

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER | Department of English
ENGL 2250 | INTRODUCTION TO FILM
Fall 2017 | Dr. Andrew Scahill | EXAM ONE

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Compose your answers in the spaces provided for each prompt (you may remove the questions). When complete, upload THIS SAME document as your exam submission. Proofread your work--these are FORMAL essays that should go through several revisions and rewrites over seven days. **This is due by class time on Sept 28. NO EXCUSES.**

Each essay must have a TITLE and a THESIS STATEMENT. For help in writing a thesis statement, consult the handout "3 Weak Thesis Types." Underline your thesis statement. For essays two and three, place your film terminology in **bold**.

Formatting: 1) This exam is single-spaced. 2) Italicize or underline film titles. 3) Please do not go over the word limitations—they exist so that everyone has the same amount of space to do the same amount of work. Essays need not be exactly 1000 words each, however a 600-word response will not have the depth required to answer fully and will be considered incomplete.

F-D: Inadequate essays are incomplete, vague, sloppy, or do not follow directions.

C: Adequate essays have no identifiable thesis, or suffer from a weak thesis type.

B: Above average essays are nuanced and consider the complicated nature of the films.

A: Exceptional essays are focused, thoughtful, complex, and provide NEW insight—they show the reader something that they would not have seen on their own.

Simply reiterating lecture, readings, or discussion will not warrant a passing grade on this exam.

COMPARE/CONTRAST ESSAY. 1000 words max. (30 points)

1) Motifs and symbolism depend upon context. In one film a motif may function in one way, and in another that motif may function differently. Both *SUNSET BOULEVARD* and *THE FALL* feature characters (Max, Roy) who manufacture elaborate fantasy worlds into which their audiences (Norma, Alexandria) can escape. Both, too, use this motif to comment upon the nature of cinema itself—particularly Hollywood, storytelling, audiences, and escapism. Using your close reading skills, compare and contrast the meaning of "Hollywood fantasy" in each film and how it speaks to the broader themes of the respective films. Avoid overly simplistic or obvious claims.

Remember to compare AND contrast. A properly nuanced essay will explore difference within seeming similarity: "Though both films do X, one believes Y, while the other believes Z, and this is why it matters." Rather than a list of vague claims, your essay will have a strong central argument (thesis) grounded in specific evidence.

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Sunset Boulevard provides viewers with the markedly extravagant world of Norma Desmond and guides them through Max's journey as he falls into her world and the life that comes along with it. His escape is upward socioeconomically and into the haute world of Hollywood, but we see this poison him throughout the film despite it being everything he wanted initially. Contrarily, The Fall has Roy, a man who has fallen from success in that upscale world and who tells stories in an attempt to come to terms with his new permanent place outside of it. Max and Roy fall into and out of celebrity, respectively, and it is through their opposing but both largely miserable bouts of escapist storytelling that we are shown how dangerous celebrity and its inherent escapism really are.

As a commentary on the escapism participated in by those employed in the real-life film industry, Roy and Max paint equally dismal pictures of what it is to move around in relation to that one thing that millions are constantly trying to achieve: success in Hollywood. Max of Sunset is the quintessential starving artist trying to write screenplays and his confrontation with Norma begins as an opportunity for him to hide out and make a little money. Quickly we see that this arrangement engulfs him. The combination of the dramatic villainess that is Norma Desmond, her isolated living arrangement, and her wealth represent the braided prosperity and danger involved with the aforementioned success, but Max can't say no. He has painted a picture of success in his mind, and when he is brought back by Norma's antics or her money he is both metaphorically escaping into a life he thinks he wants (but can clearly see, as exemplified by Norma's mental state, is dangerous) and literally escaping back to her isolated mansion.

In a similar attempt at escapism, Roy of The Fall escapes into the stories he tells in an attempt to reach the superlative escape of death. Being paralyzed for him means a fall from the relative fame he has achieved and, by extension, that a large part of his identity is gone; escaping is his only way out of the hospital. And so just like Max, he tells a story and is drawn in by its promises. For Max it is a dangerous fall into notoriety and for Roy it is a devastating fall out of it, but what we see in both their characters is a desire to be on that pedestal, an internal monologue that makes them believe something they know can't be, and an underlying unhappiness as a direct result of their idolatry.

