Western
Arts&Humanities

Film 2230F: Critical Reading and Writing for Film

Instructor: Tanja Grubnic
Office Hours: Wed. 4:45-5:45 p.m. UC1421 | Fri. 10:00-11:00 a.m. via Zoom
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Prerequisite(s): At least 60% in Film Studies 1020E or Film Studies 1022 or permission of the Department.

Course Description:

This writing- *and* reading-intensive course prepares students to be better writers and readers while also asking students to reflect on the function of criticism itself. We will look at film criticism's relationship to different institutions that have shaped the landscape of film criticism over time, including its emergence out of print journalism; its professionalization within the university post-World War II; and, more recently, its alleged democratization through Big Tech. This class examines the ways in which film criticism is shifting in the internet age, discussing platforms like YouTube and Spotify that prioritize audio-visual content, and rating platforms like Rotten Tomatoes that blur the lines between fan and critic; amateur and professional; hobby and vocation. Students will not only explore and gain proficiency in the different types of critical reading and writing for film, but ultimately consider the role of the critic throughout different eras of cinema.

The chosen films for this course allow us to discuss the function of criticism. Some films may include violence, nudity, harmful stereotypes, profanity, etc. Please remember that we are approaching these films as *critics*, not as passive consumers. If you are sensitive to any of these themes or have specific concerns, please email the course instructor for time stamps or accommodations. All films are accessible via OWL unless otherwise noted. Please watch the films *before* class.

Objectives:

This course builds on skills and knowledge acquired in Film 1022 to engage students in the critical practices involved in reading various genres of writing in Film Studies. Students will complete a variety of writing assignments as well as learn research skills that prepare them for writing critical essays.

The dual objectives of this course include 1) establishing writing, reading, and argumentative skills needed to participate in film forums and 2) thinking about the cultural evolution of those forums (and participation in them) over time.

Information on this syllabus might be subject to change. Version: 23 Sep. 2024
Course Materials:

The Canadian Writers' Handbook by William E. Messenger et al.

The Craft of Research by Wayne C. Booth

Readings uploaded to OWL and links posted on syllabus

Grading Scheme and Assessment Dates:

Film Review: 15% (Due Oct. 11th)
Film Scene Reading Writing Assignment: 15% (Due Nov 1st)
Video Essay: 20% (Due Nov. 22nd)
Final Research Paper: 35% (Due: Dec. 6th)
Attendance/Participation: 15%

Assignments are due on the date specified, uploaded through the relevant "Assignments" link on OWL. Unless you have been granted an extension, late assignments will be penalized 3% per day. You must email me regarding an extension ahead of the due date.

Week One: "What does it mean to be a critic?"

- Welcomes, syllabus breakdown, course objectives, what makes a good reader/writer/critic

Week Two: "Does anyone read anymore?"

- Film: *Eighth Grade* (2018)
- Reading: Selection (pp. 1-13) from "How We Read" by N. Katherine Hayles (uploaded to OWL); and "Print, Space and Closure" by Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (uploaded to OWL); and "ChatGPT is a Blurry JPEG of the Web" by Ted Chiang (https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/chatgpt-is-a-blurry-jpeg-of-the-web)
- Review: "Bo Burnham's *Eight Grade* Reviewed: A Teen Coming-of-Age Story Plagued by Niceness" (https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/bo-burnhams-eighth-grade-reviewed-a-teen-coming-of-age-story-plagued-by-niceness).

Writing Topic: Words Classes Review
- *CWH*: Chapters 6-8, 12, and 13; Corrigan Chapter 1 pp. 1-16

Week Three: "Does criticism ruin art?"

- Film: *Dead Poets Society* (1989)
- Review: "Dead Poets Society" by Roger Ebert (https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dead-poets-society-1989)
- Reading: "Against Interpretation" by Susan Sontag (uploaded to OWL)

- Writing Topic: Punctuation and Common Sentence Problems

- *CWH* Ch. 5 pp. 54-63 and Ch. 15 pp. 154-162

Week Four: "'It's just a movie…'"

- Film: *Rear Window* (1954)
- Review: "A Point of View" by Bosley Crowther (uploaded to OWL); and "'Rear Window' Is Hitchcock's Masterpiece" (https://insessionfilm.com/classic-review-rear-window-is-hitchcocks-masterpiece/)
- Reading: "Hitchcock's Rear Window: Reflexivity and the Critique of Voyeurism," by Robert Stam and Roberta Pearson (uploaded to OWL)

Writing Topic: Formal Analysis

- *Writing About Movies* Chapter 3 pp. 35-54 (Uploaded to OWL)

Week Five: "The Rise of serious criticism"

⇒ **Film review due.**

- Film: *Citizen Kane* (1941)
- Reading: "The Film Critic of Tomorrow" by Rudolf Arnheim pp. 90-95 (Uploaded to OWL); Selections from *Citizen Kane: A Filmmaker's Journey* by Harlan Lebo Chapter 13-14 pp. 232-248

