

Philosophy and Film
Philosophy 328
Spring 2013

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Course Description

This course examines the philosophy of film and film aesthetics. Topics we will investigate include:

- how can film function as philosophy?
- how do films elicit emotion?
- how do we engage with narrative characters in film?
- what is genre? How does it affect our understanding of a film?
- how do different forms of cinematic narration affect viewer understanding?
- how does the concept of 'race' have an impact on our perception and understanding of film characters?

We will explore these issues primarily through the **careful analysis of philosophical texts**, supplemented by thoughtful viewings of select films, class discussions, written essays and exams, and lectures. Our overall aim will be to develop a reasoned, considered perspective on film as an art form insofar as it can mimic philosophy, elicit viewer emotions, offer different modes of narration, and convey to us crucial insights regarding fictional characters and other human beings.

NOTE: The dozen or so films we will view for this course have been chosen to **make you think philosophically** about film. This aim will probably require you to **view these films in a different way** from the manner in which you usually watch films. These works of art should **challenge** you, so be prepared to **analyze** them, not simply sit back and regard them merely as entertainment. It would by no means be inappropriate for you to take notes on these films while or immediately after viewing them. Nor would it be inappropriate for you to **read the essays assigned in conjunction with these films at least once beforehand**, so that you have some idea of what issues, techniques, or themes to anticipate. One critical goal of the course is to put to rest the simple-minded view that films are "just entertainment" and not to be taken seriously. Not surprisingly, then, it stands to reason that the **philosophical essays (NOT the movies) are the main focus of the course.**

Required Texts

- Flory, Dan, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (Penn State University Press, 2008)
- Mulhall, Stephen, *On Film*, Second Edition (Routledge, 2008)
- Plantinga, Carl, and Greg M. Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)
- Wartenberg, Thomas E. (ed.), *Fight Club* (Routledge, 2012)
- handouts (to be made available in class)
- online readings available through Renne Library databases
- e-reserve readings available through Renne Library Reserve System

Required Assignments

- one mini-research essay (4-6 pp., double spaced): 30%
- two short essays (1 page each, single spaced): 5% each
- one mid-term exam: 15%
- one final exam: 15%
- reading quizzes: 20%
- participation and industry in class: 10%

Interpretation of Grades

Letter grades in the course will be awarded according to the criteria described below:

- A** Achievement that is outstanding relative to basic course requirements—for example, written work that conveys a superior understanding of the material and is free of grammatical errors. Has a special quality—for example, an essay that provides particularly insightful analysis, criticism, or reflection.
- B** Achievement that is significantly higher than basic course requirements; e.g., a well-written and well-produced essay. May contain a few minor flaws that could be overcome without difficulty. Shows a solid understanding of the material.
- C** Achievement that fulfills basic course requirements. However, may contain significant flaws—e.g., an essay that fulfills the assignment's basic requirements, but does not do it in a clear or noteworthy way. Shows some understanding of the material, but presents it partially, incompletely, or awkwardly. May fail to address properly one or more major assignment requirements. Awkward handling of source materials may be in evidence. May contain grammatical errors or clumsy writing that interfere with the essay's readability.
- D** Achievement that is worthy of course credit, but is not satisfactory. For example, an essay that forces the reader to do far too much work to understand it, due to numerous and/or serious grammatical errors, incomplete or inadequate presentation of materials, poor reasoning, or poor writing. May also fail to address properly one or more major assignment requirements, without which the essay fails to address the primary aims of the assignment.
- F** Achievement not worthy of course credit.

Other Course Policies and Information

Academic Dishonesty. All work for this course must be written by the person submitting it for evaluation. It must also be written for **this** course. These requirements include anything submitted for credit in the class. **Anyone found guilty of plagiarism, cheating, forgery, or other forms of academic dishonesty will fail this course** and the incident will be reported to the Dean of Students. (See the *MSU Student Conduct Guidelines* for further information.)

Assigned Readings. Philosophy requires a solid comprehension of texts. My assumption for this class is that you will make every effort to **read the assigned material twice and come to class prepared to discuss it**. The best way to achieve the comprehension needed to discuss philosophy texts intelligently is to **read the material carefully and more than once**: first for a general grasp, then a second or additional times (generally more slowly) for a deeper, more detailed understanding.

Attendance, Participation, and Industry. A portion of your grade (10%) will depend on your **active participation and industry in class**, which I will take to be illustrated by thoughtful discussion, comments, and questions regarding the course's topics and materials. This aspect of your grade **presupposes regular attendance**. Missing numerous class sessions (i.e., six or more) should lead to the expectation that your grade will be negatively affected, and missing **twelve** or more (i.e., 30% or more of the course) for **any** reason should lead to the expectation that you will not do satisfactorily or, in extreme cases, not pass the class. In addition, only rarely or never saying anything in class should lead to the expectation that your grade may be negatively affected.

Copies. Make copies of all your submitted work and keep them until you receive your final grade.