Where the characters and the films differ, though, has to do with the circumstances of their escapes and the messages taught by them. While Max's dropping into Norma's house is an act of pure chance, he willfully stays with her at the beginning, believing that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to jump straight to the top, or at least earn some money trying. Little does Max know that he is escaping into something of an addiction, and the film's denouement is symbolic of how fame, like a drug, can ruin you. In it, Max finally builds up the courage to leave and is killed. Norma's life, the drug he once willfully looked to for his escape, soon became inescapable, and ultimately exerts its power over him, suggesting that fame is not all it is cracked up to be and making viewers question their own desires. Everyone wants to be famous, but why, and can we handle it?

Roy's is entirely the opposite situation. All we know of his Hollywood career is that he deeply misses it, and that despite his being paralyzed, he only exhibits a desire to walk again so he can get back to the life he had. He is experiencing multiple telltale signs of withdrawal, which lends themselves to the metaphor of fame as a drug but the story separates itself from that of Max in Sunset Boulevard in how it ends up, and why. Roy is unable to live in his story-world as Max is, and The Fall suggests that no one can truly escape into a story when the viewer sees Alexandria, the girl who he is telling stories to, imagining the characters in the stories being played by doctors, nuns, and even Roy himself. This inability to entirely immerse oneself inside fantasy is clearly painful, but ends up being beneficial to him.

Left to his own devices, Roy would have committed suicide. But unlike Max, he is surrounded by (non-Hollywood) people. His literal and metaphorical fall from fame is cushioned by everyday folk who, at the end of the film, have not given Roy back his fame but have eased his withdrawal and shown him that being famous (we are shown that his famous coworkers consist of a woman who leaves him after the accident and a toxic fellow actor) is something that he can certainly be happy outside of. Norma, representing fame, kills Max, but Roy, falling from fame, is saved by the average life he thought was unbearable.

People tend to constantly tell stories to themselves about themselves and both *The Fall* and *Sunset Boulevard* prompt the viewer to think about the logical conclusions of these fantasies, the dangers of getting what you wish for, and how escaping is rarely the right choice. Roy's survival in the real world is more wholesome than Max's life with Norma, but Max lives the opulent lifestyle so many of us dream about. Both are miserable when in the path of the Hollywood vortex and the poignancy of their tales makes one think that maybe our reality is better than our fantasy, if only we can find the courage to embrace it.

CLOSE READING ESSAY: SSBS. 1000 words. (30 points)

2) For this essay, analyze the clip on Canvas from *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BADDASSSSSS SONG* to make an original, insightful claim about how the scene conveys meaning through cinematography and editing. This essay is all about demonstrating your control of film language: place the film terms you use from those textbook chapters in **bold**.

Detail **HOW** the scene is constructed rather than just **WHAT** happens. How is meaning conveyed in ways other than dialogue or narrative? What choices are made, and why do they matter? Rather than a list of observations, your essay must have structure: a strong central thesis supported by specific textual evidence using the correct terminology.

Avoid clichés and vague claims (its "draws the viewer in," it "makes you think"). When analyzing, ask yourself: "Am I saying something obvious? Or could this **ONLY** be seen after careful and dedicated focus upon the construction of the scene?" Rather than a list of vague claims, your essay will have a strong central argument (thesis) grounded in specific evidence.

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The provided clip from Sweet Sweetback's Baddasssss Song is jarring and at first glance even confusing, but this shocking of the cinematographic senses is exactly what director Melvin Van Peebles hopes to achieve. By largely omitting explanatory dialogue and continuous shots and replacing them with a combination of quick **jump-cuts** and improvised, **non-diegetic** jazz, the viewer is made to feel uneasy. What is even more affecting, though, is the amalgam of techniques used in the shots and the way these shots are shown in succession. This heavy use of **discontinuity editing** that pieces together shots and sounds of variable types enables the viewer to feel the pathos of the African-American community in the nineteen-seventies in a way that dialogue or a smoother filmic style could not.

The first few seconds of the clip introduce the viewer to the chaos straight away, but in this chaos one is able to locate a theme as well. We see a series of shaky, **handheld camera shots**, which include a quick **dolly-left** across a bridge, an extreme **close-up** of what appear to be buildings (but are so close and out of focus that the viewer can hardly making anything out), a **pan** across a city, and a **zoom-out** shot of a landscape. From here we get our first smooth shot which is of a bridge, followed by a mix of shots that feature cars and trains, have the camera **dolly** so fast that we are again made to feel as though we are moving, or show Sweetback on the move, all occasionally punctuated by **close-ups** of people responding to the presumed question, "Have you seen Sweetback?"

