

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

CTPR 499 Special Topics: Masters of Directorial Style

(2 units)

Fall 2014

Professor: Tom Abrams

Email: tabrams@usc.edu

Section: 18596R

Day/Time: TUES 1 - 4:50PM

Location: SCA 110

Office hours: By Appointment

OVERVIEW:

In this class we will share the experience of viewing and enjoying a number of films by exceptional directors from different eras and with contrasting stylistic approaches. We will study the ways these films have been constructed, what techniques the directors utilized to make them special, and how they can creatively inform the student's own work in the field.

The cinematic components of style consist of cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing and sound. It takes many talented people in these disciplines to make a film, but it is the director who shapes their creative efforts into something unified and effective. Each week we will study how different directors collaborate in these areas to create not just the *look*, but the *style* of the film. "Why was the camera placed here? Why did the actor move there? Why does this shot follow that? How was sound used to impact the drama in a given scene?"

Through questions such as these we will explore how the elements of directorial style communicate emotions, as well as *ideas*, to the viewer. In this way, each film becomes a *text* that will be analyzed for its narrative and sub-textual meaning, and how the grammar of cinema is used by filmmakers to affect an audience.

The directors and films selected represent diverse narrative techniques, story patterns, structures, styles and genres. Since every creative work is a product of its time, each film and filmmaker will also be examined in terms of their social and historical importance, as well as

their place in the development of international cinematic style.

One final purpose of the class will be to demystify the directorial process and help students understand the intentions of the film's creators and the practical choices they made to realize those intentions. By studying the ways other directors solve the very problems students face in their own creative work, they will gain an understanding of how to achieve lasting results themselves.

CLASS REQUIREMENTS and ASSIGNMENTS:

Some films may be screened more than once, and your attendance is mandatory, regardless of how many times you have seen the films before. Class participation is important - I would like us to have a dialogue about the films.

- There will be a **MIDTERM** and a **FINAL EXAM**. The **MIDTERM** will be a series of questions about the films and filmmakers discussed in the class to that point, answered in writing. The **FINAL EXAM** will be a series of questions about the films and filmmakers throughout the *entire* course, answered in writing.
- Students will create a **STYLISTIC ANALYSIS of a SCENE** from a film of their choice (pending instructor approval). This will be a 10-page paper. It should be a combination of storyboard/images with analytical writing discussing a filmmaker's style. It will be DUE the last week of class.

SUGGESTED READING:

- Film Art*, by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson
- The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*, by Michael Ondaatje
- The Elements of Cinema*, by Stefan Scharf
- Signs and Meaning*, by Peter Wollen

COURSE GOALS:

1. To expose students to the work of accomplished directors. By analyzing the creation of effective films we will teach students to understand this work from a professional perspective: not "I liked it" but "Did it work? If so, why and how?"
2. To teach aspiring directors the dynamic creation of style via exploration of cinematography, editing, sound and mise-en-scene.
3. To teach students the history of stylistic development.
4. To help students understand the meaning of a given film and how directorial technique helps communicates that meaning.
5. To study the stylistic elements of genre and how directors use and break genre conventions to make their work fresh and original.

Note: since each film will be demonstrating many of the techniques and patterns mentioned above, the weekly objective will be fluid; there will be constant review and comparison. However, the films have been chosen to explore specific aspects of style and storytelling:

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

(Films are subject to change)

WEEK 1 (8/26)

- *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock, 1934. (Great Britain.) Evocative use of locations mark this taut thriller as Hitchcock masterfully synthesizes mise-en-scene, editing and camera movement.

WEEK 2 (9/2)

- *The Graduate*, Nichols, 1968. (USA). Sets and composition express the loneliness and uncertainty of a directionless generation.

WEEK 3 (9/9)

- *Drive*, Nikolas Winding Refn, 2011. (USA) Stylish visuals, kinetic action coupled with moments of intense silence characterize this neo-noir set on gritty streets of LA.

WEEK 4 (9/16)

- *In The Mood For Love*, Wong Kar Wei, 2000. (Hong Kong) The use of color and composition to express the internal life of characters.

WEEK 5 (9/23)

- *Punch-Drunk Love*, Paul Thomas Anderson, 2005. Signature control of mise-en-scene and camera movement mark this unique postmodern romantic comedy.

WEEK 6 (9/30)

- *Children of Men*, Alfonso Cuarón, 2006. *Strong use of moving master shots create a dynamic visual design in this film about a dystopian future.*

WEEK 7 (10/7)

- *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, Sergio Leone, 1966. (Italy) The King of spaghetti westerns explores greed and combat within the "arena", and the human face as landscape.
- **There will be a MIDTERM EXAM based on the materials discussed in class up to this point.**

WEEK 8 (10/14)

- *Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino, 2003. (France) Influenced by westerns, crime films and HK action movies, Tarantino brings his obsessions to this influential postmodern crime film.

WEEK 9 (10/21)

- *The Piano*, Jane Campion, 1993. (New Zealand) Elegiac camera work in the middle of the wilderness explores the travails of a mute, single mother, and the conflict between civilization and the natural world.

WEEK 10 (10/28)

- *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow, 1987. (USA) A muscular visual stylist in a genre dominated by men, Bigelow became the first woman to win the Academy award for Best Direction.

WEEK 11 (11/4)

- *Celebration*, Thomas Vinterberg, 1998. (Denmark) The original success of the Danish Dogme 95 movement.

WEEK 12 (11/11)

- *Days of Heaven*, Terence Malick, 1978. (USA) Inspired by the lighting of silent films, as well as the works of Johannes Vermeer, Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. Malick's film is an imagistic, painterly masterpiece.

WEEK 13 (11/18)

- *Rushmore*, Wes Anderson, 1998. (USA) Use of wide angles, slow motion photography and nostalgic music express the passion and eccentricity of boyhood.

WEEK 14 (11/25)

- *Raising Arizona*, Cohen Bros, 1987. (USA) A comic tour de force through use of composition and radical camera movement.

WEEK 15 (12/2)

- *Black Narcissus*, Michael Powell, 1956. (Great Britain) Brilliant use of studio sets, sound and photography create an unmatched sensual experience of wild, mountainous Tibet.
- **Stylistic analysis of scene** is DUE.
- There will be a **FINAL EXAM** based on the materials discussed in class.

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

Grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

- Participation.....10%

- Stylistic analysis.....40%
- Midterm.....25%
- Final.....25%

Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class.

You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)

Tardiness is unacceptable. You will be allowed one unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-third letter grade for each three occurrences. PLEASE BE ON TIME.

Laptop policy: Laptops may not be open during screenings.

Cell phone policy: Phones may not be opened during screenings. If you need to text or make a call during class, go outside.

***Note:** Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *Scampus*, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00,

while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at blackboard.usc.edu.

Disruptive Student Behavior

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.