Course Prerequisite. This course **presupposes that you have already had at least one course in philosophy** and thus have a solid general understanding of what philosophy is as a form of disciplinary knowledge. If you have not yet taken any philosophy courses, you are not prepared for this course and should probably drop it.

Other Course Policies and Information (continued)

E-reserve and Online Readings. Some of the course readings will be made available to you through the Renne Library e-Reserve system or are accessible online through various databases. **These readings are required texts** for this course. As such, you will need to **print them out and bring your copies to class** so that we may study and discuss them in detail.

Essay Format. Your written, out-of-class assignments for this course must be word-processed and clearly readable in 10 to 12 point font. Space the lines as instructed, use approximately one-half to one-inch margins, place your name, assignment description, and course and section number in an upper corner of the first page, title your essay, number your pages, use a standard citation format, and staple or paper clip multiple-page essays together. There is no need for cover or backing sheets, plastic binders, folders, etc.

Incompletes. Incomplete grades are generally for students who become ill or have other emergencies late in the semester. Students eligible for Incompletes should have consistently completed four-fifths of the assigned work during the semester in a timely fashion. If you feel you merit an Incomplete, talk to be about it ASAP.

Late Papers. Late assignments are generally frowned upon, may receive a lower grade than they would otherwise, or **may not be accepted** for credit. If you have difficulty meeting a deadline, contact me ASAP.

Mature Content. Many of the films we will consider in this course contain mature (i.e., “R”-rated) content. If you are unable to tolerate this kind of material, you should take some other course.

Mini-Research Essays. A mini-research essay is a **small-scale academic research essay** that further develops the philosophical analysis of some topic we have discussed in class by means of additional, independent research. The purpose of this sort of essay is to have you focus on a topic and independently develop its philosophical discussion. This type of assignment requires you to show not only a competence in the topic itself as we have discussed and analyzed it (namely, by **citing and discussing in some detail at least two essays or book chapters we have covered in this course**), but also to extend its **philosophical analysis** by means of **independent academic research**. In keeping with this purpose, mini-research essays must use in some significant way **at least one academic philosophical resource** that discusses this topic beyond the ways in which we have discussed it in the course through assigned readings. The best papers, all things being equal, will probably incorporate more than one resource from outside class readings. For the purposes of this course, your possible academic philosophical resources will be restricted to those contained in the Wartenberg anthology for *Fight Club*.

Reading Quizzes. Several reading quizzes will be given during the semester to ensure that you are reading the course materials carefully. **Quizzes will be given without warning during the first five minutes of class and may not be made up.** If you have taken all the quizzes, your lowest score may be dropped.

Required Texts. This course is about the **analysis of texts**. The assigned readings exist in books or online resources that you **must have with you on the days we discuss them**. As such, if you come to class without these texts on the relevant days, you will be counted as absent.

Screenings. **Attendance** at screenings of the films shown for the course is **required**.

Other Course Policies and Information (continued)

Short Essays. One-page, single-spaced writing assignments, such as summary and analyses of course readings, will be assigned from time to time. These essays will each be worth 5% of your course grade and will be due at the **beginning** of the class period for which the reading was assigned.

Schedule of Readings, Topics, and Assignments

- 9 January Introduction to the course: philosophy and film, philosophy of film, and film as philosophy; discussion exercise on different conceptions of philosophy
- 11 January Can films philosophize? Mulhall
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 3-11
- 14 January Screening: *Alien* (1979) (117 minutes)
- 16 January *Alien* as illustrating Nietzschean philosophy
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 13-29
- 18 January Mere illustration vs. philosophical illustration
Reading: Wartenberg, "Beyond Mere Illustration: How Films Can Be Philosophy," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 33-42 (**online through MSU Library**) [**print out and bring to class**]
DUE: one page, single-spaced summary/analysis of Wartenberg's essay
- 21 January **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day – no class**
- 23 January Can films philosophize? Livingston and Russell
Reading: Livingston, "Theses on Cinema as Philosophy," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 11-18 (**online through MSU Library**) [**print out and bring to class**]; Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film," from *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, 387-390 (**e-reserve**) [**print out and bring to class**]
- 25 January Emotion, genre, and horror
Reading: Carroll, "Film, Emotion, and Genre," *Passionate Views*, 21-47
- 28 January Screening: *Blade Runner* (1982/2007) (119 minutes)
- 30 January *Blade Runner* as doing philosophy
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 29-45
- 1 February *Blade Runner* as eliciting viewer emotion
Reading: Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face in Film," *Passionate Views*, 239-255
- 4 February Screening: *Alien³* (1992) (144 minutes)
- 6 February *Alien³*, reflection, the meaning of life, and philosophy of religion
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 81-107
Recommended: Mulhall, *On Film*, 47-74
Recommended viewing: *Aliens* (1985) (worth one-half point of extra credit)
- 8 February The philosophy of horror
Reading: Bantinaki, "The Paradox of Horror: Fear as a Positive Emotion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), 383-92 (**e-reserve**) [**print out and bring to class**]
- 11 February Screening: *Alien Resurrection* (1997) (108 minutes)

