

Hum/VC 50 Introduction to Film, Spring Term 2022
Prof. Catherine Jurca
cjurca@caltech.edu

This course examines the historical development of film as a popular art form and as commercial entertainment from the 1880s to the present, with an emphasis on American and European contexts. Students will acquire the basic vocabulary and techniques of film interpretation, focusing on narrative and visual structure—that is, on the formal properties through which films tell their stories—while also learning about some important genres and movements, including cinema of the fantastic, slapstick comedy, German Expressionism, Classical Hollywood, the Western, and French New Wave.

The goal is for you to develop visual literacy, by which I mean an ability to recognize and analyze significant images to understand how films create meaning, and to understand and question the relationship between film as an “entertainment” medium and the historical-cultural circumstances in which it is produced and consumed.

As in all freshman humanities courses you will also be asked to develop your skills as interpreters of texts and as writers of original, compelling, and persuasive arguments about them. You will do this through discussions of the films and through a series of one- and two-page papers as well as a longer paper that gives you more room to explore independently your own thematic and/or stylistic interests in one or two films.

Required Texts

I will post a Film Location Guide on Canvas that states where you can access the films. The films for Weeks 1 - 4 are available for free online and should only be accessed through the links given on the Guide to make sure you have the right version of the film. There are two copies of all other course films on three-hour reserve at Sherman Fairchild Library, which also can loan out portable dvd players. I am working with the library to see about free digital access for those films as well.

Written Assignments

- 4 short, focused analytic papers
- 1 longer analytic paper on film(s) and topic of your choosing
- proposal for final paper
- position paper to select a final film for the course
- weekly participatory writing assignments (via discussion board)

One 300-word and three 600-word analytic papers: The purpose of these short papers is to help you develop the skills necessary for close “readings” of visual language by writing on specific film clips. These papers will be *due before the beginning of class on the day we discuss the film*. You will receive the topics and clips at least five days before the paper is due.

1200-word analytic paper: this assignment is due at the end of term on a topic of your choosing about any one or two films on the syllabus, developed in consultation with the professor. Extensions must be requested in advance (papers submitted more than two days past the deadline will receive minimal or no written comments).

100-word proposal for final paper: you will develop a topic and provisional thesis for the final paper in advance of our one-on-one meeting.

250-word paper on final film: students will choose a final film to conclude the course. Each student will make a case for the film they would like us to watch and discuss together: why should we choose it? what would it contribute to the conversations we have had about film across the term? Students will select the film from a short list, derived from the most persuasive papers (selected by me and any students who volunteer to review them).

Participatory writing assignments: Over seven weeks you will be asked to share a short response to a film or to a classmates’ writing. Prompts will be sent via email and posted on canvas. They may ask you to analyze or reflect on a moment in a film, post a compelling clip or shot, pose or answer discussion questions. There will be at least two options each week, but you need to complete only one (seven contributions total). I will not be grading these, but I will be reviewing contributions and making posts of my own.

Grading (see Grading Contract at the end of this document)

Laptops, etc.

Experience has taught me that it is better to ban laptops, ipads, etc. from the classroom rather than try to monitor relevant use. Research shows that hand-written notes result in better retention and a deeper understanding of material.

Special Accommodations

If you have a health issue or learning or physical disability that requires accommodation, please let me know immediately.

Outside Sources

Because this is an introductory course, I am interested in your ideas rather than the ideas of others. Stylistic features of most of these films have been written about *ad nauseam*, and the length and the nature of the topics are not suited to incorporating outside sources into your interpretation. Do not consult outside sources for the 600-word papers, including books, articles, the internet, published or unpublished papers, etc. You may use outside sources for the other assignments, with proper notation. You are *always* allowed to consult a source such as IMDB for information regarding character names, cast, and credits (but not for plot summary or analysis) and to look up various film terms ("sound off," "low-angle shot," etc.). I will also send you a Film Terms sheet with key terms to use in writing about film.

Hixon Writing Center

The Hixon Writing Center is an invaluable resource for student writers who are looking to improve their academic writing, either for a specific assignment or in general. Professional and peer tutors can help you work to develop your ideas, clarify arguments, refine thesis statements, write with greater precision and clarity, etc. For more information on the Hixon Writing Center, including scheduling an appointment, see <http://writing.caltech.edu/>

Film/Discussion/Assignment Schedule

- | | |
|----------|---|
| March 29 | Introduction: Syllabus and Course Expectations |
| March 31 | The Birth of Film, Part I
Lumieres
"Exiting the Factory" (1895)
"The Baby's Meal" (1895)
"L'Arroseur Arrose" (1895)
Paul
"The Countryman and the Cinematograph" (1901)
300-word paper due on Lumieres films |
| April 5 | The Birth of Film, Part 2
Edison/Dickson
"Sandow" (1894)
"Annabelle Serpentine Dance" (1895)
Edison/Porter
"The Kiss" (1896)
Méliès
"Un Homme de Tetes" ("Four Troublesome Heads," 1898)
"Les Cartes Vivantes" ("Living Playing Cards," 1904)
American Mutoscope and Biograph/Weed
"At the Foot of the Flatiron" (1903)
Edison/Porter
"New York City Ghetto Fish Market" (1903)
"Life of an American Fireman" (1903) (cont.) |

