

ENGL245: Film Form and Culture

Instructor: Jeffrey Moro
Course time and location: TTh 2 PM to 3:15 PM; Virtual
Office hours: By appointment
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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, and mise-en-scene.
- 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 are extremely expensive. Any edition from the 7th on will suffice for this class, and will be much cheaper, especially used. I will make the readings for the first few weeks of class available as .pdfs. If obtaining a copy of the textbook presents any difficulty for you, whether logistical or financial, I am happy to provide electronic copies.

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:

- *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)
- *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924)
- *Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- *To Be or Not to Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942)
- *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955) + *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943)
- *Daisies* (Věra Chytilová, 1966)
- *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)
- *Tokyo Story* (Ozu Yasujirō, 1953)
- *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) + *Hacked Circuit* (Deborah Stratman, 2014)
- *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Miyazaki Hayao, 1984)
- *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) + *Black Panthers* (Agnès Varda, 1968)
- Selected short films by John Whitney, Lillian Schwartz, Dara Birnbaum, Takeshi Murata, and Cory Arcangel
- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015)
- *Russian Doll* (Natasha Lyonne, Leslye Headland, and Amy Poehler, 2019)

In addition, I will be screening four other films throughout the semester as part of one of your assignments. I will probably vary these as the semester goes on and I get to know you and your tastes better, but for now I anticipate I will screen:

- *Branded to Kill* (Suzuki Seijun, 1967)
- *Female Trouble* (John Waters, 1974)
- *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1978)
- *Night Moves* (Kelly Reichardt, 2013)

You are welcome to watch these films in any manner you can. I will upload all of them to ELMS for streaming; you can also find many through a variety of streaming services, particularly 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—to say nothing of all of the constraints of the pandemic. 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 (10%)
- Miniature frame analysis (5%) [due Thu 11 Feb]
- Shot chart essay (15%) [due Thu 25 Feb]
- Comparative essay (25%) [due Thu 25 Mar]
- Editing project *or* Movie review essay (20%) [due Thu 22 Apr]
- "Final" essays (25%) [due Tue 11 May]

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 upload assignments to Canvas in a .docx format. As a rule, I try to avoid using Canvas as much as possible, given that it makes [its money by extracting data from student and instructor labor](#). However, I also strive to make online courses as seamless as possible, so best to use the tools we're familiar with! 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

This is a discussion-based course. Much of our intellectual work happens inside the (virtual) classroom as we wrestle together with the material's questions and provocations. I assess

participation holistically, taking into account your active presence in the classroom, thoughtfulness of response across a range of media, 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 give you a mid-term participation assessment during spring break so you have a sense of where you stand in the course.

I understand that assessing participation by traditional means during a pandemic is impossible. Traditional markers like attendance, frequency of classroom response, and so forth are problematic or ill-advised given the uneven material capacities we each have available to us right now. As such, all I ask is that you try your best to participate through the avenues I make available—whether in the classroom, in office hours, or asynchronously through our classroom forum. In return, I promise to assess your participation with understanding and generosity.

Regarding attendance: I will not be tracking attendance for this course. We're simply too large and there are too many variables that may reasonably impact your ability to attend class. I will be keeping informal track of who logs into our Zoom sessions, and if I'm concerned that you're falling off the map, I'll reach out to you. I ask that you take this attendance policy not as *carte blanche* never to come to class, but rather as a sign of my respect for you and your judgment in challenging times. I ask in return that you keep me apprised of any long-term issues that may impact your attendance, such that we can make alternative arrangements.

Miniature frame analysis

The first three assignments are part of a cycle designed to help you build your mastery of film studies' formal vocabulary and techniques. A few weeks into the semester, I'll ask you to complete a very small (c. 300 words) essay analyzing a single frame from a film we've watched. You'll describe the frame in detail, and then connect its visual language to the film's broader themes.

Shot chart essay

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. 1000 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.

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.

You can choose to do either the editing project *or* the movie review essay. You don't have to do both!

