

ENGL245: Film Form and Culture

Instructor: Jeffrey Moro
Course time and location: TTh 2 PM to 3:15 PM; Tawes 0320
Office hours: Th 3:30 PM to 4:30 PM; Tawes 2222
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Online syllabus: <https://jeffreymoro.com/teaching/umd/engl245/>

Description

This course introduces you to the discipline of film studies: the formal, theoretical, and historical analysis of the moving image. We'll pursue this goal in two parts: first, by developing a critical language with which to discuss film form and its historical progression; and second, by applying this language to questions of film's cultural meaning. Along the way, we'll discuss film's relationship to related questions of media and mediation, in particular the status of film within an increasingly digital world.

Aims

It is my hope that by the end of this course you will:

- Develop a facility with the languages of film studies, in particular those associated with its form such as editing, cinematography, mise-en-scene, and narrative.
- Situate these languages within broader critiques of film's relationship to culture, history, and politics.
- Practice the critical and creative techniques of film studies across a range of written and hands-on assignments.
- Connect film studies to broader interdisciplinary questions of media and mediation, particularly across film's historical and material transformation from a technical curiosity to a mass consumer object.

Materials

There is one textbook I would like you to obtain for this class:

- Bordwell, David and Kristin Johnson. *Film Art: An Introduction*.

You will notice there are multiple editions and that some of the more recent ones (it's up to the 12th) are extremely expensive. However, any edition from the 7th on will suffice for this class—and be much cheaper, especially used. (As of this writing, the 8th and 9th editions seem to have many cheap used copies on Amazon.) I will make the textbook's readings for the first few weeks of class available as .pdfs to give you the chance to secure copies. If the textbook presents a financial difficulty for you, please contact me and we can make arrangements.

You can consider the textbook necessary background to our class discussions. We will spend comparatively little time on it directly, but rather focus on the films themselves as well as the other

course readings. All these materials will be available on our course website: the films on streaming; and the readings as .pdfs.

The films we will watch this semester are:

- *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014)
- *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924)
- *Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940)
- *In a Lonely Place* (Nicolas Ray, 1950)
- *Daisies* (Věra Chytilová, 1966)
- *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)
- *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979)
- *Love and Anarchy* (Lina Wertmüller, 1973)
- *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991)
- *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1984)
- *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975)
- *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990)
- *Black Panthers* (Agnès Varda, 1968)
- *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch and Mark Frost, 1990–2017)
- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015)

You are welcome to watch these films in any manner you can, whether streaming on ELMS, off DVDs or Blu-rays from the library, or through your preferred streaming service. Many of these films are available on the [Criterion Channel](#). We will also screen a variety of short films and excerpts in class.

A Brief Note on Watching Films for a Class

I admit you are watching these films under less-than-ideal circumstances: alone, small screens, low quality, distracted attentions, poor lighting, and meager sound. Unfortunately, these are the trade-offs under which contemporary film studies—and film-going more generally—operates, ones that we will discuss at length throughout the course. Given these circumstances, here are some recommendations for maximizing your viewing experiences and critical engagement this semester:

- Always watch with a pencil in hand. Make notes about the films as you go. What do you see? Hear? How do you understand the film's world? Throughout the course, we will develop a critical language for discussing film: apply these languages *as* you watch.
- Re-watch the films. You might not have time to do so every week, but all films reward repeat viewings. Upon your second viewing, don't be afraid to stop, back up the film, and repeat sequences. Re-watching is integral to writing meaningfully about film.
- Watch on the largest screen you can, in the darkest room available to you, at maximum volume. If you have friends in the course, consider taking over a common space and blacking out the windows. Find a projector and play the film on a hanging bedsheet. Cinephilia rewards creativity.

- Watch from beginning to end without stopping and without looking at your phone. I know. This one is the hardest—for me too. But these films were made for continuous, undistracted viewing and we should approach them as such.

Assignments

Here's the breakdown for the class:

- Participation (25%)
- Miniature essay (0%) (no, that's not a typo!) [due 20 Feb]
- Short essay #1 / shot chart assignment (15%) [due 5 March]
- Midterm essay (20%) [due 26 March]
- Short essay #2 / editing project (15%) [due 30 April]
- Final essays (25%) [due 18 May]

What follows are short descriptions of the assignments. I'll provide longer descriptions and prompts as we get closer to the deadlines, and will update these descriptions accordingly.

