 10/11: ***No Screening***

Fall Break – October 6,7

Week Eight

Wednesday, October 12

- Project II due – group screening

Homework:

- *How Real is the reality in documentary film?* Jill Godimillow
- *Old Faithful* by David Sedaris

SCREENING 10/16 & 10/18: ***The Beaches of Agnes*** (Agnes Varda, 2010, 110 TRT)

Week Nine

Wednesday, October 19

- Discussion of Reading
- In-Class screening: **Bright Leaves** (Ross McElwee, 2005, 105TRT)

Homework

- *Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes
- Start work on Project II/Part I

SCREENING 10/23 & 10/25: **No Screening**

Week Ten

Wednesday, October 26

- Individual meetings about project II

Homework

- Work on project II/Part I

SCREENING 10/31 & 11/1: **BLACK AIN'T BLACK** (MARLON RIGGS, 2004, 86TRT)

Week Eleven

Wednesday, November 2

- Project II/Group Work

SPECIAL INTERNATIONAL LENS SCREENING THURSDAY 11/3 **O'ER THE LAND** (DEBORAH STRATMAN, 2009, 51 TRT)

Week Twelve

Wednesday, November 9

- Work Day/Individual Meetings

SCREENING 11/13 & 11/15: **Leche & Mal Leche** (Naomi Uman, 1998/2005, 30/47 TRT)

Week Thirteen

Wednesday, November 16

- In Class Work Day/Group Meetings

SCREENING 11/20 & 11/22: **No Screening**

THANKSGIVING BREAK
November 19 - 27

Week Fourteen

Wednesday, November 30

- In Class Work Day Project II

SCREENING 12/4 & 12/6: **Tokyo Ga** (Wim Wenders, 2006, 92 TRT)

Week Fifteen

Wednesday, December 7

- Project II Due

University Equipment Pool Policies **Fall 2011**

Check-In and Check-Out Policies:

I. Checkout Times

Check out equipment: 12 - 4

Check in equipment: 8 - 12

With the exception of some special projects, all TSS equipment checkout is 3 days (Friday to Monday is considered 1 day). One renewal by phone will be allowed; after two 3-day checkouts students will be required to return the equipment. If you want the equipment for a longer period of time, you will need to reserve it for the next day.

II. Reservations: 615-322-4855

We strongly advise you to contact and reserve equipment at least 24 hours in advance. If not reserved in advance, equipment may not be available.

III. Consequences for Failed Return:

If you hand in equipment late, half a letter grade will be deducted from your project grade. If you are working in a group, half a letter grade will be deducted from the entire group's project grade. This is a Film Studies director's rule and cannot be bent.

Note: If there is a legitimate reason for missing the appointed times (illness, funeral, etc.), TSS staff will still have to mark down that the equipment is late, but please inform your professor.

IV. Hard Drives:

It is highly recommended that you purchase your own hard drive (500 GB or more). You can also check out a hard drive from TSS for the entire semester.

V. Equipment:

Each Film course has a specific equipment allotment. Please check with your professor what equipment is designated to your course.

Friendly Suggestions: Please look at and test equipment when you check out. Bring back equipment in the condition you received it.