

# *Film Interpretation*

SPRING 2015

ENGL 2100  
TR 10:00 – 12:20 (CRN14497 screening)  
TR 2:00 – 2:50 (CRN11428 lecture)  
1028 Brown / 1720 Chemistry Bldg

Prof. Nicolas Witschi  
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## **READINGS:**

All assignments for this class come from the following textbook available at the WMU Bookstore:

*Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Richard Barsam & Dave Monahan  
This course also requires the use of an i>clicker, also available at the Bookstore.

## **DESCRIPTION:**

You say, “it’s just a movie”? Film is a complex art form designed to communicate, enlighten, and entertain. Whether we’re talking about *Citizen Kane* or *Dumb and Dumber To*, all films require their viewers to be intensely active in piecing together a complex set of associations, narrative devices, and ideas. By looking at the closely related matters of art (style, theme, meaning) and craft (lighting, cinematography, editing, design, sound), this class offers an account of how meaning arises in the interaction between viewers and the medium. Also, with both historically classic films and popular genre movies on our screening schedule, we’ll explore a number of themes and issues crucial to the representation (even creation) of America’s cultural and ideological identity. Understanding what we as viewers do every time we watch a film allows us to enjoy, learn from, and appreciate them to an ever greater degree. This, then, is a class in how to watch and listen to films.

Please note: several of the films in this class contain intense, mature, and possibly controversial subject matter and representations. I expect us to approach each and every screening and discussion in a manner consistent with and well-suited to academic inquiry.

This course satisfies one (1) General Education requirement in: Area I – Fine Arts.

## **REQUIREMENTS & GRADING:**

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|---|-----------------|
| ✓ <b>eLearning assignment on "salient techniques"</b>   | <b>12.5%</b>    |
| This assignment will be available in eLearning and will require you to watch several film clips and answer a few questions about them. Details to follow. |                 |
| ✓ <b>In-class participation, quizzes, reading</b>   | <b>12.5%</b>    |
| Your attendance, comprehension of the reading, and in-class participation will be scored primarily via the data collected from your i>clicker unit.       |                 |
| ✓ <b>3 exams (2 midterms and a final)</b>   | <b>25% each</b> |
| The questions for these exams will derive from material available in the textbook, the screenings, and the lectures.                                      |                 |

## Distribution of Points:

## Grading Criteria

A = 100	A - writing is eloquent	B - good writing, but needs work:
BA = 95	- invites reading, has something new to say	- one or two weak points
B = 90	- clear sense of purpose	- one point may be repetitive or obvious
CB = 85	- depth to the arguments	- shows independent thought
C = 80	- originality of expression, free of clichés	- has a clear sense of audience
DC = 75	- goes beyond readings, class discussions, or obvious arguments	- thesis is clear
D = 70	- the reader is left with a lot to think about	- well organized
E = 65	- outstanding vocabulary	- transitions are effective
		- clear control of grammar
	C - writing is competent, consistent with average college writing	D - the writing is hard to follow
	- definite ideas present, but they are either not effectively connected or obvious	- thesis is unfocused
	- thoughts remain on the level of generalities	- exploits the obvious
	- summary predominates over analysis	- argument may be fragmented or superficial
	- evidence and examples are missing	- tendency to wander
	- thesis is weak or unclear	- tendency to play it safe with ideas, words, etc.
	- points are brought up and then dropped	- high instance of mechanical error
	- statements are predictable	- little effort seems to have gone into this essay.
	- vocabulary is clear but unsophisticated	

## **THE FINE PRINT:**

Regular attendance is expected at every class session, both screenings and lectures, since there will be fascinating and informative interpretations available nowhere else (i.e., no “lecture notes” beyond those you take yourself). Exam questions will also derive chiefly from the lectures, screenings, and discussions. It should be clear that the more you show up, the more you will “get” out of this class. Finally, please be on time; I reserve the right to not admit any latecomers once a film has started.

All work submitted in this course must be your own and must be written exclusively for this course. The use of sources needs to be properly documented, using the standard MLA format. You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding the policies and procedures in the Undergraduate Catalog that pertain to Academic Honesty. These policies include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity and computer misuse. [More info can be found at <http://catalog.wmich.edu> under Academic Policies, Student Rights and Responsibilities.] If there is reason to believe you have been involved in academic dishonesty, you will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. You will be given the opportunity to review the charge(s). If you believe you are not responsible, you will have the opportunity for a hearing. You should consult with me, your instructor, if you are uncertain about an issue of academic honesty prior to the submission of an assignment or test.

Note: the only email address that should be used for communication between WMU students and WMU faculty and staff is the email address associated with a BroncoNet ID. This email address typically takes the form <firstname.middleinitial.lastname@wmich.edu>. You can access this email account or get instructions for obtaining a BroncoNet ID at [GoWMU.wmich.edu](http://GoWMU.wmich.edu).

Any student with a documented disability (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, etc.) who needs to arrange reasonable accommodations must contact the office of Disability Services for Students (<http://www.wmich.edu/disabilityservices/> or 269.387.2116) at the beginning of the semester. A disability determination must be made by this office before any accommodations can be provided by the instructor.