It is directly through what these energetic bits do not tell us that we are able to feel Sweetback's panic and to feel as if we ourselves are on the run. Occasionally shown is one or two seconds at a time of Sweetback running, but it is through the shot choice that we feel the unease in these liminal spaces. With the exception of the interview shots, the camera is always featuring something moving (a vehicle or the viewer's perspective) while itself **panning, zooming** or **dolly**. This forms a scene that the viewer unconsciously understands to be about fleeing and transition. As the clip continues we see an increase in the number of police officers and police cars featured in this same way which increases the intensity of the situation.

Just as powerful as the choice of the images themselves is the **discontinuity editing** that pieces them together. Most the shots just mentioned are pieced together by a **jump-cut** with the occasional **dissolve**, but even the **dissolve** is often cut away from. Again, this creates intensity. What we see is important, but when the viewer can barely even focus on an image before it changes, an element of powerlessness is introduced. We are on a rollercoaster whether we like it or not.

Perhaps the most unusual bit of editing here is the combination of the visual **jump-cut** and the aural **jump-cut**. The **center-frame close-ups** of the people responding as to Sweetback's whereabouts feature the complete silence of the brassy, almost grating jazz in the background of the other clips which forces the viewer to pay attention to their words and to feel that the answers are perhaps less improvised and more predetermined. None of the African-American folks say they know anything about where Sweetback is and some claim to have never even heard of him, while the white folks are portrayed to be more helpful. The **jump-cut** from involved jazz to these lone voices implies that, no matter what, the African-American community is not going to tell where Sweetback is (even if they do know) because they distrust the system which condemns him while simultaneously suggesting that white folks are more likely to point in some direction (probably the wrong direction towards an entirely different person) because of either their trust in a corrupt system or their own racism. Both groups are biased. The music picks back up with another **jump-cut** and suddenly we see Sweetback running again, but now we understand why.

The final third of the clip provides different insight into the mind of Sweetback's community by combining repetitive dialogue, poor lighting, and even quicker **jump-cuts** of sound and visuals. As the police siren enhances the immediacy of Sweetback's run from the law, the sound continues and we experience an **L-cut** in which we still hear the siren, but are seeing a somber woman in **soft light** surrounded by children expressing that often the children become bad when they get older and are "taken away from me." Her short **monologue** is repeated seven or eight times from an array of angles using **medium-close or close-up shots**, interspersed with **close-ups** of the faces of shocked children. This is sad on its own but what

relates it to Sweetback is the small interruptions of police sirens, jazz music, and **jump-cuts** to his journey. Suddenly the film is not about one man running from the law; the repetition helps the viewer understand that Sweetback is one of many who are forced to run from the law and who are coerced into prison by a system that targets African-American men. The children grow up and become "bad" (in the eyes of the mostly white government), are mistreated, and end up in prison. The children are shocked for a reason, and through our disorientation we derive the film's ultimate theme.

The **discontinuity editing** employed in Sweet Sweetback's Baddasssss Song tells a story and conveys a message not in spite of its chaos, but because of it. Giving just enough information to allow the viewer to connect the dots, so-to-speak, underscores the theme of the unfairness of the law and the struggles of African-American communities in the nineteen-seventies.

CLOSE READING ESSAY: MMFR. 1000 words. (30 points)

3) For this essay, analyze the clip on Canvas from MAD MAX: FURY ROAD to make an original, insightful claim about how the scene conveys meaning through sound design and mise-en-scene. This essay is all about demonstrating your control of film language: place the film terms you use from those textbook chapters in **bold**.

Detail HOW the scene is constructed rather than just WHAT happens. How is meaning conveyed in ways other than dialogue or narrative? What choices are made, and why do they matter? Rather than a list of observations, your essay must have structure: a strong central thesis supported by specific textual evidence using the correct terminology.

Avoid clichés and vague claims ("it's chaotic," or it "creates tension"). When analyzing, ask yourself: "Am I saying something obvious? Or could this ONLY be seen after careful and dedicated focus upon the construction of the scene?" Rather than a list of vague claims, your essay will have a strong central argument (thesis) grounded in specific evidence.

