**Film Studies - Course Syllabus**

4 September 2012
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Rm. 2017
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**COURSE CONTENT:**

**Introduction and Objectives:**

Film Studies is the study of the production, aesthetics and history of the 20th century’s most important visual medium—the cinema. As storytelling device, as historical document, as expression of imagination, as artistic object, there is no form more capable of capturing our interest and provoking the senses. The cinema can create worlds of magic, fantasy and romance just as easily as it can expose the dim reality of actually-lived life.

Our primary interest this year will be in reading— in this case, reading the language of cinema in order to improve our critical understanding of the way texts create meaning. In this way, we will proceed much like an English class, with many of the same goals. Since the alphabet of cinema is not comprised of A, B, C, etc., though, we will have to start from scratch.

But we will also have a secondary interest in writing, too. In past years (and in past assignments this year), you have written in a few modes: analytical, argumentative, personal and creative. We will be writing in all of these modes this year, with one added bonus: we will often be writing for and with cinema itself. You will each complete a screenplay for submission to the Heintzelmann competition, and you will each complete an ambitious project in which you will translate selected screenplays from class into short films. Yes, writing and creating will occupy much of our time together this year.

Your primary tool in this class will not be a textbook, or the internet, or even a DVD player. It will be your eyes. Since film is a photographic medium, it is a visual medium—its primary formal concerns are visual concerns. This may take a while to truly absorb, but in cinema, images mean more than words. A script with no images cannot be cinema, but images with no scripts can!

Our objectives in this course are as follows:

1. To understand the nature and process of film production.
2. To learn how to read and analyze film as you would a novel, a poem or a short story
3. To familiarize ourselves with certain theoretical ideas presented by major film theorists.
4. To learn how to develop, write and revise workable screenplays.
5. To explore the major aesthetic trends in the history of cinema.
6. To work collaboratively with our peers to produce short films in a variety of different ways.
7. TO GAIN A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE WAY ART WORKS—how it manipulates reality to make a thematic point (political, social, philosophical, sexual, aesthetic, etc.)

**COURSE SCHEDULE:**

The course will contain eight units (please note that Units Five and Six will be going on simultaneously):

1. **The Art of the Personal Essay:** In the first unit of the year, we will be reading a number of exceptional personal essays in preparation to write short form essays that you can use on your college applications. Or to navel gaze.
   b. **Key Assessments:** Nightly reading notes, two short form essays

2. **What is Cinema?** In the first section of the actual Film Studies course, we will examine cinema as a produced creation. Some important questions for us to consider will be: What is Cinema?? Why do we watch films? What are the technical processes that go into the production of films? How do films get made? Who are the people who make films? Who are the people who watch films? Why do people watch films? Why do people make films?
   a. **Key Films:** *Mothlight* (1963, dir. Stan Brakhage), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924, dir. Buster Keaton), Film Production Independent Viewing
   b. **Key Assessments:** *Sherlock, Jr.* essay, Production Debate, Production Quiz

3. **Introduction to Film Form:** Next, we will move from film production to film form. In this section of the course, we will learn the elements of film language, focusing mostly on the four most important elements: *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, *montage*, and sound. Some important questions are: What is the language in which cinema speaks? How do films create meaning? How does form reflect content? How can we read films more effectively? How does cinema create and use metaphors and symbolism?
   a. **Key Film:** *Citizen Kane* (1941, dir. Orson Welles)
   b. **Clips from:**
      v. *Battleship Potemkin* (1925, dir. Sergei Eisenstein)
vi. *October* (1927, dir. Sergei Eisenstein)


xiv. *Breathless* (1959, dir. Jean-Luc Godard)

xv. *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* (1939, dir. Frank Capra)


xxii. *THX 1138* (1971, dir. George Lucas)


xxiv. *Chungking Express* (1994, dir. Wong Kar Wai)

c. **Key Assessments:** Nightly reading notes, *Citizen Kane* response piece, Shot-by-Shot Analysis (8-10 pages)

4. **Screenwriting as Art:** Next, we will turn our attention to the process of developing and writing our own original screenplays and prepare them for submission to the Heinzteamann writing competition. We will spend two to three weeks coming up with ideas, figuring out characters and arcs, writing drafts, and revising. At the end of the unit, I will choose between four and six of the class’s screenplays to “green light” for production (see Unit 7).

a. **Key Films:** Independent selections of models for conventional and unconventional screenplays.

b. **Key Assessments:** Drafting, editing, doctoring and revising screenplays (both yours and those of your peers).