On Deadlines

Assignments are due at 11:59 PM on the listed days. As a rule, I don't reduce grades for late assignments. But this comes with two caveats: I won't accept any assignments turned in more than three days late (including weekends); and late assignments will not receive much, if any feedback. If you have an extenuating circumstance that will make it difficult to make a deadline, please write me, ideally well in advance, to discuss extensions and alternatives. You'll find that I'm fairly generous in this regard.

You should email me assignments in a .docx file format. Since Instructure (the company behind ELMS/Canvas) was [purchased by a private equity company](#) last year, and since it makes its money by extracting data from student and instructor labor, I try to avoid using it as much as possible. I will not accept: Apple Pages files, PDFs, or links to Google Docs. I'm stringent about file formats because I use track changes to give you comments, and Microsoft Word doesn't play nice with all other formats and programs. Please give your file a descriptive name, e.g., "LastName_shot-chart.docx".

Finally, please use MLA formatting for all assignments. The [Purdue OWL](#) is a great resource if you need to brush up on this citation format.

Participation

In a discussion-based course, participation is crucial. Much of our intellectual work happens inside the classroom as we wrestle together with the material's questions and provocations. I assess participation holistically, taking into account your attendance, thoughtfulness of response in a variety of media, preparation for and contributions to class discussions, and how you engage the material, me, and your peers outside the classroom. This means that if you're the kind of person who doesn't always have your hand raised, you can still do quite well by participating in a variety of ways. I'll also administer the very occasional quiz in order to assess how you're picking up the course's language

and engaging with the viewings/readings. Finally, I'll give you a mid-term participation assessment during spring break so you have a sense of where you stand in the course.

Regarding attendance: more than two unexcused absences will begin to adversely affect your participation grade. Emphasis on *unexcused*: if you're ill or have a death in the family, I certainly think you should miss class! Just please keep me apprised—better to tell me what you need so we can work something out rather than drop off the map. In general, if you're absent, I encourage you to contact one of your peers for what you missed.

Miniature essay

A few weeks into the semester, I'll ask you to complete a very small (c. 300 words) essay. This is ungraded. I'll give you a prompt the week it's due. Its purpose is to help us gauge together your performance in the class and how you're picking up the course's vocabulary.

Short essay #1 / shot chart

For this assignment, I'll ask you to complete a *shot chart*: a table that works moment by moment through a scene and characterizes each individual shot. You'll choose from a bank of scenes that I provide on ELMS. You'll then use this shot chart to write a short essay (c. 900 words) about the scene in which you'll connect questions of editing and cinematographic technique to the production of effect and meaning.

Midterm essay

For our midterm, I'll ask you to write a longer essay (c. 1500 words) in which you'll put two films from the course in conversation with each other. Your goal is to develop an argument about a particular function of film language through a comparative reading of these films. We'll discuss techniques for writing about film at length during the classes preceding the midterm.

Short essay #2 / editing project

For this assignment, you'll experiment with techniques of film editing in order to learn more about how a scene operates. An apocryphal quote, often attributed to director Jean-Luc Godard, states that the best way to critique a film is to make another one. In this spirit, I'll ask you to re-edit a short scene (again, from a provided bank) in order to make an argument about the scene. You'll pair the scene with a short (c. 500 words) artist's statement.

Final essays

Our "final exam," such as it is, takes the form of three short essays of c. 750 words apiece. I'll release a bank of questions a week or two before the end of the term. You'll then select three and respond to them.

Various Policies Suitable to the Printed Version

Unless otherwise stated, this course operates according to all University of Maryland Course Related policies as detailed here: <https://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with these policies and to ask me if you have a question about any of them or how they apply to this course.

Names, Pronouns, and Self-Identification

I use he/him/his pronouns. If you would like to share your pronouns with the class on the first day, I will make space to do so. I encourage everyone to share their pronouns, the names they'd like us to use, and any other information useful to addressing them properly during the class. However, disclosing this information is not mandatory. I encourage students to come speak with me privately with any questions or concerns.

