

Philosophy of Film

Geoffrey Hall

Spring, 2021

E-mail: ghall14@nd.edu
Office Hours: & By appointment
Office:

Web:
Class Hours:
Class Room:

Course Description

This course is about film: the philosophy of film, the aesthetics of film and our perceptual experience of film. Let's start with how each of these facets of theorizing about film differ. The philosophy of film is primarily concerned with *philosophical questions about film*: Is filmmaking a distinctive art form? Or is it merely a recording of various different kinds of art forms, such as acting, set designing, music making, and so on. If it is a distinctive art form, what is distinctive about it? We'll look at the classical debates between formalists and realists: the formalists locate the art of film in the *form* of the film: it's use of shot angles, editing and camera movement to convey ideas. The realist locates the art in film in its ability to depict the world in its true nature: the more realistic, the better. Further philosophical questions we'll ask: is there such a thing as a "cinematic language?" Do films have an author? Relatedly, how should we evaluate the success or failure of a film?

The aesthetics of film is part of the philosophy of film, but pays closer attention to the specific ways in which ideas are conveyed through film, the aesthetic qualities exemplified by films, and the aesthetic experiences we have in reaction to films. Doing aesthetics of film is important to doing the philosophy of film more broadly: in order to understand the claims the formalists makes about film, that the art of film consists in its form, we need to first understand what the "form" of a film is supposed to be. To do that we need to understand the technical devices by which films convey ideas. There is a further, ethical dimension to the aesthetics of film. Like many art forms, the aesthetics of film has often been explicitly tied to ethical questions concerning the ideas conveyed in the film. Particularly salient here are ethical questions about the genesis of film as primarily a means for propaganda and pornography, and its continued use for those means.

Finally, as noted above, to deal with the aesthetics of film we need to deal with our experiences of film. Films cause all sorts of perceptual experiences: sadness, anger, fear, hope, and in some rare cases, something approaching religious type experiences (experiences of the divine). We'll ask a variety of questions about the role of experience and attention in aesthetics. Some of these

questions will be straightforwardly questions of the philosophy of experience such as “What are emotions?” and “Do emotions represent the world to be a certain way?” Others will be slightly harder to pin down: to what extent can films “convey” an experience? How should we understand the contents of experiences of films? We’ll then tie these to questions about what it means for certain parts of the form of a film to *express* an emotion: What role does editing, set design, music choice or plot play in determining whether a film is sad, hopeful, or frightening? We will also pay particular attention to the paradox of horror as it arises in the philosophy of film: Why do we seek out films that cause in us *negative* emotions? And should we do that?

Course Requirements

Several readings will come from the following two texts:

- Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*
- Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*

Your grade will be determined by the following assignments:

Film Responses (20 %) You are required to watch a total of six films throughout the semester from the film list (I will provide more information about this). I will show parts of these films in class, and for some of them, we will do public screenings. For the six films you watch, you should submit a one to two page response highlighting some of the ways in which the philosophical concepts or ideas have been illustrated or instanced.

Discussion Forum There will be an online forum for this class in which we will record our thoughts or questions on the films and readings from the course. You are required to make one contribution a week to this forum. This could be in the form of a question, a briefly argued for point, or a response to a question. It could also just be an observation that you find interesting that may spark discussion.

Final Paper There will be a final, ten page, philosophical paper defending one of the positions advocated for the course. If you prefer to defend a novel position, this is permitted but you will need pre-approval from me on the idea.

Reading Schedule

Topic	Readings	Films
What is Film? The Nature and Origins of Cinema	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carroll, <i>The Philosophy of Motion Pictures</i>, Ch. 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 frames (2017)

Film as Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaut, <i>A Philosophy of Cinematic Art</i>, Ch. 1 • Carroll, <i>The Philosophy of Motion Pictures</i>, Ch. 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intolerance (1916)
Film as Philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Wartenbeg, "Illustrating a philosophical theory: <i>Modern Times</i>" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern Times (1935)
Understanding Film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carroll, <i>The Philosophy of Motion Pictures</i>, Ch. 4-5. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L'Avventura (1960)
Film as a Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eisenstein, <i>Film Form: Essays in Film Theory</i> (Excerpt) • Gaut <i>A Philosophy of Cinematic Art</i>, 2.1-2.2 • David Bordwell, "Sergei Eisenstein" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Battleship Potemkin (1925)
Formalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sergei Eisenstein <i>Film Form</i> (excerpts) • Lev Kuleshov, "The Banner of Cinematography" • Katherine Thomson-Jones, "Formalism" • Maya Daren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Study in Choreography for Camera (1945) • Ivan the Terrible, Part II (1958) • Speed Racer (2008)
Realism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andre Bazin, <i>What is Cinema</i> (excerpts) • Gaut, <i>A Philosophy of Cinematic Art</i>, 2.2-2.4 • Andrew Kania, "Realism" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bicycle Thieves (1948) • L'enfant (2005)

Cognitive Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noel Carroll, "Philosophical Problems in Classical Film Theory" • David Bordwell, "A Case of Cognitivism" • Carl Plantinga, "Cognitive Theory of the Moving Image" 	
Cinematic Authorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deleuze, <i>Cinema 1: The Movement-Image</i> (Excerpt) • Bordwell, "Jump Cuts and Blind Spots" • <i>A Philosophy of Cinematic Art</i>, Ch. 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breathless (1960) • Justice League (2017) • Zack Snyder's Justice League (2021)
Horror	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carroll, <i>The Philosophy of Horror</i> (selections) • Cynthia Freeland, "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974) • Prince of Darkness (1987) • Sisters (1972)
The Digital Revolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Berys Gaut, "Digital Cinema" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack of the Clones (2002) • Miami Vice (2007) • Film Socialisme (2010)
Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noel Carroll, "Narration" • Noel Carroll, "Narrative Closure" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Camion (1977) • The Wind Will Carry Us (1999)
The Nature of Film: Avant Garde Cinema	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noel Carroll, "Avant-Garde Film and Film Theory" • Maureen Turim, "Avant-garde Film" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serene Velocity (1970) • Zorns Lemma (1970)

Feminism in Film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminist Philosophy of Film • Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertigo (1958) • Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) • Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce , 1080 Bruxelles (1975)
Race in Film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lewis Gordon, "Race in Film" • Dan Flory, "Race" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth of a Nation (1906) • Killer of Sheep (1978) • Horse Money (2014)
Perception and Film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hannah Trindade, "The Lived Experience of Motion Pictures: A Phenomenological Approach to Cinema" 	
Emotion and Film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebecca Copenhaver and Jay Odenbaugh, "Experiencing Emotions" • Dina Mendonca, "Predictive Processing and the Experimental Solution to the Paradox of Fiction" • Gaut, <i>A Philosophy of Cinematic Art</i>, Ch. 6. • Amy Coplan, "Empathy and Character Engagement" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A.I. Artificial Intelligence

Table 1: Reading Schedule