



Winter 2011
English 386: The Film Review as Genre
Professor Nick Davis

Office Hours:
Tue 4:30-5:30, Thu 3:45-4:45

Evanston, IL (AP) — What is a film review? How have reviews evolved as cinema has evolved? What do film reviewers want, and what criteria do they imply not only for the movies they critique but for the prose, the logic, and the details they enlist to convey that critique? Setting aside stars and thumbs and rotten tomatoes, we will engage with the literary, rhetorical, and stylistic aspects of film reviews as pieces of writing with their own history, considering the ways

in which strong reviews require the same foundations as other expository essays (structure, argument, economy, evidence) but with specific and highly diverse relations to their readers, their venues, and their points of view. As an opportunity to bridge the “critical” and “creative” facets of literary study, participants in this course will study and write about film reviews by a host of crucial figures (including Carl Sandburg, H.D., Cecilia Ager, James Agee,

Manny Farber, Parker Tyler, Andrew Sarris, Jonas Mekas, Pauline Kael, James Baldwin, Robin Wood, bell hooks, and Roger Ebert) and will also write and revise their own reviews in response to a wide range of required as well as self-appointed viewings. Neither the films nor the reviews will be taken lightly, and the course expects students who are committed and ambitious—but wit, style, and esteem for the “popular” are warmly welcomed.



OBJECTIVES FOR MEMBERS OF THIS COURSE

Intellectually: To practice watching and writing about films critically, attending to how formal choices embed ideas and complicate themes; to become well-versed in the history of film criticism as an American literary tradition, in content, context, evidence, goals, and style;

Technically: To practice different scales, voices, and modes of argument, from single sentences to short reviews to full-length essays; to become strong readers, including of each other's work.

Editorially: To instill the idea that to *critique* a film, you have to write from a *knowledge* of film

REQUIRED TEXTS

► Phillip Lopate, ed., *American Movie Critics* (Exp. Ed., 2008; ISBN# 9781598530223)

Additional readings as well as all assigned films will be accessible on the Blackboard website

You are *strongly encouraged*, but not required, to buy or rent some of the DVDs for assigned films, to ensure convenient access to materials and superior image and sound quality

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

The main assignments will be **four reviews (2-4pp. each)**, **a midterm essay (5-6pp.)** and **a final project (10-12pp.)**. I will distribute guidelines for these assignments in advance and have specified their due dates and modes of submission in the following pages. To clarify the readings, facilitate practice with formal film analysis, or help steer our conversations, I may occasionally assign very short writing exercises, to be completed in or out of class.

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

The lively, informed, succinct, spirited, but fair exchange of ideas is what film reviews are all about, and our course will follow suit. It is therefore key that you arrive to each class fully versed in the assigned readings and/or viewings, and that you remain alert, open-minded, and respectful. Upon your **third** absence (barring medical or family emergencies), your participation grade is **capped** at a C; after four absences, I cannot give any credit for participation.

DEADLINES & SUBMISSIONS

Papers will be docked a half-point for late arrival on the due date, and a full letter for each day they remain outstanding (i.e. an A paper becomes an A- paper later that evening, and a B paper the next day). Extensions will only be granted once per quarter, in writing, and well in advance of the deadlines. Failure to submit any of the reviews or essays will lead to failure of the course.

OFFICE HOURS

Please note them, listed atop the first page of this syllabus, and please come to them! They offer a great chance for me to get to know you and to provide personalized feedback and encouragement, and also for you to voice your questions or impressions about the class.

MORE OF WHAT'S HOT

Flagging crucial or representative passages in the readings; taking notes during class and while you watch the films; peer-editing each other's work; responding to in-class comments

MORE OF WHAT'S NOT

Lateness to class; laptops; cell phones; chatter; snoozing; relying on others to carry discussion

FEEDBACK ON YOUR WORK

You should always expect clear and helpful **comments** on your graded essays and reviews. If you ever have trouble grasping these comments, or if you disagree strongly with something that I have said, please visit my office hours or contact me by e-mail.

