

Philosophy and Film

It is hard today to imagine life without movies. The medium of film, although little more than a century old, outpaces virtually all other artistic and communicative media in its powers to mold our beliefs, desires, fears, and even our identities in accordance with its images and narratives—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. To this extent film invites philosophical reflection in two broad ways that will structure the discussions, readings, and screenings of this course.

First, films can—like literature, painting, music and other art forms—serve as a vehicle for philosophical ideas of independent interest. These include, for example, ideas about such perennial philosophical subjects as reality and appearance, good and evil, and knowledge and skepticism. But, second, the experience of moviegoing—especially when one becomes acquainted with a variety of films, styles of cinematic narratives, and directors—also has a way of reflecting back upon itself and prodding us to ask what film *is* in a deeper ontological sense, (and along the way, what art in general is). For example, is film basically a passive *mirror* of a pre-existing reality? Or does it actively provide an alternative reality of its own through its own distinctive techniques and formal procedures? These last questions are particularly pertinent to an understanding of cinematic modernism and the avant-garde, along with critical perspectives on these phenomena that have emerged in the climate of postmodernism. This course will address all of these subjects to a greater or lesser extent.

Since this is an upper level course, it is assumed that anyone taking it for credit will have had at least one prior course in philosophy or comparable experience in the critical analysis of theoretical texts and in critical argumentative writing. Anyone who does not meet this condition but wishes to take the course should speak with me before enrolling.

There will be screenings of many of the films we will discuss on Mondays in Humanities 1064 at 4:30 (specific dates TBA). Attendance at these screenings is technically optional, but **strongly** encouraged. In any case, everyone taking the class for credit is required to see all of these films in time for class discussions. For those who cannot attend the screenings, most of the films will also be placed on reserve and be available for viewing, at the appropriate points in the semester, in the Center for Instructional Resources (CIR) in the library.

Required texts (Available in Purchase College Bookstore)

1. Robert Kolker., *Film, Form and Culture*
2. Plato, *The Republic*
4. Additional required readings will be distributed in xeroxed packets, available for a small charge in the Humanities Office (HUM 2020, second floor). Some of these readings will also be available on E-Res at the Library website. Details TBA.

Course Requirements and Grading Policy

Written work (required of all students taking the course for credit) will consist of (i) three short papers (3 or more full double spaced pages) on assigned questions, (ii) an in-class midterm exam; (iii) an in-class final exam; and (iv) a final longer paper (six or more pages) due at the end of the course on a topic chosen by you and approved by me.

Schedule of Readings and Discussions

All readings listed below are required unless indicated otherwise. I may need to alter dates of some readings and/or screenings, and I may reschedule some screenings for a nighttime slot to accommodate a larger audience. Of the many books, articles, websites, etc. which you may find useful as background resources for this course, I particularly recommend: (i) Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 4th Edition (contains classic readings in film theory from a variety of authors) ; and (ii) John Hill and Patricia Church Gibson, eds., *The Oxford Guide*

to *Film Studies* (A recent collection of introductory articles by noted film scholars on a spectrum of topics in film studies, including the history of cinema, film and gender studies, the international cinema, film genres, etc.) Both of the preceding volumes will be on reserve for the course. A good internet source of film-related links can be found at <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/phillips-film/> (established in conjunction with another excellent general film aesthetics text, William H. Phillips, *Film: An Introduction* (Bedford, 1999) Further philosophical discussion of films can be found at <http://www.film-philosophy.com/>. Anyone wishing to purchase or rent films of just about any description should check out Facets Video, a great mail-order house: their web address is www.facets.org and their phone number is 1-800-331-5197. Also a promising new venue for art films is opening this June in Westchester County: the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, at (914) 747-5555 or www.burnsfilmcenter.org.

August

27 Introduction. Why philosophize about films? First short paper assigned (on Shymalan's *Signs* and excerpt from Mark Edmundson on Gothic horror and religion in America)

I. Film and Reality

29 Kolker, *Film, Form, and Culture*, chapter 1 ("Image and Reality")

Short paper on *Signs* due in class Sept. 5

September

3 "Image and Reality" (cont.)