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Mad Max: Fury Road wastes no time establishing its gritty aesthetic, and the provided clip is a perfect example of that. Its **mise-en-scène** provides multiple specifically-lit, survival-oriented visuals which, even in an unusually (for this film) dialogue-heavy scene, explain a lot more about the every-man-for-himself, badlands style than the few speaking characters do, while still lending meaning to their words and actions. Furthermore, the **sound design** emphasizes key moments with drum beats and separates out a story along its own aural lines which help the viewer understand how a character is feeling and, as a result, which characters are most important. Through its distinctive use of drum beats to identify characters and moods and a visual style that emphasizes either the incredibly beautiful or the incredibly gruesome, this clip from Mad Max: Fury Road draws the viewer's physical and mental focus to key pivot points in the scene.

The clip opens on a war boy sitting along a bench in a cave. But this cave does not evoke a sense of adventure or discovery so much as it hints at a medieval prison. There are people sitting upright, laying down, and hanging upside down from opened cages and the **overhead focusable spotlights** on the upright, noticeably conscious people contrasts the very low **key light** elsewhere to establish that it may not be just the caged people that are, in a sense, imprisoned here. Also, we see soon after that the strongest **focusable spotlight** in the cave is

on the mountain of wheels, establishing them as important, coveted items, more so than any of the war boys. As a result, the viewer is not confused when the wheel is fought over, but instead understands its inherent value.

Notice also the **soft shadows** that are cast over our main war boy's face here and throughout the rest of the scene by the **overhead spotlight**. This is in **contrast** to his pale white skin and establishes that even though he is rising to action, he is not a character who represents anything wholesome or good. The light is representative of his place in society, which is below the king or god (or both, as he may see it) that shines light upon his existence.

Finally, the **mise-en-scène** of the cave is made complete by the look of the characters and where we see them on the screen. War boys feature a mix of unintentional and intentional bodily scarring, cracked lips, and bald heads, and the character attending to the war boys on the bench has clumps of hair missing and a vest stocked with various knives and gadgets. None of this is used, but it does not need to be to tell us something of the brutality of their world. These character elements are introduced blatantly by a **steady, medium-distance, centered, low-angle shot**. With this shot the viewer can read body language enough to understand motives and also get a sense that these gangly creatures loom over us, increasing our discomfort and distrust in them.

For exposition, the viewer is also given brief shots of the world outside the cave. We see war boys, mechanical parts, and vivid colors. These are **long-shots** taken with a **long-focal-length-lens** that achieve spatial, mechanical, and color-contrast to the cave. Thus, the viewer begins to piece together more of the society of the war boys.

Sound plays a very key role in Mad Max: Fury Road in that it's switch between **diegetic** and **non-diegetic** slightly disorients the viewer at some points and provides clarity in others. Immediately in the clip we hear a steadily increasing drum beat that starts to lend intensity to the war boy's attitude and when the sudden **jump-cut** to the actual drummers is made and the sound goes directly from **non-diegetic** to **diegetic**, the **loudness** is understood not just to be in his head, but representative that there are larger events happening around him. The drum beats soon get accompanied by engines revving and hundreds of war boys yelling. All at once, the chaotic world has some order. The **high-fidelity, diegetic** sound is enhancing the viewers understanding of the story itself.

As the shot **jump-cuts** to the main war boy being confused at what's going on, so too does the music immediately cut, and all the viewer hears are yells. This is subtle, but underscores the confusion and makes the viewer feel panicked that they are going to be left behind. The **diegetic** music left, so the story and the war-boys must be leaving too. This is one way in which the scene sets up the fight over the wheel. We understand the war boy's need not to be left behind in part because of this **sound-editing** decision.

With another jump-cut to the outside the viewer hears drum beats again, but they are less **frequent** now. There is some impending event, and as the final drum beat lines up with the vehicle hitting the ground, we are introduced to the mountain of wheels. The **loudness** of the yelling minimizes to nothing and orchestral music fades in until we hear one single drum beat as our main war boy tries to grab his wheel from someone else. This does two things. First, the fading **loudness** of the outside sound lends to our understanding of the wheels as incredibly important. Second, the halt of the sound upon the war boy's action blurs the line between **diegetic** and **non-diegetic sound**, but gives us more clarity that to the extent that sound is **non-diegetic**, we are experiencing moments as this particular character experiences them and thus need to pay the most attention to him.

The provided clip from Mad Max: Fury Road creates a world with its **mise-en-scène** and **sound-editing** that is believable outside the film's story. **Diegetic** and **non-diegetic** drum beats contribute to the viewer's emotional connections and gritty, symbolic lighting and character design make us intentionally uneasy. This is all by design and helps us navigate the world of Max, Furiosa, and Immortan Joe.

Your READING QUIZ on Trinity Syndrome will constitute the remaining 10 points.