**SCREENING & LECTURE SCHEDULE**  
**READING ASSIGNMENTS**  
**DUE DATES**

**WEEK 1:      INTRODUCTIONS: WHAT IS FILM?**

- Tue. 1/13 screening: No screening  
Tue. 1/13 lecture: course introductions  
Thu. 1/15 screening: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (dir: Spielberg, 1977)  
Thu. 1/15 lecture: "This means something; this is important."  
             read chapters 1 & 2 (pp. 1-62) and "How a Movie is Made" (pp. 491-95)

**WEEK 2:      NARRATIVE**

- Tue. 1/20 screening: No screening  
Tue. 1/20 lecture: the major Hollywood film  
             read ch. 4 "Elements of Narrative" (pp. 121-68)  
Thu. 1/22 screening: *The Third Man* (dir: Reed, 1949)  
Thu. 1/22 lecture: the American (film) abroad

**WEEK 3:      MISE-EN-SCENE & THE FRAME**

- Tue. 1/27 screening: *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir: Demme, 1991)  
Tue. 1/27 lecture: sound, color, movement  
             read ch. 5 "Mise-en-Scène" (pp. 171-223)  
Thu. 1/29 screening: *Days of Heaven* (dir: Malick, 1978)  
Thu. 1/29 lecture: storytelling through images  
             read ch. 6 "Cinematography" (pp. 225-85)

**WEEK 4:      EDITING**

- Tue. 2/3 screening: *The Conversation* (dir: Coppola, 1974)  
Tue. 2/3 lecture: can you see what you hear?  
             read ch. 8 "Editing" (pp. 339-86)  
Thu. 2/5 screening: *Bonnie & Clyde* (dir: Penn, 1967)  
Thu. 2/5 lecture: cutting for space

**WEEK 5:      SOUND**

- Tue. 2/10 screening: *Citizen Kane* (dir: Welles, 1941)  
Tue. 2/10 lecture: putting it all together I  
             read ch. 9 "Sound" (pp. 388-429)  
Thu. 2/12 screening: TBA  
Thu. 2/12 lecture: putting it all together II

✓ **EXAM #1** WILL OPEN IN ELEARNING AT 3:00PM ON THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12<sup>TH</sup>

**WEEK 6: GENRE FILMS: SCREWBALLS & MUSICALS**

- Tue. 2/17 screening: *Singin' in the Rain* (dir: Kelly and Donen, 1951)  
Tue. 2/17 lecture: of time and men II  
read ch. 3 "Types of Movies" (pp. 65-117)  
Thu. 2/19 screening: *The Artist* (dir: Hazanavicius, 2011)  
Thu. 2/19 lecture: the art of reference  
read ch. 7 "Acting" (pp. 288-337)

**WEEK 7: GENRE FILMS: DOCUMENTARIES**

- Tue. 2/24 screening: *American Movie* (dir: Smith, 2000)  
Tue. 2/24 lecture: narrative construction  
Thu. 2/26 screening: *Incident at Oglala* (dir: Apted, 1992)  
Thu. 2/26 lecture: narrative reconstruction

**WEEK 8: GENRE FILMS: WESTERNS**

- Tue. 3/3 screening: *High Noon* (dir: Zinneman, 1952)  
Tue. 3/3 lecture: of time and men  
Thu. 3/5 screening: No screening  
Thu. 3/5 lecture: No Class -- ELEARNING ASSIGNMENT: SALIENT TECHNIQUES

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**\*\* SPRING RECESS \*\***

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**WEEK 9: GENRE FILMS: EXPERIMENTAL FILM**

- Tue. 3/17 screening: "La Jetée" (dir: Marker, 1964), et al.  
Tue. 3/17 lecture: the "moving" image  
re-read "Principles of Film Form" (pp. 36-62)  
Thu. 3/19 No screening  
Thu. 3/19 lecture: playing with film

✓ **EXAM #2** WILL OPEN IN ELEARNING AT 3:00PM ON THURSDAY, MARCH 19<sup>TH</sup>

**WEEK 10: TIME**

- Tue. 3/24 screening: *Koyaanisqatsi* (dir: Reggio, 1983)  
Tue. 3/24 lecture: the technologies of cinematic time  
Thu. 3/26 screening: *Reservoir Dogs* (dir: Tarantino, 1992)  
Thu. 3/26 lecture: dramatic time

**WEEK 11:**

- Tue. 3/31 screening: *Vertigo* (dir: Hitchcock, 1958)  
Tue. 3/31 lecture: mind games  
Thu. 4/2 screening: *Some Like It Hot* (dir: Wilder, 1959)  
Thu. 4/2 lecture: gender games

**WEEK 12:**

- Tue. 4/7 screening: *Blue Velvet* (dir: Lynch, 1986)  
Tue. 4/7 lecture: mainstream alternatives / alternative mainstreams  
read sections from "Film History," pp. 450-61, 472-77  
Thu. 4/9 screening: *Rachel Getting Married* (dir: Demme, 2008)  
Thu. 4/9 lecture: camera games

**WEEK 13:**

- Tue. 4/14 screening: Viewers' Choice film -- TBA  
Tue. 4/14 lecture: whatever makes the most sense!  
Thu. 4/16 screening: *Die Hard* (dir: McTiernan, 1988)  
Thu. 4/16 lecture: the major Hollywood film redux

**WEEK 14:**

- Tue. 4/21 screening: *Birdman* (dir: Iñárritu, 2014)  
Tue. 4/21 lecture: questions for review  
Thu. 4/23 screening: TBA  
Thu. 4/23 lecture: final review & comments

✓ **EXAM #3** WILL OPEN IN ELEARNING AT 10:00AM ON MONDAY, APRIL 27<sup>TH</sup>