

Eng 5050, Fall 2010

Not Narrative Avant-Garde and Underground Cinemas, 1920–1965

Meets Tuesday (Screening) and Thursday (Seminar), 6pm–9pm
State Hall 325

Instructor: Scott Richmond

scr@wayne.edu

5057 Woodward, #9313

(313) 577-3358

Office Hours: Wednesday, 3pm–5pm, and by appointment

Course Description

What can a film do besides tell a story? At various points in the history of film, groups of artists and filmmakers experimented radically with the cinema, exploring the limits of what it could do. This course traces the history of a series of experiments with the cinema, focusing on Soviet cinema from the postrevolutionary period (Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov), European Avant-Garde cinema after World War I (Marcel Duchamp, Jean Epstein, Luis Buñuel), and early Underground American cinema after World War II (Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Tony Conrad). In addition to tracing this history across countries and contexts, this course will focus on how to watch such frequently challenging cinema, and how to understand it in a cultural, political, and art-historical context. In turn, the course will thus ask questions like: What is an avant-garde? What is the relation between revolutionary aesthetics and revolutionary political projects? Why does this radical cinema come after radical historical upheavals (wars, revolutions)? What is the relation between cinema and art movements? What is the relation between avant-garde and mainstream cinema? And, what can the cinema do beyond telling stories and constructing representations? This is a screening-intensive course; much of the course will consist in close scrutiny of film examples.

Course Objectives

("In this course, students will learn how to x...")

Express yourself. The main goal of this course is to provide students the opportunity and the tools (see below) to develop the viewership skills required for these frequently-challenging films. This is, however, not only a question of the process of film viewing, but also of communicating what you see and how you see it. Thus we will also emphasize how to speak and how to write about such films. And so, we will spend a great deal of time speaking and writing about such films, in a variety of different contexts. Some of this will be informal—class discussion, discussion board posts. Some of this will be formal—your final paper. The main focus, though, will be how to translate an experience of a film—its aesthetic impact—into language: explicit, formal, expressive, poetic, informal, etc.

Be formal. This problem—how to take a visual and experiential object and communicate something about it in language—is known in film studies and art history as *ekphrasis*, which comes from the name of an ancient Greek genre of poetry in which poets used to describe, as virtuosically as possible, visual art (the most famous example is Homer's description of Achilles's shield). One way of cracking that particular nut is *formal description*. Here, this means describing the *form* of the film. The first third of the class is dedicated to techniques and strategies for the formal description of avant-garde film. (Your take-home midterm exam will largely consist of the formal analysis of film clips.)

Think aesthetically. That said, a film isn't *only* its form. One major goal of the course is to learn how to connect a film's form to its aesthetic impact. This means connecting a formal description to your own experience—and leveraging that experience to create, or impart, or share a sense of significance connected to formal concerns. This is hard, and can't be taught quite so explicitly. One of the most difficult aspects of this class—and of aesthetic experience in general—is how to share an impact, a meaning, a significance *that are articulated by artistic (cinematic) form*.

Think historically. Finally, this class tells a story, of sorts. Of the history of avant-garde and underground cinema. This is the horizon in which these films make their impact, gain their significance, innovate their form. It is impossible to understand the aesthetic and formal significance of these films without also understanding their history. At the same time, it's also impossible to understand the importance of these films to contemporary art and cinematic practice without understanding their history—and ours, and how they're part of our inherited moving image culture. (Your midterm paper will largely consist of writing about a film in its historical context.)

Course Requirements

The most basic expectation is attentive and careful viewing of *all* films, and engaged reading of *all* required course texts.

Prerequisite

This is an advanced undergraduate course, with Intro to Film (ENG2450 / COM2010) as a minimum prerequisite. That said, students with a background in art history (but not film) are welcome with my permission.