Diversity

UMD English considers the diversity of its students, faculty, and staff to be critical to its educational mission and expects every member of the community to contribute to an inclusive and respectful culture in the classroom, work environment, and at campus events. It is my intent that students from diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and learning needs be well served by this course and that the diversity students bring to class be viewed as a resource and strength. Dimensions of diversity include intersections of sex, race, age, national origin, ethnicity, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, intellectual and physical ability, primary language, faith and non-faith perspectives, income, political affiliation, marital or family status, education, and any other legally protected class. I endeavor to present materials and activities that foster a positive learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Please let me know of ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or other students or student groups.

Academic Integrity

The University is one of a small number of universities with a student-administered Code of Academic Integrity and an Honor Pledge. The Code prohibits students from cheating on exams, plagiarizing papers, submitting the same paper for credit in two courses without authorization, buying papers, submitting fraudulent documents, and forging signatures. All students in this class are expected to abide by the terms of this code at all times and are assumed to be operating under its strictures. More information is available here: <http://www.shc.umd.edu/SHC/Default.aspx>.

Religious Observances

In accordance with university policy, you will not be penalized for participation in religious observances during this class. Please contact me as early as possible to let me know of intended absences or necessary accommodations.

Disabilities

Similarly, I'm legally obligated (and happy to provide) any necessary accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Please speak with me at the beginning of the semester if you need any

accommodations, and make sure as well to register with the university's counseling services as necessary: <https://www.counseling.umd.edu/ads/>.

ELMS

This course is listed on ELMS. However, due to its parent company Canvas' recent purchase by a private equity firm and stated business model of surveilling student and instructor activity, I do not use it beyond distributing some of the course materials and making the occasional mass email.

Office Hours and Email Policies

I keep regular office hours at the time and location listed at the outset of this syllabus. I am happy to make appointments outside those listed office hours. If you'd like to meet with me, please write me at least twenty-four hours in advance; I will not be able to make appointments same day. I will respond to all emails during working hours and within forty-eight hours of receiving your email. Please don't write me to follow up before then; however, if you haven't received a response within two days, please send me a ping to remind me.

Grading Policy

I use letter grades in this class. In calculating your final grade, I use UMD's official 4.0 scale equivalence table, located here: <http://registrar.umd.edu/current/Policies/acadregs.html#plusminus>. I then round your grade to two decimal points. The grade ranges for this class are:

- $4.0 \geq x \geq 3.8 = A$
- $3.8 > x \geq 3.5 = A-$
- $3.5 > x \geq 3.2 = B+$
- $3.2 > x \geq 3.0 = B$
- $3.0 > x \geq 2.8 = B-$
- $2.8 > x \geq 2.5 = C+$
- $2.5 > x \geq 2.2 = C$
- $2.2 > x \geq 2.0 = C-$
- $1.8 > x \geq 1.5 = D+$
- $1.5 > x \geq 1.2 = D$
- $1.2 > x \geq 1.0 = D-$
- $1.0 > x \geq 0.0 = F$

If You're Having Trouble, Please Come Talk to Me

Much of these boilerplate policies boils down to one principle: I want you to succeed in this class, and I want to make sure you have access to the tools and resources you need to do so. In the past few years, instructors have become more aware of the "hidden curriculum" of college—who feels comfortable asking for an extension, whose voice in the classroom gets coded as "useful participation" or "disruption," or who feels uncomfortable letting their professor know that they have to choose between books and food. It's my hope that you'll find this class rigorous and challenging; it's also my hope that you'll reach out to me when you're struggling.

Schedule

Please view the films and complete the class readings before our Tuesday meetings. If you're looking to prioritize the readings, we'll roughly go in chronological order, with the most important readings listed first. I imagine we'll often spend Tuesday discussing the film primarily, and then bring in the readings more deliberately on Thursday.