5. **Hitchcock: Form and Theory:** In our third unit, we will transition from a general study of Film Form to something much more specific. Alfred Hitchcock is, arguably, the most revered formal master and innovator in the history of cinema,¹ and his film *Vertigo* (1958) stands at the top of his canon. This unit will introduce us to the work of this master; it will serve as the capstone to our studies of Film Form and will help us transition into the murkier but more rewarding area known as **Film Theory**.

a. **Key Film:** *Vertigo* (1958, dir. Alfred Hitchcock)


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¹ He has competition from (in no particular order): Orson Welles, Sergei Eisenstein, D.W. Griffith, F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, Michaelangelo Antonioni, Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, Satyajit Ray, Jean Renoir, and many others.


6. Film (as) History: Finally, in this unit, we will concentrate chronologically on the most prominent moments in film history, highlighting formal innovations or aesthetic movements. We will examine, in turn: Early Cinema, German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, European Art Cinema, New Hollywood, and Postmodernist Film. Key questions include: How does knowing the past help us to better understand the present? How have filmmakers from all eras used innovations of the past to tell their own stories more effectively? How have the differences between Melies and Lumiere emerged as the central divide in film history, and why is this difference important?


b. Key Assessments: Realism v. Expressionism debate and essay; Godard essay; research on “Third Cinema”.

7. Introduction to Collaborative Filmmaking: This unit, which will serve as the culmination of our studies of the cinema, will require you and a small group of peers to turn one of the screenplays that you have already written into an 8-10 minute short film. You will produce these films between February and the end of April, and we will celebrate your work at the Second Annual NSHS Film Festival. Your films will be screened for the rest of the school and prizes will be distributed based on the various areas of Film Production: producing, directing, acting, editing, sound design, cinematography, production design, etc.

8. Hamlet: Though it may seem like an afterthought, tucked away here at the end of your senior year, this unit is the cherry on top. After immersing ourselves in the world of movies for so long, we end the year by an intensive yet informal study of William Shakespeare’s most important tragedy. We will engage in both formal
analysis of the text and interpretive adaptation based off our (now masterful) knowledge of cinema—and our final assessment will be a filmed Hamlet scene.


b. **Key Assessments:** Nightly reading notes, explication papers, reading quizzes, Hamlet on Film (5-6 minute scene).

Our key textbooks will include:


**Our Activities:**

**Film Viewing**
Watching films is the single most important aspect of Film Studies. We will watch as many films in class as possible in order to devote enough time for discussion. In addition to the films we watch at school, **you will be politely required to watch at least one film a week on your own** (Honors students will be politely asked to watch at least two). These films may be assigned or they may be up to you, but either way, you will keep a log of the films you watch in your **film journal**. More on that later.

**Reading**
The reading in Film Studies will be secondary to film viewing in our discussions, but just as important in terms of content. You should expect to read approximately 10-20 pages of our primary textbooks each night (H: add additional reading assignments). You will also be frequently assigned to read critical analyses, theoretical essays, or historical surveys. **You must take notes on all your reading assignments in your film journal.** More on that later.

**Going Out to the Movies**
Boston is a small city, but for its size, it offers a wide variety of film-related activities and events. Part of becoming a true enthusiast of the cinema is reveling in the experience of it, and so part of this course will ask you to go out and sample some of our city’s film culture. Beyond your local multiplex, that is.

A great place to start is the **Harvard Film Archive**, a theater affiliated with the Harvard University film studies department (known as VES—Visual and Environmental Studies). The HFA shows rare and significant films, and it often screens retrospectives of
directors’ complete work. For example, this spring, they will be hosting screenings of the work of John Ford and Peter Bogdanovich. Other great sources of new, rare, or repertory cinema are the Museum of Fine Arts, the Boston Public Library, the Brattle Theater, and the Coolidge Corner Cinema. If anything particularly notable comes around, I’ll let you know.