- *How* to Write for Film
  - Corrigan Chapter 4 pp. 86-100 (option to read sample essay at end) (uploaded to OWL)

Reading Week:

- No class

Week Six: "Eras in Flux"

- Film: *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)
- Readings: "The Film Critic of Tomorrow, Today" pp. 528-537 (Uploaded to OWL); and Reading: "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film" pp. 109-113 (Uploaded to OWL)
- Video Essays: "Sunset Boulevard Explained: The Hollywood Nightmare" by *The Take* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gbknao5D-U)
- Optional Video Essay: "Parasite vs. Sunset Boulevard" by *Lessons from the Screenplay* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NXt0I8Z3do&t=626s)
- Writing Topic: Engaging with Others & Developing Your Position
  - *Craft of Research* Chapter 4 pp. 74-82
  - *Writing About Movies* Chapter 7 pp. 137-145 (Uploaded to OWL)

Week Seven: "How to research"

⇒ **Writing Assignment Due.**

- Library visit. No screening.

- Writing Topic: Choosing a Topic; Finding and Evaluating Sources
    - Selections from *The Craft of Research*: Chapter 3 pp. 53-71

Week 8: "Meta-Critique"

- Film: *Get Out* (2017)
- Reading: "After Peele: *Get Out*'s Influence on the Horror Genre and Beyond" pp. 254-276 (Uploaded to OWL); "What if You're Not a Horror Film Fan, But It's Your Job to Watch?" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/movies/2024/08/02/horror-films-not-fan/)

- Optional Video Essay: "Get Out: A New Perspective in Horror" by *Lessons from the Screenplay* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJLHsXw-LFI)
- Optional Review: "'Get Out': Jordan Peele's Radical Cinematic Vision of the World Through a Black Man's Eyes" (https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/get-out-jordan-peeles-radical-cinematic-vision-of-the-world-through-black-eyes)

- Writing Topic: Genre Criticism
    - *Writing About Movies* pp. 77-100 (Uploaded to OWL)

Week 9: "Fan vs. Critic"

- Film: *Jennifer's Body* (2009)
- Video Essay: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7Twg8rG2HI
- Readings: "Bad Movies" by J. Hoberman pp. 517-528 (Uploaded to OWL); "How Jennifer's Body Went From a Flop in 2009 to a Feminist Classic Today" (https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/10/31/18037996/jennifers-body-flop-cult-classic-feminist-horror).

- Writing Topic: Making Good Arguments
    - *The Craft of Research*: Chapter 5 pp. 101-112

Week 10: "Algorithmic Taste-Makers"

⇒ **Video essay due.**

- Film: *Her* (2013)
- Reading: "Algorithms and Taste-Making: Exposing the Netflix Recommender System's Operational Logics" by Niko Pajkovic (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13548565211014464) pp. 214-235 and "Rotten Tomatoes, Explained" by Alissa Wilkinson (https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-score-get-their-ratings-top-critics-certified-fresh-aggregate-mean)

- Optional Review: "Her" by Glenn Kelly (https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/her-2013)

- Writing Topic: Refining Personal Style
    - CWH: Ch. 4 pp. 48-54; 14 pp. 131-152

Week 11: "Essay workshop"

- No screening
- Essay-writing workshop (bring materials)

- Writing Topic: Essay Structure and Academic Tone
    - Craft of Research Chapter 14 pp. 235-250
    - CWH: Chapter 2 pp. 23-32

Week 12: "Can anyone be a critic?"

- Film: *Vengeance* (2022)
- Reading: "When Everyone's a Critic: How U.S. Arts and Culture Critics Strategize to Maintain Their Cultural Authority" pp. 245-260 (Uploaded to OWL)
- Reviews: Choose your own adventure! Watch a film review on YouTube, listen to a podcast on Spotify, or read essays on Substack and be prepared to talk about it in class. It doesn't have to be about *Vengeance*.

Screenings:

You are supposed to watch films before class, even if the films can be accessed in an asynchronous manner. The films can be screened through Kanopy, Criterion on Demand, Audio Ciné Films or McIntyre Media/other platforms. The first three platforms can be accessed through the Weldon library catalogue (https://www.lib.uwo.ca/ > Research Tools > databases). Links for films available through McIntyre Media/other platforms will be posted to the class individually on OWL, the UWO online learning platform.

Brightspace:

Students are responsible for checking the course OWL site (https://westernu.brightspace.com/) regularly for news and updates. This is the primary method by which information will be disseminated to all students in the class.