Presence (and Absence)

Attendance at all classes and screenings is expected. **More than two unexcused absences (at either screenings or class meetings) will adversely affect your participation grade.** If you miss more than one class, for every additional class you miss, your participation grade will be docked one +/- grade. Attendance at one of the first two classes is required to register for the course (as per English Department guidelines). **Habitual tardiness will also negatively impact your grade.** Absences will be considered excused only with advance permission or some form of documentation (e.g. a doctor's note, a tow truck receipt, a mechanics' bill, etc.) More than five unexcused absences (at class meetings or at screenings) will result in a failing grade for the course.

In class: Screenings and Class Meetings

Typically (although not always) our weeks will be organized with screenings on Tuesday evenings, and seminars on Thursday evenings. All meetings will be in State Hall, room 325.

Screenings

Screenings will frequently not run to the full three hours, but will be let out once we are done viewing and discussing the films. Readings, unless otherwise noted, are to be prepared for seminars on Thursday. **If you cannot make a screening, you must make up the film viewing on your own, before class on Thursday.** That said, some of the films we are seeing this semester are rather obscure and difficult to see, and the library might not be able to put them on reserve. Sometimes, screenings are the only place to see required films. It is much, much better to see the films on a larger screen, projected; it is also crucial to participate in the commentary and discussion that will attend screening. Also, I will be introducing many of the films, and we will have brief discussions of films at Thursday night screenings.

Some of the material we will see in this class is difficult or uncomfortable to watch (cruelty to animals, nudity, simulated or actual sex). You will still be responsible for this material. If you have categorical objections to certain kinds of images, you should not take this

course. There is, however, one exception: if you are epileptic, certain films (especially late in the semester) may cause seizures. Please speak to me outside of class if this is a concern for you.

Class Participation

A large portion of your grade will be determined by your in-class participation. Be forewarned, I will be sure to offer you chances to speak up in class if you don't do it on your own (i.e. I will occasionally cold-call on students, especially those who don't speak up on their own).

In-class Presentation

Over the course of the term, each student will be expected to prepare one in-class presentation. This will be about a particular reading as it relates to a film we have screened. These should be fifteen minutes (I will cut you off after 20 minutes). In the second week of the course, we will work out who will present at which particular class; I will also distribute guidelines for these presentations then.

Class Discussion

You learned everything you need to know about this in kindergarten: basic golden rule stuff. Class discussion should always be respectful and considerate. We will be dealing with some challenging, and sometimes disturbing, imagery this semester. Please treat your colleagues, and their opinions, experiences, and even (especially) their ignorance, with the care and respect they deserve. Please also be considerate of the project of learning: before you offer an opinion or (especially) your personal reaction, ask yourself what you would like to teach the class with, about, or by it.

By the same token, please do not IM, text, or surf the web during class. Or at least, keep it to a minimum. It's quite distracting. And it's fantastically disrespectful of your peers.

Coursework

Written work will fall into four categories: (1) A final paper of about 12–15 pages; (2) A midterm papers of about 5–7 pages; (3) A midterm take-home exam; and (4) Weekly discussion board posts. All four must be completed and submitted in a timely manner.

Turning in Work

Papers and exams should be submitted by email to scr@wayne.edu. Work should be in .doc / .docx (Microsoft Word), .rtf (Rich Text Format), or .pdf (Portable Document Format—Adobe Acrobat) format. If you do not know how to produce or convert your work in any of these formats, please see me *before* it comes time to turn in work. The parameters—and due dates—for each assignment will be distributed in class and via Blackboard at least a week before the assignment is due. I will generally return graded work, with written comments, within a week of when you turn it in. I will return work to you no later than 10 days after you turned it in. (NB: if you turn work in late, you will get it back late.)

Generally speaking (for the comfort of my increasingly geriatric eyes), work should be in 12-point font (Times New Roman or equivalent), double-spaced, with 1-inch margins. Be aware, though, that length guidelines will *not* be based on number of pages, but on *word count* (which will be specified when you receive the assignment). That is, playing with margins or fonts won't get you anywhere, one way or the other.