Week 1, Jan 28/30th: Introduction

- *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014)
- *Read:*
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 2, "The Significance of Film Form"

Week 2, Feb 4/6th: Movement

- *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924)
- *Read:*
 - André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema"
 - W.J.T. Mitchell, "Image"

Week 3, Feb 11/13th: Montage

- *Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- *Read:*
 - Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram"
 - Karl Marx, ["Theses on Feuerbach"](#) (the first link; whole page is a useful resource on Marxist dialectical thinking)
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 6, "The Relation of Shot to Shot: Editing"
 - There are some useful notes on Soviet montage in Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 12.

Week 3, Feb 18/20th: Continuity

- *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940)
- *Read:*
 - Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility" (second version)
 - continue with Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 6
 - There are some useful notes on Hollywood-style continuity in Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 12.
- *Due:* Mini-essay due Thu 20 Feb.

Week 5, Feb 25/27th: Cinematography

- *In a Lonely Place* (Nicolas Ray, 1950)
- *Read:*
 - Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality"
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 5, "Cinematography"

Week 6, March 3/5th: Mise-en-scene

- *Daisies* (Vera Chytilová, 1966)
- *Read:*
 - Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 4, “The Shot: Mise-en-Scene”
- *Due:* Short essay #1 (shot chart) due on Thu 5 March.

Week 7, March 10/12th: Composition

- *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)
- *Read:*
 - Sarah Lewis, [“The Racial Bias Built Into Photography”](#)
 - Teju Cole, [“A True Picture of Black Skin”](#)
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 8, “Style and Film Form”

Week 8: SPRING BREAK

Week 9, March 24/26th: Time

- *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979)
- *Read:*
 - W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, “Time and Space”
 - Sean Cubitt, “Time” from *The Practice of Light*
- *Due:* Midterm essay due on Thu 26 March.

Week 10, March 31st / April 2nd: Narrative I — Building

- *Love and Anarchy* (Lina Wertmüller, 1973)
- *Read:*
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 3, “Narrative Form”

Week 11, April 7/9th: Narrative II — Breaking

- *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991)
- *Read:*
 - Marisa Parham, [“.break.dance”](#)

Week 12, April 14/16: Animation

- *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1984)
- *Read:*
 - excerpts from Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*
 - Alexander Galloway, “Origins of the First-Person Shooter”

Week 13, April 21/23rd: Sound

- *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975)
- *Read:*

- Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”
 - Alexander Weheliye and Katherine McKittrick, “808s and Heartbreak”
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 7, “Sound in the Cinema”
- *Due:* Short essay #2 (editing project) due on Thu 30 April.

Week 14, April 28/30th: Documentary

- *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990)
- *Black Panthers* (Agnès Varda, 1968) [in-class viewing]
- *Read:*
 - Bill Nichols, “Documentary Modes of Representation”
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 10, first twenty pages on documentary

Week 15, May 5/7th: Post-cinema I — The New Seriality

- excerpts from *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch and Mark Frost, 1990–2017)
 - S01E01, “Pilot”
 - S01E03, “Zen, or the Skill to Catch a Killer”
 - S02E07, “Lonely Souls”
 - S02E22, “Beyond Life and Death” (optional, but the last ten minutes help set up season three)
 - S03E01, “Part 1” and S03E02, “Part 2” (aired as one continuous episode)
- *Read:*
 - Kirsty Fairclough, Michael N. Goddard, and Anthony N. Smith, [“‘I’ll See You in 25 Years’: The Return of Twin Peaks and Television Aesthetics”](#). (I recommend skimming the essays in this *Sense of Cinema* [special feature](#).)

NB: I recommend viewing *Twin Peaks* throughout the semester, since it’s a substantial undertaking even in this highly abbreviated version. I’ll distribute recommendations for timing screenings in the first few weeks of class.

Week 16, May 12th: Post-cinema II — Fragmentation

- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015)
- *Read:*
 - Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions”
 - Matt Zoller Seitz, [“Disney Is Quietly Placing Classic Fox Movies Into Its Vault, and That’s Worrying”](#)
- *Due:* Final essays due Monday 18 May.

Acknowledgements

All syllabi are cumulative, built from bits, pieces, and people from the instructor’s own education. This syllabus features traces of: Timothy van Compernelle, Andrew Johnston, Marisa Parham, John Drabinski, Kyle Bickoff, and Amelie Hastie.