All course material will be posted to OWL Brightspace: https://westernu.brightspace.com/. If students need assistance with OWL Brightspace, they can seek support on the OWL Brightspace Help page. Alternatively, they can contact the Western Technology Services Helpdesk online or by phone at 519-661-3800 or ext. 83800 for technical support. Current versions of all popular browsers (e.g., Safari, Chrome, Edge, Firefox) are supported with OWL Brightspace; what is most important is that you update your browser frequently to ensure it is current. All JavaScript and cookies should be enabled.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

Assignments must reflect the students' own thoughts and independent written work. In this course, students are permitted to use AI tools exclusively for information gathering (i.e. as a search engine). Students are not permitted to use AI-generated writing in their work under any circumstances. If unethical AI use is suspected, the instructor will ask for research notes, rough drafts, essay outlines, and other materials used in preparing assignments. Students must uphold academic integrity by appropriately attributing all sources and avoiding plagiarism.

Accommodation Policies:

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities.

Accommodation for Students on Medical Grounds:

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth (either alone or in combination) 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The Student Medical Certificate (SMC) can be found at https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf. The full policy is set out here: https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf.

Religious Accommodation:

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the Western Multicultural Calendar.

General information about missed coursework:

Students must familiarize themselves with the *University Policy on Academic Consideration – Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs* posted on the Academic Calendar: https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academicpolicies/appeals/academicconsiderationSep24.pdf

This policy does not apply to requests for academic consideration submitted for **attempted or completed work**, whether online or in person. The policy also does not apply to students experiencing longer-term impacts on their academic responsibilities. These students should consult: Accessible Education.

For procedures on how to submit Academic Consideration requests, please see the information posted on the Office of the Registrar's webpage:
https://registrar.uwo.ca/academics/academicconsiderations/
All requests for Academic Consideration must be made within 48 hours after the assessment date or submission deadline.

All academic consideration requests must include supporting documentation.

Academic Offences:

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf.

Plagiarism:

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.

Plagiarism Checking:

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com http://www.turnitin.com.
All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven

cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Subsequent offences will result in failure for the course.

Mental Health Support:

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (https://uwo.ca/health/) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Gender-Based and Sexual Violence:

Western University is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: https://www.uwo.ca/health/studentsupport/survivorsupport/get-help.html. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.

Support Services:

Registrarial Services http://www.registrar.uwo.ca
Student Support Services https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login
Services provided by the USC http://westernusc.ca/services/
Academic Support & Engagement http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/
Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western: http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/ for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Grading Criteria:

A+ (90-100)

Argument: Clear development of a specific, challenging and original thesis. The writer has taken significant risks successfully; in the resulting piece, distinctive ideas and content have discovered their necessary distinctive form. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response. Ability not only to expound subject but to see it around– subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc. **Presentation, structure:** Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. Almost no typographical errors.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses). Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, and few errors.

Research/scholarship: Evidence of effective, extensive and independent research, with proper documentation of sources. Quotations used appropriately and purposively.

A(80to89)

Argument: The writer has taken risks and most of them succeed. Clear development of a specific and challenging thesis, with proper paragraphs. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response. Ability not only to expound subject but to see it around–subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc.

Presentation, structure: Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. Almost no typographical errors.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses). Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, and few errors

Research/scholarship: Evidence of effective and independent research, with proper documentation of sources. Quotations used appropriately and purposively.

B(70to79)

Argument: Clear development of a specific thesis, with proper paragraphs. Adequately detailed reference to texts. Ability to expound reasonably sophisticated ideas with clarity.

Presentation/structure: Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. A few typographical errors.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, with reasonable range of sentence types and full range of punctuation. Style not too wordy, with errors relatively few and minor.

Research Scholarship: Evidence of adequate research, with proper documentation of sources.

C(60to69)

Argument: Reasonably clear development of a thesis, with proper paragraphs. Basic ability to expound ideas, whose development might be rather thin. Effort to support points with references to the text. Tendency to replace analysis with descriptive retelling of plot.

Presentation/structure: Presentation showing lapses in tidiness and/or proofreading. Poor use of paragraphs.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, but perhaps overly simple, with tendency to avoid punctuation besides period and comma. Errors relatively few, but occasionally serious, with evident misunderstanding of some point of elementary grammar (comma splices, fragments, semicolon errors, subject-verb disagreements, poorly integrated quotations)

Research/Scholarship: reasonable effort at documentation, but rather thin.

D(50to59)

Argument: Difficulty with paragraphing or consecutive thought. Ideas inchoate but clouded by weak expression. Overgeneralization with inadequate support, or examples that run to lengthy paraphrase, with little or no analysis.

Presentation/Structure: Very poor to non-existent use of paragraphs. Inadequate and inaccurate documentation. Multiple typographical errors.

Language Skills: Errors of grammar or diction frequent enough to interfere with understanding.

Research/Scholarship: Little serious effort to research the topic.

F (49 and down)

Argument: Ideas too simple for level of course. Argument completely incoherent. Erroneous content showing little or no understanding of subject.

Presentation/Structure: Very sloppy proof-reading. Documentation virtually non-existent.

Language Skills: writing frequently ungrammatical.

Research/Scholarship: Non-existent. Content largely "borrowed" from sources with no individual distillation, but no apparent attempt to deceive.

0 (Report to Department)

Plagiarism with intent to deceive