

# AESTHETICS OF FILM

(730: 364)  
Summer 2012

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Class Location: Scott Hall 220  
Office: 1 Seminary Place, 012

Meetings: T/Th, 6:00 – 9:55  
Office hours: W, 4:00 – 5:30

## Course Description and Goals

This class is an introduction to the aesthetics of film. While this may seem like a narrow branch of inquiry, we will see quickly that reflection on the nature and status of film as art raises some of the most fundamental questions in aesthetics. We will frequently grapple with these deeper issues. So the class doubles as an introduction to aesthetics—just *through* film. Moreover, since we will be watching films drawn from several major periods in the history of the cinema, the class will also to a lesser degree be an introduction to the cinema, period. At any rate, extensive familiarity with film history will not be assumed, though “buffs” are certainly welcome.

Like other branches of philosophy, aesthetics is organized around some very general, abstract questions. We will address a subset of these questions, including:

- \* Can films be art? (And what is art, anyway?)
  - o If ‘no’, why not?
  - o If ‘yes’, is there anything unique about the art of film? What distinctive features of the medium, if any, ground its potential aesthetic value?
    - How, more broadly, does the aesthetics of film compare and contrast with the aesthetics of other arts, visual or otherwise?
  - o Moreover, if ‘yes’, are *all* films art—just *bad* art in some cases? Or is there a sharp boundary line between art films and other films? How do documentaries fit in? Are they art?
  
- \* Are films essentially representational, in a broad sense of ‘representational’?
  - o If so, what sort of representational function do they have?
    - Are they transparent windows onto reality?
    - Or illusions?

- Or projections of the imagination?
- Or like dreams?
- Or like language?
- Or something else?

\* Does film even have an essence worth studying?

- o If so, is *film* the right subject matter to be studying anyway? What about motion pictures that aren't recorded *on film*, like computer animations? Are the aesthetic criteria for these significantly different?
- o If not, are aesthetic generalizations about film possible?
  - And if not, is "the aesthetics of film" a legitimate enterprise?

\* Are films rightly viewed as having *authors*? Are directors *the* authors?

- o And how do the intentions of creators fix the aesthetic value of films? How do films compare with other works of art on this score?

\* How do films engage our emotions? *Why* are they so emotionally compelling, if they are known to be illusory?

\* How do films tell stories? Is the cinematic mode of narration importantly different from modes of narration found in other art forms (e.g., novels)? Do all films have narrators?

\* Is film a (mere) instrument of ideology?

We may hit other questions as well, depending on time and your interests.

## Course Materials

There is one textbook to buy for the course, available at the University bookstore:

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. Oxford: Blackwell.

We will work through most of this book. Noel Carroll is perhaps the most prominent philosopher of film currently writing in English. So setting aside the fact that his book is a great introduction, he is well worth reading for anyone interested in the area.

But we will read many other things, as you can see in the schedule below. All else will, however, be available through a Sakai site. I'll upload things as time passes.

There will also be in class screenings. Below you can see some early ideas. This is all up for debate, if people have other ideas.

Another part of the course will involve writing some short essays on films you watch at home. I've made some stipulations below about relevant films you should watch. I may create a longer list. I also welcome you to make your own choices. But you would have to discuss this with me first, and give me reasons for thinking your choices are relevant.

I *strongly recommend* that you get a Hulu or Netflix account. Hulu is especially great, since it has most of the Criterion Collection available for streaming for a mere \$8.00 per month. Still, this isn't exactly mandatory, and I'm happy to help people get access to films for homework if they don't take these routes.

## **Tentative Schedule**

### 7/10: Can Films be Art?

Carroll, Noel. PMP: Ch.1

Gaut, Berys. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*. Ch. 1

### 7/12: Classical Film Theory

Arnhem, Rudolf. Selections from *Film as Art*

Selection from Mast's *A Concise History of the Movies* on Soviet Montage

Bazin, Andre. "The Evolution of the Language of the Cinema."

**SCREENING:** a few illustrative parts of *Battleship Potemkin* and *Man with a Movie Camera*, and then all of *Sunrise*

**Homework Possibility:** *Bicycle Thieves* or *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

### 7/17: Medium Specificity

Perkins, Victor. Selections from *Film as Film*

Carroll, Noel. PMP: Ch.2

Gaut, Berys. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*. Ch.7

### 7/19: Representational Character (I): Transparency and Illusion

Walton, Kendall. "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism."

Currie, Gregory. *Image and Mind*: Ch.1

Currie, Gregory. "Film, Reality, and Illusion."

Optional: Gaut, Berys. Selection from *The Philosophy of Cinematic Art* on realism.

**SCREENING:** *The Rules of the Game*

**Homework Possibility:** *Children of Paradise* or *The Magnificent Ambersons*

### 7/24: Representational Character (II): Imagination and Symbolism

Currie, Gregory. *Image and Mind*, Ch.5

Carroll, Noel. PMP: Ch.4

Optional: Sosa, Ernest. "Dreams and Philosophy."

7/26: Narration and Narrators

Gaut, Berys. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*. Ch.5

Carroll, Noel. PMP: Ch.5

**SCREENING:** *Letter from an Unknown Woman*

**Homework Possibility:** *Memento* or *Citizen Kane*

7/31: Boundaries, Margins, or Paradigms? Documentaries and the Avant-Garde

Ponech, Trevor. "What is Non-Fiction Cinema?"

Carroll, Noel. "Avante-Garde Film and Film Theory."

8/2: Affect and Engagement

Smith, Murray. Selections from *Engaging Characters*.

Carroll, Noel. PMP: Ch.6

Gaut, Berys. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*. Ch.6

**SCREENING:** *Vertigo*

**Homework Possibility:** *Rear Window*, *Night of the Hunter* or *The Shining*

8/7: Authorship and Auteurs

Sarris, Andrew. "Notes on the *Auteur* Theory."

Truffaut, Francois. "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema."

Livingston, Paisley. "Cinematic Authorship."

Optional: Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" and Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

8/9: Ideology

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

Carroll, Noel. "Film, Rhetoric and Ideology."

**SCREENING:** *Breathless*.

**Homework Possibility:** *The 400 Blows* or *Cleo from 5 to 7*

8/14: TBA

**SCREENING:** *Do the Right Thing*

## Grading/Assignments

Your grade will be based on the following factors:

- \* Four one-page response papers. You can choose which weeks / readings to respond to. (15%)
- \* Two short essays (2-3 pages) on films listed as homework possibilities. (15%)
- \* A final paper (9-12 pages). (40%)
- \* Post-screening quizzes. (10%)
- \* Attendance, participation and discussion. (20%)

Topics for the final paper will be circulated by July 26. You are welcome to design your own topics, as long as you get my approval first after writing a short proposal.

## **Policies**

Here are a few basic policies:

**Attendance:** For every two unexcused absences, your grade drops by a letter.

**Lateness:** Coming in more than thirty minutes late without clear excuse counts as an unexcused absence.

**Other Stuff:** Please don't use phones or laptops, or play games, in class.

These are all for your own benefit.

## **Students with Disabilities**

Do inform me of any special needs you may have. I'm glad to accommodate you.

## **Academic Integrity**

Cheating and plagiarism are severely punished: you get an automatic F in the course. Don't take the risk. Both are very easily detected. If you can't complete an assignment, you are better off not cheating or plagiarizing. For more information on the integrity policy, visit: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/integrity.shtml>