

English 2341 – Forms of Literature: The Literature of Film

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Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday – 3:00 to 4:00

Tuesday/Thursday – 10:00 to 11:00 and 3:00 to 4:00

This course explores the American Myth as told through the medium of film. During the course of the semester, we answer the following questions:

1. What is the “American Myth”?
2. How is storytelling a unique tool for fostering the American Myth?
3. What are some distinctly American literary archetypes?
4. What is the evolutionary path of the classic American protagonist?
5. What literary genres are American specialties?

In answering these questions, we examine (1) the storytelling methods of screenwriters, (2) the themes explored by directors, and (3) the social significance of each film and how it reflects the world around it at the time of its creation. By studying these works, students gain an appreciation for film as literature and a better understanding of the world around them. We look closely for relationships between history, social movements, cultural bias, and storytelling.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon completing the course, students will be able to . . .

1. Analyze and interpret film as literature.
2. Understand film genres as a reflection of American culture.
3. Articulate an informed, personal reaction to film.
4. Demonstrate a wide-ranging knowledge of film history and aesthetics.
5. Produce critical responses to all elements of film through written essays.

TEXTBOOK

Film Art: an Introduction, by Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith

ISBN: 978-1-259-534959

“Taking a skills-centered approach supported by examples from many periods and countries, the authors help students develop a core set of analytical skills that will enrich their understanding of any film, in any genre. In-depth examples deepen students’ appreciation for how creative choices by filmmakers affect what viewers experience and how they respond.”

CLASS CONTENT

Class time will be divided between lectures and film screenings—*some of which will take place outside of class time, on Sunday afternoons*. Students will compose a 1,000-word essay at the conclusion of each section. Specific subject areas to be examined include the following:

Week 1: Introduction – Overview, Terminology, and the American Myth

We create the foundation for future class discussions, discuss the **Joseph Campbell thesis**, and agree upon a meaning of “American Myth.” We break down the course syllabus and MLA style, talk about the importance of genre to filmmaking, and randomly select a film for the final student project.

Week 2: The Myth of the American West

The literature of the west has shaped our identity and provided our relatively young nation with a unique pantheon of semi-historic heroes. These stories, from the dime-store novels of the nineteenth century to the works of modern cinema, have created an archetypal protagonist who is distinctly “American.”

Excerpts and scenes from these films: *The Searchers*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, *High Noon*

Student Essay: *Unforgiven*, director Clint Eastwood, 1992

⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 9 - 25**

⇒ **Director/actor response #1 due.**

Week 3: Film Techniques and Additional Terminology

Filmmaking has its own language. The study of film as a storytelling device requires a working knowledge of this lingo, but also of the craft of filmmaking itself. How is each scene composed? What is the importance of any single image seen on screen at a given moment? Why do directors and cinematographers make certain choices during the creative process?

⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 64 - 70**

⇒ **Director/actor response #2 due.**

Weeks 4 to 5: The Myth of the Noir Icon

The urban shadows gave birth to a protagonist that seemed particularly well-suited to post-war America, a cynical loner who lives by his own code, even when that code costs him his only chance at love and inclusion.

Excerpts and scenes from these films: *Out of the Past*, *The Big Combo*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Blade Runner*

Student Essay: *Brick*, director Rian Johnson, 2005

⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 79 - 84**

⇒ **Director/actor responses #3 and #4 due.**

Week 6: Science Fiction as a Genre

We step aside from our routine to talk specifically about science fiction. We’ll highlight various works and attempt to measure them against what we’ve learned so far throughout the semester.

⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 112 - 131**

⇒ **Director/actor response #5 due.**

Weeks 7 to 8: The Myth of the Rebel

America's fascination with the "rebel hero" originated as a response to the "social sameness" of the late 1940s and early 50s. Though "the rebel" is now a stereotype, it owes its existence to a character archetype popularized in certain seminal films.

Excerpts and scenes from these films: *The Wild One*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Student Essay: *Easy Rider*, director Dennis Hopper, 1969

- ⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 191 - 203**
- ⇒ **Director/actor responses #6 and #7 due.**
- ⇒ **Mid-Term Exam.** (vocabulary, film history, genres)

Weeks 9 to 10: The Myth of Vietnam

The turmoil of Vietnam changed a generation and reshaped America's relationship with wars and the soldiers who fight them. The films depicting the struggles of Vietnam helped distill the public perception of that conflict into a handful of particular beliefs, some more accurate than others.

Excerpts and scenes from these films: *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Good Morning Vietnam*

Student Essay: *Born on the Fourth of July*, director Oliver Stone, 1989

- ⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 216 - 226**
- ⇒ **Director/actor responses #8 and #9 due.**

Week 11: Independent Film

We'll talk specifically about "indie" films, highlighting various works and attempt to measure them against what we've learned so far throughout the semester. Students are encouraged to view such films as *Donnie Darko*, *Garden State*, *True Romance*, and *Run, Lola, Run*,

- ⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 263 - 278**
- ⇒ **Director/actor response #10 due.**

Weeks 12: *Clerks*

This week we will watch the indie film *Clerks*.