Discussion Board

This semester, we will be using Blackboard's discussion board function. **Each week, you will post at least once to the discussion board.** This can take the form either of a post that starts a new thread, or response in an already-ongoing conversation on the board. Which you write will be up to you. **You are required not only to post on, but keep up with, the discussion board.** Posts must be made **by 4pm on Thursday** (or by 4pm on Tuesday, if we only have one meeting that particular week). This deadline is meant to ensure that I have a chance to track your questions and interests to be able to better prepare for class. I myself will also post (although sparingly) to the board.

This more informal writing is meant to be a place to try things out. Don't worry about making mistakes, doing things wrong, or posting questions rather than answers. Grading for this portion of the course will be quick and heuristic (check, check-plus, check-minus), and is less about quality than effort. Being a good citizen on the discussion board will go a long way. Weekly posting gets you at least a B+ on this portion of your grade (missing posts will get you a lower grade). Written feedback will not be provided. I will inform you of your posting grade when I return each assignment over the course of the semester.

Late Work

In short: work *must* be turned in on time. I am very strict about this. That said, I understand the vagaries of academic life, and life in general. And so, I will almost always grant

an extension of up to 48 hours, so long as you ask for one **at least 48 hours in advance** of when the assignment is due. This is, however, a privilege, not a right.

If work is late without extension or excuse (e.g. doctor's note), for every 24-hour period after the due date, you will lose a +/- grade. E.g. if a paper is due at 6pm, and you turn it in at 7:30, and it is a B+ paper, your grade for that work will be a B. **I will absolutely not accept work that is more than a week late** without a commensurate excuse.

Drafts and Rewrites

I will not review drafts of papers. Except in extraordinary circumstances, you will not have the opportunity to rewrite papers. I encourage students who know they have difficulty with writing to visit the Writing Center, early and often.

Grading

Grades will be assigned by letter (A, B, C, with + and -), and converted to standard 4-point scale (4.0 = A, 3.0 = B, 2.0 = C, 1.0 = D, 0 = F). Weighted averages will then be calculated and submitted to the University. The grading breakdown is as follows:

25% Final paper

25% Class participation (including regular attendance)

(NB: I will notify you of your ongoing participation grade when I return your midterm work.)

15% Midterm Paper

10% Midterm Take-Home Exam

15% Discussion board

10% In-class presentation

Other Housekeeping

Email

I will generally respond to emails within 24 hours. I will always respond to emails within 48 hours. Do not expect or rely on a response before then, especially if it is a time-sensitive manner (e.g. asking for an extension).

The department requests and requires that you use your Wayne State email address. I will do so as well. This is to prevent fraud; apparently, email fraud has occurred recently at the university.

Please write emails in reasonably standard English. Computers have full keyboards, and emails do not have 140-character limits. I may have facial piercings, but I am an old fuddy-duddy. I do not wish to have to work to decipher your emails.

Plagiarism

I do not tolerate plagiarism. There are two types of plagiarism: patchwork (copying a sentence, or a paragraph) and wholesale. For patchwork plagiarism: if I catch you plagiarizing at all in an assignment, you fail that assignment, without possibility of rewriting the assignment. If I catch you plagiarizing a second time, you will fail the course, and I will report you to the administration of the Department and the College.

For wholesale plagiarism (turning in somebody else's work as your own), as well as "patchwork" plagiarism that, in my judgment, is serious enough, you will simply fail the course and be reported.

Be aware that there is a due process for plagiarism cases, as outlined by the department. I sincerely hope that neither I nor you should ever discover what this process is.

Because the stakes are so high, if ever you have a question on whether something constitutes plagiarism, email me to ask. Be sure you know what plagiarism is and is not. Ignorance is not an excuse.

The College's regulations on plagiarism reads: "The principle of honesty is recognized as fundamental to a scholarly community. Students are expected to honor this principle and instructors are expected to take appropriate action when instances of academic dishonesty are discovered. An instructor, on discovering such an instance, may give a failing grade on the assignment or for the course. The instructor has the responsibility of notifying the student of the alleged violation and the action being taken. Both the student and the instructor are entitled to academic due process in all such cases. Acts of dishonesty may lead to suspension or exclusion. Information on procedures is available in the Office of the Dean."