Schedule of Readings, Topics, and Assignments (continued)

- 13 February Philosophy, reflection, sequeldom, motherhood, monstrous children, and adulthood
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 109-125
- 15 February Baggini's analysis of Mulhall's conception of film as philosophy
Reading: Baggini, "Alien Ways of Thinking: Mulhall's *On Film*," *Film-Philosophy* vol. 7, no. 3 (2003) **(online through MSU Library) [print out and bring to class]**
Recommended viewing: *Rashomon* (1950) (worth one-half point of extra credit)
DUE: one page, single-spaced summary/analysis of Baggini's essay
- 18 February **Presidents' Day – no class**
- 20 February Andersen's analysis of Mulhall's conception of film as philosophy (discussion project)
Reading: Andersen, "Is Film the Alien Other to Philosophy? Philosophy as Film in Mulhall's *On Film*," *Film-Philosophy* vol. 7, no. 3 (2003) **(online through MSU Library) [print out and bring to class]**
- 22 February Ripley's voice in the *Alien* series, being female, and philosophy (discussion project)
Reading: Mulhall, "In Space, No-one Can Hear You Scream: Acknowledging the Human Voice in the Alien Universe," *Film as Philosophy*, 57-71 **(e-reserve) [print out & bring to class]**
- 25 February Screening: *Minority Report* (2002) (146 minutes)
- 27 February Mulhall's defense of his conception
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 129-155
- 1 March Mulhall's extension of his model
Reading: Mulhall, *On Film*, 157-187
Review for Midterm
- 4 March **6-6:50 PM: Midterm**
6:55-8:30 PM: Screening: *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) (96 minutes)
- 6 March Theories of Film Comedy
Reading: Eitzen, "The Emotional Basis of Film Comedy," *Passionate Views*, 84-99
- 8 March Narrative Desire
Currie, "Narrative Desire," *Passionate Views*, 183-199
- 11-15 March **Spring Break – no classes**
- 18 March Screening: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) (108 minutes)
- 20 March Human identity and the morality of having painful memories I
Reading: Grau, "*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the Morality of Memory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 119-131 **(online through MSU Library) [print out and bring to class]**
- 22 March Human identity and the morality of having painful memories II
Reading: Meyers, "Reflections on Comic Reconciliations: Ethics, Memory, and Anxious Happy Endings," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008), 77-87 **(online through MSU Library) [print out and bring to class]**
- 25 March Screening: *Memento* (2000) (113 minutes)
- 27 March *Memento* and philosophy of narration
Reading: Gaut, "Telling Stories: Narration, Emotion, and Insight in *Memento*," in *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, eds. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011), 23-44 **(e-reserve) [print out and bring to class]**

Schedule of Readings, Topics, and Assignments (continued)

- 29 March **University Day – no class**
- 1 April Screening: *Fight Club* (1999) (139 minutes)
- 3 April *Fight Club* and Philosophy of Gender
Reading: Guignon, “Becoming a Man: *Fight Club* and the Problem of Masculine Identity in the Modern World,” in *Fight Club* (ed. Wartenberg), 35-49
- 5 April *Fight Club* and philosophy of narration
Reading: Wilson and Sphall, “Unraveling the Twists of *Fight Club*,” in *Fight Club* (ed. Wartenberg), 78-110
- 8 April Screening: *Clockers* (1995) (129 minutes)
DUE: mini-research essay (on *Fight Club* anthology)
- 10 April Character engagement and allegiance
Reading: M. Smith, “Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes, or Apparently Perverse Allegiances,” *Passionate Views*, 217-238
- 12 April *Clockers* as a philosophical film about empathy and race
Reading: Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 124-52
Recommended: M. Smith, “In and Out of Character,” *Film and Philosophy* 16 (2012), 139-47;
Flory, “Response to My Critics,” *Film and Philosophy* 16 (2012), 162-69 (**both e-reserve**)
- 15 April Screening: *Menace II Society* (1993) (104 minutes)
- 17 April *Menace II Society* as philosophical film about allegiance, nihilism, and the meaning of life
Reading: Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 153-57; 168-84
- 19 April *Menace II Society* as a black film
Reading: Tommy L. Lott, “Film Noir, Realism, and the Ghetto-centric Film,” *Film and Philosophy* 16 (2012), 148-161 (**e-reserve**) [**print out and bring to class**];
Flory, “Response to My Critics,” *Film and Philosophy* 16 (2012), 168-177 (**e-reserve**) [**print out and bring to class**]
- 22 April Screening: *Deep Cover* (1992) (107 minutes)
- 24 April *Deep Cover* as a philosophical film about the moral life and how to live it
Reading: Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 185-207
- 26 April Philosophy, film, race, and emotion
Reading: Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 309-22
Review for Final Exam
- 2 May **Final Exam (8-9:50 AM)**