5 in-class screening of short early films by the Lumiere Brothers and George Melies

10 Jean Baudrillard, "The Evil Demon of Images" (xerox packet) Recommended: "Simone" (in theaters now)

12 Plato, *The Republic*. In the Penguin edition, read first the section of the translator's introduction titled "the main ideas of the Republic", focusing on the section under the subtitle "education". Then read the Allegory of the Cave (part seven, book six,)

Monday Sept. 16 Screening: Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times" (Humanities room 1064, 4:30. All Monday screenings will be at this time and place unless indicated otherwise)

17 Christopher Falzon, "Plato's Picture Show—The Theory of Knowledge" (from *Philosophy Goes to the Movies*; packet)

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Our Ultimate Gratitude to Art" (excerpt from *The Gay Science*; packet);

24 Kolker, chapter 2 ("Formal Structures: How films Tell Their Stories")

September (cont.)

26 "Realist" vs. "formalist" theories of cinema. Siegfried Kracauer, "Basic Concepts" (first xerox packet); Rudolph Arnheim, "The Complete Film" and "Film and Reality" (first xerox packet). Discussion of Lumiere, Melies, and Chaplin films.

October

1 Same readings as 9/26. Midterm study questions and midterm paper topic distributed.

II. Modern Problems through Film: Technology, Knowledge, Gender, Desire, Alienation

3 Christopher Falzon, "Modern Times: Science, Society and Technology" (packet)
Screening: Frank Capra's "It Happened One Night"

8, 10 Kolker, chapter 4 ("Film as Cultural Practice"); Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (in xerox packet)

15 In-class midterm on material covered so far.

17 Romance, Comedy, and Gender. Discussion of *It Happened One Night*. Readings: (1) Stanley Cavell, "The Thought of Movies" (excerpt); (2) excerpt from essay on *It Happened One Night* (from Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*)

Midterm paper on *It Happened One Night* due by end of day in my office on Monday, October 21

Screening : Andrei Tarkovsky's "Stalker" (Date and Time TBA. This, by the way, isn't a slasher-type film!)

22 Naomi Scheman, "Missing Mothers, Desiring Daughters: framing the Sight of Women" (all in packet) Recommended: The rest of Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* , along with the other films discussed in the book (*The Lady Eve, Bringing Up Baby, The Philadelphia Story, His Girl Friday, Adam's Rib, The Awful Truth*), several of which are in the Library's collection.

24 Gender and horror. Cynthia Freeland, "Women and Bugs" (from *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*) Recommended: the "Alien" films (or *The Fly*, or *Mimic*, or any other film where women battle disgusting insect-like monsters)

29 Discussion of "Stalker" and Tarkovsky's aesthetics. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (excerpts); excerpts from Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (on the "paradox of the sublime", p. 202-3) and *The Fragile Absolute* (pp. 40-1) . Recommended: screenplay for "Stalker" (reserve). Also, Tarkovsky's sixties Soviet sci-fi masterpiece, "Solaris" (whose remake by Steven Soderbergh, is scheduled for release in November 2002). See the excellent Tarkovsky website at <http://www.hal-pc.org/~questers/TARKOVSKY.html> (This site has links to other sites on Godard, Bunuel, Kurosawa, Bergman, Paradzhanov, Bresson, Pasolini, Sokurov).

31 no class; work on short paper

November

Screening: Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" (Date and Time TBA)

5 no class; election day

III. Modernism and Reflexivity

7, 12 Harvey Cormier, "2001: Modern Art, and Modern Philosophy"(packet) Recommended: Murray Smith, "Modernism and the avant-gardes" (on reserve in library, in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*).

Short paper (on either "Stalker," "2001", or "The Seventh Seal") due by the end of the day on Wednesday, Nov. 27

Screening : Ingmar Bergman's "The Seventh Seal" (Date and Time TBA)

November (cont.)

14 In-class discussion of “The Seventh Seal.” Other readings on Bergman TBA. Recommended: the Bergman website at <http://www.hal-pc.org/~questers/bergman.html>.

Screening: Ingmar Bergman’s “Persona” (Date and Time TBA. I recommend that you see “Persona” at least twice)

19, 21 Discussion of “Persona”. G.W.F. Hegel, excerpt from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (on the master-slave dialectic)

IV. Morality, History, and Film

Monday November 25 Screening: Roberto Benigni’s “Life Is Beautiful”

26 In-class screening: Alain Resnais’ “Night and Fog” .

28 no class; Thanksgiving recess

December

3 Casey Haskins, “Art, Morality, and the Holocaust: The Aesthetic Riddle of Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful*.” (reserve).

5 Wrap-up discussion.

Final exam Thursday 12/12, 9-11:30 a.m. (same room)

Final papers due by end of the day on Monday, December 16. No extensions.