Week 13: The Myth of the Anti-Hero

Not all protagonists demonstrate the classic "heroic" traits. Expressing an identifiable restlessness and angst, the anti-hero drives the plot forward while simultaneously permitting us to live out our frustrations with authority and those elements of society beyond our control.

Excerpts and scenes from these films: *Falling Down*, *The Godfather*, *Citizen Kane*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Training Day*, *Napoleon Dynamite*

Student Essay: *Taxi Driver*, director Martin Scorsese, 1976

- ⇒ **Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 303 - 310**
- ⇒ **Director/actor response #11 and #12 due.**

Weeks 14 to 15: Documentaries, Screenwriting, and Miscellany

We'll spend the last few weeks of class touching on many other important aspects of storytelling through film, including screenplays and documentaries, casting and financing. We will discuss such award-winning documentaries as *Man on Wire*.

⇒ Quiz over *Film Art*, pages 327 - 336

⇒ Director/actor responses #13 and #14 due.

Week 16

I. Director/actor response #15 due.

II. Quiz over *Film Art*, pages TBA.

II. Final Exam

The comprehensive final exam consists of (1) vocabulary learned throughout the semester, (2) short-answer descriptions of various subgenres, film techniques, relevant social movements, et cetera, (3) directors and actors from our weekly responses, and (4) material from the Campbell thesis.

III. Final Paper

The course culminates in a 2000-word student research paper. The student is randomly assigned a film from the list below and explores a thesis based on the cumulative material covered throughout the semester. The paper will be completed using MLA documentation style. It is the student's responsibility to acquire a copy of his or her assigned film. The thesis and outline require the instructor's prior approval.

1. *Apocalypse Now*, director Francis Ford Coppola, 1979
2. *American Beauty*, director Sam Mendes, 1999
3. *Bonnie and Clyde*, director Arthur Penn, 1967
4. *Casablanca*, director Michael Curtiz, 1942
5. *Cool Hand Luke*, director Stuart Rosenberg, 1967
6. *Dances With Wolves*, director Kevin Costner, 1990
7. *Deliverance*, director John Boorman, 1972
8. *Drive*, director Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011
9. *Hud*, director Martin Ritt, 1963
10. *In the Heat of the Night*, director Norman Jewison, 1967
11. *Jeremiah Johnson*, director Sydney Pollack, 1972
12. *Midnight Cowboy*, director John Schlesinger, 1969
13. *Mystic River*, director Clint Eastwood, 2003
14. *North By Northwest*, director Alfred Hitchcock, 1959
15. *Once Upon a Time in the West*, director Sergio Leone, 1968
16. *Raging Bull*, director Martin Scorsese, 1980
17. *Rocky*, director John G. Avildsen, 1976
18. *Say Anything*, director Cameron Crowe, 1989
19. *Sunset Boulevard*, director Billy Wilder, 1951
20. *The Big Sleep*, director Howard Hawks, 1946

21. *The Crow*, director Alex Proyas, 1994
22. *The Electric Horseman*, director Sydney Pollack, 1979
23. *The Shootist*, director Don Siegel, 1976
24. *The Last Picture Show*, director Peter Bogdanovich, 1971
25. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, director John Ford, 1962
26. *The Misfits*, director John Houston, 1961
27. *The Natural*, director Barry Levinson, 1984
28. *The Outsiders*, director Francis Ford Coppola, 1983
29. *Vanishing Point*, director Richard C. Sarafian, 1971
30. *The Breakfast Club*, director John Hughes, 1985
31. *Mud*, director Jeff Nichols, 2012

GRADES

Throughout the course of the semester, students can earn up to 2000 total points:

Fifteen director/actor replies	10 points each
Ten quizzes	50 points each
Five 1000-word essays	100 points each
Mid-term exam	200 points
Mock indie proposal	50 points
Final paper	400 points
Final exam	200 points

CLASSROOM POLICIES

1. Avoid absences. Attendance is critical. We view several film excerpts during each meeting, and these are generally not available outside of normal class time. If you *must* miss class for a legitimate reason, please make every effort to (1) email me in advance, and (2) obtain the class notes from someone in the course. Any student with six absences receives a failing grade.

2. Complete all assigned readings. To complete the course successfully, a student must have an understanding of the material presented in the textbooks. Contributing regularly to class discussions demonstrates this understanding. The mid-term and final exams test students on their knowledge of the concepts presented in the texts.

3. Put your phone away. Anyone using a phone during class receives an unexcused absence.