Movie review essay

Cinema is a popular art form whose academic study emerged only after decades of its broader development. Much of our contemporary interaction with film criticism comes not from academia, but from popular reviews, whether traditional written reviews in newspapers and magazines or multimedia engagements on the internet. For this assignment, you'll review a film in a short (c. 1000 words) essay. You should select a film that's new to you (in an ideal world, one that comes out during the semester, although the pandemic has made such a requirement difficult, if not impossible!) and not one that we discuss in class. You are welcome, however, to write about one of the four extra films that we screen outside of class.

You can choose to do either the movie review essay *or* the editing project. You don't have to do both!

Final essays

Our "final exam," such as it is, takes the form of three short essays of c. 500 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:

- $4.00 \geq x \geq 3.85 = A$
- $3.85 > x \geq 3.50 = A-$
- $3.50 > x \geq 3.15 = B+$
- $3.15 > x \geq 2.85 = B$
- $2.85 > x \geq 2.50 = B-$
- $2.50 > x \geq 2.15 = C+$
- $2.15 > x \geq 1.85 = C$
- $1.85 > x \geq 1.50 = C-$
- $1.50 > x \geq 1.15 = D+$
- $1.15 > x \geq 0.85 = D$
- $0.85 > x \geq 0.15 = D-$
- $> 0.15 = F$

I use these ranges in order to assure that students can get a mix of letter grades and still receive a grade that reflects their overall work in the class. (For instance, if you get A-'s on all your assignments except one B+, I think you should still get an A- for the class!) I reserve the right to adjust these percentages as the semester progresses and all grades are at my ultimate discretion as instructor.

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 26/28th: Introduction

- *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)
- *Read:*
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 2, "The Significance of Film Form"

Week 2, Feb 2/4th: Movement

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

Week 3, Feb 9/11th: 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)
 - There are some useful notes on Soviet montage in Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 12.
- *Due:* Miniature frame analysis due Thu 11 Feb.

Week 3, Feb 16/18th: 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)
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 6, "The Relation of Shot to Shot: Editing"
 - There are some useful notes on Hollywood-style continuity in Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 12.

Week 5, Feb 23/25th: Cinematography

- *The Night of the Hunter* (Nicolas Ray, 1950)
- *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943)
- *Read:*
 - Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality"
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 5, "Cinematography"
- *Due:* Shot chart assignment due on Thu 25 Feb.

Week 6, March 2/4th: Mise-en-scene

- *Daisies* (Vera Chytilová, 1966)
- *Read:*
 - Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 4, “The Shot: Mise-en-Scene”

Week 7, March 9/11th: Composition

- *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)
- *Read:*
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 8, “Style and Film Form”

Week 8: SPRING BREAK

Week 9, March 23/25th: Time

- *Tokyo Story* (Ozu Yasujirō, 1953)
- *Read:*
 - TBD
- *Due:* Comparative essay due Thu 25 Mar.

Week 10, March 30th / April 1st: Sound

- *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)
- *Hacked Circuit* (Deborah Stratman, 2014)
- *Read:*
 - excerpts from Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 7, “Sound in the Cinema”

Week 11, April 6/8th: Animation

- *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Miyazaki Hayao, 1984)
- *Read:*
 - excerpts from Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*

Week 12, April 13/15th: Documentary

- *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990)
- *Black Panthers* (Agnès Varda, 1968)
- *Read:*
 - Bordwell/Thompson, chapter 10, first twenty pages on documentary

Week 13, April 20/22nd: Digital

- “Permutations” (John Whitney, 1968)
- “Pixillation” (Lillian Schwartz, 1971)
- “Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman” (Dara Birnbaum, 1978)
- “Monster Movie” (Takeshi Murata, 2005)

- “Super Mario Movie” (Cory Arcangel, 2005)
- *Read:*
 - selections from Andrew Johnston, *Pulses of Abstraction*
- *Due:* Editing assignment OR movie review essay due Thu 22 April

Week 14, April 27/29th: Action

- *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”](#)

Week 15, May 4/6th: Streaming

- *Russian Doll* (Natasha Lyonne, Leslye Headland, and Amy Poehler, 2019)
- *Read:*
 - TBD

Week 16, May 11th: Final Class

- No assigned readings or viewings. We’ll decide later in the semester how we want to use this final class. I will also hold it on the off chance that we need to cancel a class (snow day, pandemic, revolt against the government, etc.).
- *Due:* Final essays due Tue 11 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.