Citation

Generally speaking, if you are citing from course readings on the syllabus, nothing more than a parenthetical with enough information to specify work, and a page number, is required. E.g. "(Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 23)." Other sources (anything not in *Modernist Cinema*, *Visionary Film*, or on the Blackboard site) should be cited in full, following whichever style you prefer (Chicago, MLA, etc.), as long as you are consistent. If you have questions about citation, don't hesitate to ask. Also: don't sweat citation format; as long as I can tell where something came from and can look it up myself, I'm not worried about it, and so you shouldn't be, either.

Withdrawing

You may withdraw from the class. Whether or not you receive a WP (withdrew with a passing grade) or WF (withdrew from a failing grade) will be calculated based on your marks for your submitted work, your participation grade, your presentation, your discussion board posts, etc., with the same relative weighting they would have otherwise.

Incompletes

The University's policy on incompletes is as follows: "The mark of I—Incomplete, is given to either an undergraduate or a graduate student when he/she has not completed all of the course work as planned for the term and when there is, **in the judgment of the instructor, a reasonable probability that the student can complete the course successfully without again attending regular class sessions.** The student should be passing at the time the grade of 'I' is given. A written contract specifying the work to be completed should be signed by the student and instructor. Responsibility for completing all course work rests with the student" (2009-2011 WSU Undergraduate Bulletin, 40; emphasis added). **I recommend strongly against taking incompletes**—I know this from experience.

Writing Center Information (from the Department)

The Writing Center (2nd floor, UGL) provides individual tutoring consultations free of charge for students at Wayne State University. Undergraduate students in General Education courses, including composition courses, receive priority for tutoring appointments. The Writing Center serves as a resource for writers, providing tutoring sessions on the range of activities in the writing process – considering the audience, analyzing the assignment or genre, brainstorming, researching, writing drafts, revising, editing, and preparing documentation. The Writing Center is *not* an editing or proofreading service; rather, students are guided as they engage collaboratively in the process of academic writing, from developing an idea to editing for grammar and mechanics. To make an appointment, consult the Writing Center website: <http://www.clas.wayne.edu/writing/>

To submit material for online tutoring, consult the Writing Center HOOT website (Hypertext One-on-One Tutoring):

<http://www.clas.wayne.edu/unit-inner.asp?WebPageID=1330>.

Instructors may require individual students to attend the Writing Center to receive tutoring on a specific assignment, skill, or aspect of the writing process. Instructors may also require individual students to attend the Writing Center to receive instruction in grammar and mechanics. Instructors may *not* require entire classes to attend the Writing Center. For more information about the Writing Center, please contact the Director, Jule Wallis (phone: 7-2544; email: au1145@wayne.edu).

For Students with Disabilities (from the Department)

If you feel that you may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, please feel free to contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. Additionally, the Student Disabilities Services Office coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. The Office is located in 1600 David Adamany Undergraduate Library, phone: 313-577-1851/577-3365 (TTY). <http://studentdisability.wayne.edu>

Course Readings and Screenings

Required texts (available from Marwill Bookstore, on Warren Avenue):

Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema, ed. Ted Perry

Visionary Film, by P. Adams Sitney.

Unless otherwise noted, readings not from *Modernist Cinema* or *Visionary Film* can be downloaded from the Blackboard website, in PDF format. Please let me know ASAP if there are any problems with any of the readings (downloading, opening, viewing, etc.).

On reading load: I have, in a number of cases, assigned what is very probably too much reading. This is intentional. As we go through the course, and as we develop a shared vocabulary and a shared set of interests, we will set reading priorities (hopefully together; sometimes I may be somewhat dictatorial).

If you are working on a particular film for a paper (midterm or final), you will be responsible for all of the reading on the syllabus related to that film—including low-priority and explicitly recommended reading.