You will be required to attend at least one repertory screening a term (so, for those math-challenged among you, you have to go four times). If you want to go more than that, GREAT! Just don’t cut class to be there (not even if Hitchcock himself rose from the grave to give a talk).

Vocabulary and Grammar
You will not be receiving a red vocab book this year. Yay!

But we will have periodic vocab quizzes on important film terminology. Oh.

Those of you who have had me before know that we don’t do grammar in my classes—we do Grammar-Rama. We WILL be participating in Grammar-Rama in this class—studying the grammar of film language. During the third unit (“Introduction to Film Form”), we will learn the language of cinema and its “grammatical” rules.

You will be expected to use the vocabulary of cinema in order to analyze its grammar, and thus its form.

Writing
You will be writing analytically, argumentatively and creatively in this class. Unlike your previous English classes, writing, per se, will not be the principal focus of our time together, as our primary goal will be to learn how to analyze film. Nonetheless, your writing will form the majority of the work completed in this class. Your writing assignments will fall into two broad categories:

1. **Response Writing**: This category includes unpolished writing that attempts to outline your opinions or observations about a piece of cinema. I will grade papers in this category primarily on quality and clarity of ideas. Response writing also includes routine homework assignments and, perhaps more importantly, your film journal. More on that later.

2. **Formal Writing**: Formal writing is writing that has been revised and put into final form; I will be grading you on clarity of ideas as well as form, organization, grammar, spelling, punctuation and presentation. This category includes the large format projects that you will complete in Film Studies.

Final Film Project
As stated above (see Unit Seven), each of you will participate in a collaborative project to plan, shoot and edit an 8-10 minute film that is based off an original screenplay. This project will be the culmination of our work, and you should be prepared! That means:
GET EXCITED…but temper that excitement with a realistic sense of what it will take. My sense is that to produce an excellent student film, you will need to devote at least **fifty hours** of your time to the project. That’s a rough estimate, to be sure, but it should give you a sense of what kind of commitment it will require. Here are just some of the things you will have to do:

a) Cast the film—find actors  
b) Find locations where you can shoot  
c) Amass props and costumes  
d) Storyboard each shot, scene and sequence  
e) Rehearse with your actors  
f) Acquire necessary technical equipment—from cameras to lighting to mobile gear to microphones to boom poles, etc. We will have some, but not all, of this equipment.  
g) Shoot the film (a much more complicated task than those three words imply)  
h) Reshoot shots or scenes that failed in the first try.  
i) Edit the shots together to create a coherent final cut.  
j) Design the soundtrack so it includes music and sound effects.  
k) Create a coherent film style that is appropriate to the subject matter and story.

**Film Journal**
Your film journal is the heart and soul of Film Studies. In it, you will take nightly reading notes, document your viewing, take notes on films, jot down ideas in the middle of the night, and perhaps lose once or twice. **I will check your notes after every reading assignment and at-home film viewing.** Still, don’t let that fact ruin the party. This is your journal, your space to write, muse, ponder, create, document, dramatize, and spill orange juice.

**Grading Percentages:**
I will use the following percentages to compute your quarter grades:

- Formal Writing: 40%
- Response Writing, Quizzes and Notes: 40%
- Citizenship (see “Citizenship Rubric”): 20%

Grades will signify the following amount of effort and success: an A denotes work of exceptional quality, a B denotes work of high quality, a C denotes work of standard quality, a D denotes work of sub-standard quality, and an F is a sign of no quality at all. Students who try earnestly and honestly will never receive an F, no matter what the quality of their work.
**CLASS REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS:**

*The Most Necessary Requirements:*

*Class Behavior:*
The cardinal rule in this class is RESPECT: respect for your classmates, respect for your teacher, and respect for yourself. Any breach of this respect will result in a personal consultation with myself; continued abuse of class decorum will result in disciplinary action and/or extra assignments. I encourage your active challenging of ideas raised in class, but when you move from criticizing ideas to criticizing people, you move into the arena of the disrespectful.