- “Gay Shoe Clerk” (1903)
“Great Train Robbery” (1903)
- April 7 D. W. Griffith, Lois Weber, and the Development of Narrative Film
Griffith
“The Country Doctor” (Biograph, 1909)
“A Corner in Wheat” (Biograph, 1909)
“The Lonely Villa” (Biograph, 1909)
“The Girl and Her Trust” (Biograph, 1912)
Weber
“Suspense” (Rex, 1913)
600-word paper due before class, on “The Country Doctor”
- April 12 Silent Film Comedy: Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton
Chaplin
“Kid Auto Races” (Keystone, 1914)
“Recreation” (Keystone, 1914)
“The Bank” (Essenay, 1915)
Keaton
“One Week” (Comique, 1920)
“The Scarecrow” (Comique, 1920)
“The Goat” (Comique, 1921)
- April 14 Revolutionary Cinema I, The Soviet Experiment
Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein, Goskino, 1925)
- April 19 German Expressionism and the Transition to Sound
M (Lang, Nero-Film, 1931)
600-word paper on *M* due before class
- April 21 Classical Hollywood: Romantic Comedy
It Happened One Night (Capra, Columbia, 1934)
- April 26 Classical Hollywood: Genre, the Western I
My Darling Clementine (Ford, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1946)
- April 28 One-on-one meetings to discuss student writing
Lewis Thomas, “On Punctuation”
- May 3 Genre, The Western II
The Seven Samurai (Kurosawa, Toho, 1956)
- May 5 *The Seven Samurai*
- May 6 250-word paper on choice for final class film
- May 10 The French New Wave I
Introducing Cannes '68 (Criterion, 2018)
Breathless (Godard, Les Films Imperia, et. al., 1960)
- May 12 Revolutionary Cinema II, Italian Neo-Realism
The Battle of Algiers (Pontecorvo, Igor Film/Casbah Film, 1966)
600-word paper on *Battle of Algiers* due before class
- May 17 The French New Wave II
Vagabond (Varda, Ciné Tamaris, et. al. 1985) Criterion

May 19	Genre, The Western III <i>Unforgiven</i> (Eastwood, Warner Bros./Malpaso, 1993)
May 24	Revolutionary Cinema III, Superheroes <i>Black Panther</i> (Marvel, Disney, 2018)
May 26	Final Film: class choice
May 31 - June 2	classes rescheduled for Historic Broadway Theater District Tour 100-word proposal for final paper (May 31) one-on-one meetings to discuss final papers
June 10	1,200-word final paper due

Grading Contract

I am trying something different with grading for this course. I will read all your written work and comment extensively on analytic papers (to a fault perhaps), but I will not be assigning grades for individual assignments. Your grade will primarily reflect the amount of work you do for the course. There are a couple of goals. The first is to encourage you to focus on substantive feedback—the comments that can help improve your prose, your selection and use of evidence, and the development of persuasive arguments—rather than on a not very meaningful, letter-grade reveal at the end. The other goal is to allow you to relax and take more chances with your writing.

The Contract

--students will attend class (unless illness or personal emergency intervenes—please notify me in advance) and one-on-one meetings and participate in class. Participation means showing up having watched the film, prepared to contribute to our discussion.

--students will complete participatory writing assignments on time.

--students will complete all papers and the paper proposal.

--all papers and the proposal must meet minimum standards. These standards will be laid out in advance of the assignments.

If you meet these expectations, you will receive a final course grade no lower than a B+.

Grade	Number of Unexcused Non-Participation Days	Number of Missed Participatory Writing Assignments	Number of Papers Below Minimum Standards*	Number of Missed Papers/ Proposal
B+	≤1	≤1	0	0
B	≤1	≤2	0	0
B-	≤2	≤2	0	0
C+	≤3	≤2	0	0
C	≤4	≤2	0	0
F	≤4	≤3	≤1	≤1

*Papers that don't meet minimum standards can be revised and resubmitted.

Students must meet all requirements in a row to earn that grade. A student taking the course pass/ fail must meet the requirements for a C to pass the course.

Please note: students are expected to turn in the short analytic papers on time because they are designed to facilitate participation for that day's class. If you cannot submit a short paper on time, you will be asked to write on another topic.

Recording participation:

At the end of each week you will assess your participation level for that week.

Earning a higher grade:

A student who achieves a B-range grade can earn an A-range grade by:

--submitting all written assignments on time (except for the final paper if extension policy is followed);

and either

--submitting drafts of 1) the 600-word *Battle of Algiers* paper, 2) either the 600-word paper on *M* or on "The County Doctor," and 3) the final paper, and submitting revised final versions that respond to feedback (as opposed to correcting small errors only). Submitting drafts are worth the effort it takes, because revision is the best way to improve writing;

or

--outstanding participation. Outstanding participation means attending class (no more than two absences, whether excused or unexcused), having watched the assigned film for that day, making frequent contributions to class discussion, and preferably engaging with the comments/questions of your peers as well as the professor. Perfunctory contributions to participatory writing assignments on canvas will jeopardize a record of outstanding participation. I value participation highly because it reflects both effort and understanding of the course material and improves the experience of everyone in the class including me.

Of course I invite and encourage you to submit drafts and revise them and give the class the benefit of your outstanding participation!

A student who achieves a C-range grade can earn a B-range grade by:

--submitting all written assignments on time (except for the final paper if extension policy is followed);

and both

--submitting drafts of 1) one of the 600-word papers and 2) the final paper, and submitting revised final versions that respond to feedback (as opposed to correcting small errors only);

and

--missing no more than four classes, whether excused or unexcused.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: Every assignment must represent independent work. Plagiarism is the wrongful use of another person's ideas by representing them as one's own. Plagiarism occurs when the general thoughts of another person and/or specific sentences and passages from another writer's work are appropriated without proper attribution in the form of a footnote or endnote. Plagiarism applies to unattributed material that is lifted from unpublished as well as published work and material from the internet. You may discuss the topics with other class members—indeed, I encourage you to do so because it's fun to talk about films—but written assignments must be your own. Plagiarized work is a violation of the Caltech Honor Code and a violation of the grading contract; plagiarized papers cannot be rewritten.