I absolutely encourage you to **discuss** your ideas about films, readings, or paper topics with me, as far in advance as possible. In-person exchanges are best, but e-mail is also wonderful. The more involved you are in the course and the more you take pride in your writing, thinking, and conversation, the more likely it is that you will enjoy and profit from the experience of the class.

One **exception**: please do not ask for feedback about full drafts of your work. These exchanges can easily become narrow or misleading, and learning to paraphrase your own arguments and to frame your own questions is an important part of the learning process. (Friends in class, blank-slate peers, or tutors at the Writing Place are terrific candidates for responding to full drafts.)

GRADES

At the end of the term, I will calculate final grades according to the following percentages: the four reviews combine for 35%, with the lowest mark counting least; the midterm essay for 15%; the final project counts for 35%; and participation and attendance, including any ungraded writing or other assignments, counts for 15%. “Participation” also encompasses engagement in discussions (to include speaking as well as focused listening), constructive use of office hours, and diligence in following the course schedule. Please do not assume that your participation grade is an “A” simply by dint of showing up; I am serious in expecting you to be openly and earnestly dedicated to the course and to your fellow students.

PLAGIARISM & ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Though we hope to have *no* encounters with the problem of plagiarism in this class, the scope of both the infraction and its consequences requires a brief, clear statement. Plagiarism comprises the unattributed disguising of *any portion* of another person's thoughts or writing—whether quoted verbatim or superficially rephrased—as your own original work. Also forbidden is resubmitting old work under the guise of new work. Northwestern rightly considers such behavior intolerable to genuine and responsible education. Therefore, any student engaging in any plagiarist practice is automatically vulnerable to a range of severe punishments, as determined by the office of the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies. Official college policies are available here: <http://www.wcas.northwestern.edu/advising/academic.html>.

Your possession of this syllabus hereafter presumes your familiarity with the definition of plagiarism, your awareness of the possible penalties for dishonesty, and your agreement *not* to perpetrate these offenses at any point as a participant in this course.

PROVISIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Any student with a verified disability requiring special accommodations should speak to me and to the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (847-467-5530) as early as possible in the quarter. All discussions will remain confidential.

NOW, AS FOR THE ACTUAL *LEARNING*...

All of that is crucial information, but let's move on. Administrating is no fun compared to teaching, and I'm so grateful to you for taking the course—and eager to dive into the material!

Weekly Schedule of Assignments

Complete the assigned readings, viewings, and other tasks *in advance* of the dates indicated.

WEEK ONE

- Tue, 1/4:** Syllabus review; learning film terms
VIEWING *Peel* (dir. Jane Campion, 1982; 9min; screened in class)
- Wed, 1/5:** ► Capsule review of *Gasman* due by midnight over Blackboard
- Thu, 1/6:** READING Villarejo, Ch. 2; Terminology Worksheets (all on Blackboard)
VIEWING *Gasman* (dir. Lynne Ramsay, 1997; 15min)

WEEK TWO

- Tue, 1/11:** LOPATE Introduction
READING Villarejo, Ch.5; Haberski, Introduction
- Thu, 1/13:** VIEWING Clips of *Speedy*, *Caligari*, and *The Passion of Joan of Arc*
LOPATE Vachel Lindsay, "The Photoplay of Action"
Hugo Münsterberg, "The Function of the Photoplay"
H.L. Mencken, "From *Appendix from Moronia*"
Carl Sandburg, "*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*"
H.D., "*The Passion of Joan of Arc*"

WEEK THREE

- Tue, 1/18:** VIEWING *King Kong* (dir. Cooper & Schoedsack, 1933; 104min)
LOPATE William Troy, "*King Kong*"
Cecilia Ager, "*King Kong*"
- Thu, 1/20:** ► Review of *King Kong* due in class
LOPATE Rudolf Arnheim, "The Film Critic of Tomorrow"
Paul Goodman, "Griffith and the Technical Innovations"