It is **disrespectful** to:
- use mobile communication devices of any variety in class
- interrupt someone else’s comments (unless he or she is about to divulge secrets damaging to national security)
- come to class unprepared
- impugn someone’s abilities or contributions
- deface or destroy school property, including books and other reading materials
- come late to class
- compose heinous excuses for late work
- complete work from other classes while sitting in rm. 2107
- *debase or insult anyone based on his or her race, gender, class or sexual orientation*

*Class Participation:*
Everyone will contribute to classroom discussions. You will be graded not only on the frequency of your contributions but also the thoughtfulness and respectfulness of your comments. Notice that on the grading percentages above, class participation is worth as much as Tests/Quizzes and Response Writing. Here’s why: this class depends 100% on you — on your comments, your suggestions, your enthusiasm, your insights, your interests, your level of comfort. The more you put in, the more you will take out.

*Materials*
In class, you must have a **film journal** (see above), and a **class binder** with pockets for handouts and returns. You should also come to class with a writing utensil.

In addition, it is absolutely necessary to have access to a DVD/Blu-Ray player or a (ha!) VCR, as well as access to a streaming video service like Netflix or Hulu Plus (or both, if you can afford it). And here’s a novel idea: get a library card, because the Newton Free Library has an **incredible selection** of movies that you get for free!
Ok, you’ll also be using YouTube more than I’d like, so make sure you have a strong Internet connection at home.

Finally, if anyone has access to a DV, video or film camera, let me know ASAP—we will be able to use it in informative and fun ways.

One more thing:

You will not watch movies on your smartphone!

Attendance and Tardiness
Be on time. Period. If you arrive late, be prepared to meet with me after class or during J-Block. I will enforce the school’s policies on tardiness, so be sure that you are familiar with the rules in the Student Handbook. Do not expect to ever leave class before the bell rings.

Make-up Work and Late Assignments
If you are absent, it is your responsibility to get and complete your missing assignments. Work handed in late will suffer egregious penalties, including but not limited to: the deduction of one-third of a letter grade per each day late (so, for example, a B- becomes a C+ after one day late, a C after two days, and a C- after three days, etc.). These penalties are strict; however, I am generous with granting extension time if you know you will need it. **If you know in advance that you will have problems with a deadline, do not hesitate to discuss the matter with me—I will NEVER grant an extension on the day an assignment is due, and I will ALMOST NEVER grant an extension the night before an assignment is due.**

If you are absent on the day of a quiz or an in-class writing exercise, you have **one week** to make it up. After that one week has passed, you will not be allowed to make it up, and you will receive a zero. If you are late on the day of a quiz or an in-class writing exercise, you will receive extra time **only if you have a signed note from a teacher or parent/guardian.** If you arrive without a note, you must finish with the rest of the class.

Cheating and Plagiarism
This class, as you will find out soon enough, is designed to empower you as a thinker, reader and writer. It is designed to get you to ask questions of the world around you, and never be satisfied with the easy answer or easy out. Cheating and plagiarism are both easy outs and easy answers, and as such run in direct contrast to what we are trying to accomplish here this semester. If you cheat or plagiarize, you will be caught. When you are caught, you will face the maximum penalties outlined in your Student Handbooks. But most importantly, if you choose to plagiarize or cheat, you are disrespecting yourself and the work of your classmates. Don’t be that guy (or girl).

Extra Help
On most days, I will be available for extra help during C, E, F and J blocks. Since my schedule is very busy this semester, I strongly recommend that you schedule an
appointment if you’d like to meet with me. On Tuesdays, I will be in faculty meetings and will be unavailable after school.

Please bring this Syllabus home tonight, **read it!**, and have your parent/guardian sign below, in addition to signing it yourself. This signature proves that you have read the above expectations and understand them. In addition, if you are under 17, I will need your parents to sign a waiver that allows you to watch R-Rated films in the class. We will not be watching anything too explicitly violent, sexual or drug-related, but to cover the topic completely, we need to feel free to choose from the entire spectrum of the cinema (and that includes films rated R).

Your name:_____________________________________________________________________________________

Your signature:_________________________________________________________________________________

Parents’/Guardians’ name(s):_____________________________________________________________________

Parental signature:_____________________________________________________________________________

**FOR PARENTS OF STUDENTS UNDER THE AGE OF 17:**

I **do** grant permission for my son/daughter to watch R-Rated films in class: ______

I **do not** grant permission for my son/daughter to watch R-Rated films in class: ______