Generally speaking, we will have screenings on Tuesday evenings, and seminars on Thursday evenings. Readings are to be prepared for seminars on Thursdays (although I will sometimes draw your attention to readings that will be helpful to prepare before screenings).

NB: On three occasions, we will only have one meeting in a week. The first of these is the first class. In the other two instances (10/28, 11/23), we will be meeting for the full three hours on Tuesday, combining both screening and seminar.

On screenings: In screenings where we will be seeing a few longer (feature) films, I have listed them, their directors, and their runtimes on the syllabus. However, a number of weeks, we will be seeing programs of shorts. I have not listed all these films here. I will provide you with a program list and program notes in the week before the screening.

Please do be aware that the screenings do not have a regular runtime. Some weeks, screenings will take up all, or almost all, of the allotted three hours. Other weeks, screenings will be much shorter. That said, the runtimes listed on the syllabus are only a very rough guide to how long we will be meeting. I will typically introduce films. And frequently, I will want to conduct relatively informal discussions of the films in that class meeting.

Finally, this bears repeating: you are required to see *all* the films this semester. If you miss screenings, you will be required to make up the viewing—and some films will *not* be available outside of screenings.

The Course

Week 1: Sept. 2: Introduction
Introductions, course overview, etc.

Unit 1: Origins: The 1920s

Week 2: Sept. 7 & 9: The Soviets, part 1: Eisenstein and the Concept of Attraction
SCREENING: *Strike*, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925, 82 min.; short program of early cinema attractions.

Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator."

Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde."

Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions" and "The Montage of Film Attractions," from *The Eisenstein Reader*.

Tom Gunning, "The Birth of Film Out of the Spirit of Modernity," from *Modernist Cinema*.
Recommended: Jane Gaines, "Political Mimesis," in *Collecting Visible Evidence* (available on books.google.com).

Week 3: Sept 14 & 16: The Soviets, part 2: Vertov and Futurist Perception

SCREENING: *Man With a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov, 1926, 68 min.

Dziga Vertov, from *Kino-Eye*.

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, 2nd Version," from *Selected Works*, vol 3.

Recommended: Yuri Tsivian, "Man With a Movie Camera—Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties," from *Modernist Cinema*.

Recommended: Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered."

Week 4: Sept 21 & 23: Expressionism, *Mise-en-scène*, and the Art Film

SCREENING: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Robert Weine, 1920, 71 min.; *Salomé*, Charles Bryant, 1923, 72 min.

Anton Kaes, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Expressionism and Cinema," from *Modernist Cinema*.

Folio of historical reviews of *Salomé*.

Recommended: Patricia White, "Nazimova's Veils: *Salomé* at the Intersection of Film Histories," from *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*.

Week 5: Sept 28 & 30: *Photogénie* and Impressionism

SCREENING: *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Jean Epstein, 1928, 63 min.; *Rain*, Joris Ivens, 1929, 12 min.

Selections of short theoretical texts by Epstein, Aragon, Dulac, Delluc, etc. from Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*.

ASSIGNMENT DUE Oct 5: Midterm take-home exam. Due by email **before** 6pm.

Unit 2: From Dada to Surrealism

Week 6: Oct 5 & 7: Dada and Agonism

SCREENING: Program of Dada(ish) films by René Clair, Ferdinand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling (*Entr'acte*, *Ballet Mécanique*, *Anémic Cinéma*, etc.)

Renato Poggioli, "The Concept of a Movement" and "Agonism and Futurism," from *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

Ted Perry, "Entr'acte: Dada as Real Illusion," from *Modernist Cinema*.

Rosalind Krauss, "Where's Poppa?"

Week 7: Oct 12 & 14: "Existence is elsewhere": Surrealist Film

SCREENING: *Un Chien Andalou*, Luis Bunñuel & Salvador Dalí, 1929, 16 min.; *Blood of a Poet*, Jean Cocteau, 1930, 55 min.; *L'Age d'Or*, Luis Buñuel, 1930, 60 min.