WEEK FOUR

- Tue, 1/25:** VIEWING *Double Indemnity* (dir. Wilder, 1944; 106min)
LOPATE James Agee, "Annual Wrap-Up of 1944"
Parker Tyler, "Double into Quadruple Indemnity"
- Thu, 1/27:** VIEWING *The Lost Weekend* (dir. Wilder, 1945; 101min)
LOPATE James Agee, "*The Lost Weekend*"
Andrew Sarris, "Billy Wilder," "Billy Wilder Reconsidered"
- Fri, 1/28:** ► Review of *Double Indemnity* or *The Lost Weekend* due by 5pm over e-mail

WEEK FIVE

Tue, 2/1: VIEWING *Pickup on South Street* (dir. Fuller, 1953; 81min)
LOPATE Manny Farber, "Underground Films," "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art"
Richard Schickel, "Sam Fuller: Movie Bozo"

Thu, 2/3: VIEWING *The Misfits* (dir. Huston, 1961; 125min)
LOPATE Jonas Mekas, "Marilyn Monroe and the Loveless World"
Stanley Kauffmann, "*The Misfits*"

WEEK SIX

Mon, 2/7: ► Review of *Pickup on South Street* or *The Misfits* due by 5pm over e-mail

Tue, 2/8: VIEWING One entire film from the Kael File on Blackboard (choose among
2001: A Space Odyssey, *Band of Outsiders* (aka *Bande à part*),
Bonnie and Clyde, *Funny Girl*, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *Petulia*,
The Thomas Crown Affair, and *Wild in the Streets*)
LOPATE Pauline Kael, all reviews, plus "Trash, Art, and the Movies"

Thu, 2/10: VIEWING *Lady Sings the Blues* (dir. Furie, 1972; 144min)
READING Pauline Kael, "*Lady Sings the Blues*: Pop versus Jazz"; Haberski, Ch. 7

WEEK SEVEN

Tue, 2/15: LOPATE James Baldwin, "From *The Devil Finds Work*"
Molly Haskell, "The Woman's Film"
READING Robin Wood, "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic"

Thu, 2/17: ► Special Forum with Chicago-area film critics, Transportation Building –
Richard Knight (*Windy City Times*), Michael Phillips (*Chicago Tribune*),
Hank Sartin (*Time Out Chicago*), and Gregg Shapiro (*Gay Chicago*, et al.)

WEEK EIGHT

Mon, 2/21: ► Essay on your chosen Kael film and review due by 5pm over e-mail

Tue, 2/22: VIEWING *Pulp Fiction* (dir. Tarantino, 1994; 154min)
or *The Social Network* (dir. Fincher, 2010; 120min)
LOPATE bell hooks, "Cool Cynicism: *Pulp Fiction*"
READING Zadie Smith, "Generation Why?"

Thu, 2/24: VIEWING *Dances with Wolves* (dir. Costner, 1990; 180min)
or *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Lee, 2005; 136min)
LOPATE Paul Rudnick, aka Libby Gelman Waxner, "A Boy Named Sioux"
READING D.A. Miller, "On the Universality of *Brokeback Mountain*"

WEEK NINE

Tue, 3/1: ► Review inspired by Rudnick, Smith, Miller, or hooks due at the start of class
LOPATE J. Hoberman, “The Film Critic of Tomorrow, Today”
READING Jeremiah Kipp, “Beyond Entertainment: An Interview with Film Critic Armond White” (link from Blackboard)

Thu, 3/3: VIEWING *Eyes Wide Shut* (dir. Kubrick, 1999; 159min)
LOPATE Jonathan Rosenbaum, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”
READING *Eyes Wide Shut* reviews by Geoff Andrew, Bill Chambers, Manohla Dargis, Roger Ebert, David Edelstein, Bryant Frazer, Cynthia Fuchs, J. Hoberman, Richard T. Jameson, MaryAnn Johanson, Stanley Kauffman, Jeremiah Kipp, Janet Maslin, Peter Rainer, Andrew Sarris, Amy Taubin, and Charles Taylor

EXAM WEEK

Fri, 3/18: ► Final projects due by 12pm (noon) in University Hall 215