André Breton, Surrealist Manifesto.

Paul Hammond, "Available Light," from *The Shadow and its Shadow*.

Dudley Andrew, "L'Age d'Or and the Eroticism of Spirit," from *Modernist Cinema*.

Recommended: Hal Foster, from *Compulsive Beauty*.

Week 8: Oct 19 & 21: Joseph Cornell and the POOL Group: Surrealism off the Continent

SCREENING: *Rose Hobart*, Joseph Cornell, 1936, 19 min.; Joseph Cornell shorts; *Borderline*, Kenneth MacPherson, 1930, 76 min.

P. Adams Sitney, "The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell."

Anne Friedberg, Introduction, and "The Contribution of H.D." and "Borderline and the POOL Films," from *Close-Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*.

Unit 3: The American Avant-Garde

Week 9: Oct 28 (no class Oct 30): The American Avant-Garde: Watson & Webber

SCREENING: *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Watson & Webber, 1928, 13 min.; *Lot in Sodom*, Watson & Webber, 1933, 28 min.

Jan-Christopher Horak, Introduction, chapters 1 & 7, from *Lovers of Cinema*.

ASSIGNMENT DUE Nov 2: Midterm paper. Due by email **before** 6pm.

Week 10: Nov 2 & 4: Middlebrow Modernism, or the *Hollywood Hallucination*

SCREENING: *The Gang's All Here*, Busby Berkeley, 1943, 103 min.

Parker Tyler, "The Play Is Not The Thing" and "The Somnambulists," from *The Hollywood Hallucination*.

Parker Tyler, selection of short film reviews from *View*.

Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," from *The Mass Ornament*

Week 11: Nov 9 & 11: Deren and Anger: Film and/as Personal Expression
SCREENING: Program of Deren and Anger short films, including *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Deren, 1943) and *Fireworks* (Anger, 1947).

P. Adams Sitney, "Meshes of the Afternoon," "Ritual and Nature," and "The Magus," from *Visionary Film*.

John Pruitt, "*Meshes of the Afternoon: A Model of Visual Thinking*," from *Modernist Cinema*.

Unit 4: New York Underground Cinema and the Neo-Avant-Garde

Week 12: Nov 16 & 18: Film as Surface: Graphic Cinema

SCREENING: Program of short films by Len Lye, Harry Smith, Robert Breer, Norman McClaren, and Peter Kubelka.

P. Adams Sitney, "Absolute Animation" and "The Graphic Cinema: European Perspectives," from *Visionary Film*.

Robert Breer, "But First a Little Ru-Ru" (interview).

Recommended: Andrew Johnston on Len Lye.

ASSIGNMENT DUE Nov 23: Final paper proposal. Due by email **before** 6pm.

Week 13: Nov 23 (no class Nov 25): Personal Expression as Surface: Jack Smith

SCREENING: *Flaming Creatures*, Jack Smith, 1963 45 min.

Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," "On Style," and "Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures," from *Against Interpretation*.

Branden Joseph, "Primitives and Flaming Creatures," from *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*.

Recommended: P. Adams Sitney, "Recovered Innocence," from *Visionary Film*.

Week 14: Nov 30 & Dec 2: Surface as Surface: Andy Warhol

SCREENING: Program of Andy Warhol shorts, including *Blow Job*, *Kiss*, and selected Screen Tests.

Branden Joseph, "Andy Warhol's *Sleep: The Play of Repetition*," from *Modernist Cinema*.

Roy Grundmann, selections from *Andy Warhol's Blow Job*.

Week 15: Dec 7 & 9: Structural Film

SCREENING: *The Flicker*, Tony Conrad, 1965, 30 min.; *Wavelength*, Michael Snow, 1967, 45 min.; *Serene Velocity*, Ernie Gehr, 1970, 11 min.; and Paul Sharits shorts.

P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," from *Visionary Film*.

Branden Joseph, "The Flicker," from *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*.

ASSIGNMENT DUE Dec 16: Final paper. Due by email **before** 6pm.