

Study of a Theme in Cinema: Bad Movies and Why We Love Them

Instructor: Sasha Krugman

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Office Hours: by appointment

<https://calendly.com/krugmans/office-hours>

Tues, Thurs 5:15pm–7:35pm

COURSE NUMBER:

CIMS 0021 910,

COML0021910,

ENGL 0021 910

Course Description:

What is a “bad” movie, and who gets to decide? Can we still look at “bad” movies as an object of study? If, indeed, the movie is so “bad,” then how is it so bad that it’s good? This course urges students to embrace the good, the bad, and the low-budget film object as a means of advancing and practicing film literacy. Together we will reflect on methods of film criticism/theory and the practice of reading film itself. The emphasis of this course will be on how to apply methods of film criticism onto films that critics have deemed “unworthy”. The approach is premised on the idea that both individual taste and world motion picture canon are open to question and revision. Each week we will grapple with an area of film criticism in tandem with a “bad film” and work towards applying an analytical frame to the film in question. We will begin by discussing the nature of a film object and question the hierarchies of taste that are attached to such objects. We will then interrogate the nature and history of cinephilia (and cinephobia) and film criticism, both as it is manifest in individuals and groups of individuals (a.k.a cult followings). Are all cult films created equal? What is a privileged moment or why do we like what we like, and can this be the basis for a coherent aesthetic? What critical traditions and exhibition conditions form the canon? Is it a matter of history, pedagogical necessity, audience demographics, critical fashion or personal taste?

If one person’s trash is another’s treasure, then this course invites students to dig through the wasteland of “bad cinema” in hopes of bringing theories of film criticism to task on a broader range of films than ever imaginable. Yes, you can write about that movie, and no, no one actually says you can’t.

Status:

This course will be taught online.

This course is a Junior Research Seminar, designed to familiarize students with research methods and current scholarship in the field of literary studies. In this course students will learn critical research skills, particularly in terms of films that lack scholarship and academic engagement. In addition, students will learn how to read, interpret, and write about “bad” films. This course will

challenge students to develop their analytical skills by asking them to work with difficult objects. We may not always get to study, work on what we enjoy, or even like, but the ability to do so will always remain valuable.

Class structure for Summer 2023:

Synchronous activities:

Twice weekly seminars

- We will meet twice a week on Zoom. During the first half of class, we will discuss the assigned readings and pre-recorded lecture. The second half of the class will be reserved for discussion of the assigned film, followed by a discussion of the weekly response film.

Asynchronous Activities:

- Watching assigned recorded lecture.
- Screening assigned films
- Reading materials

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

Participation in Class/ Attendance 15%

Assignment 1 20 %

Assignment 2 15 %

Assignment 3 10 %

Final Presentation 40%

Assignment 1 Weekly Response/Clip:

You will be responsible for posting a response and consequent discussion question based on the readings, and the response film assigned for that session. You will need to provide a 500-word post, introducing the film and looking at it in relation to our readings. We will discuss your post in class.

If It is not your assigned week, then you are encouraged to engage with the post online or in class.

I will have a sign-up sheet available for you to determine which session you would like to take on.

You need to post your question either by Monday, 5pm (if for Tuesday reading) or on Wednesday, 5pm (if for Thursday reading).

Assignment 2: Due June 6th

A “privileged moment,” in documentary lingo, occurs when the filmmaker and the subject experience something new together. A director can provoke new thoughts by asking a question yet unanswered, or simply be there to listen as the interviewee tells a story for the first time. In the spectatorship context, a “privileged moment” relates to a similar instance of profound connection and meaning, this time in regard to a film or broader media object.

You will write a paragraph or two describing your "privileged moment"--either cinephiliac or cine-phobic in a film of your choice. 500 words min, no more than one page double spaced, 12 pt font.

Assignment 3: Due June 13th

Proposal: Your final project will be a presentation on a ‘bad movie’ of your choosing. You may focus on a film, technique, director, or a comparative analysis, however, must be based on the content and theoretical models discussed in class. Your essay will be predicated on a research question to direct the paper. You will address elements such as narrative, plot and character development, but also provide detailed analyses of particular scenes, with attention to the medium of the moving image itself. What effects or emotional responses are generated from specific cinematic techniques or tropes? Are there any unique or unusual qualities or tactics used in the film?

This should be a detailed outline that includes various notes-to-self.

The proposal should be at least two pages double spaced and include a tentative title, short outline, and introductory paragraph that presents a clear thesis statement as well as a list of preliminary sources. Each student should meet with me briefly prior to submission.

Final Presentation June 20 and 22

You will prepare a 10-minute class presentation on the topic you have prepared your outline for. Begin with an introduction to the film that is to be screened; next a follow-up lecture capsule; and, finally, 3-4 questions for class discussion that not only include the film but the assigned reading. If clips are to be shown, indicate which ones and where they will occur. For my benefit, the goals of the class should be synopsised in a paragraph or two.

You will be presenting a finalized version of your outline. Think of this as the equivalent of submitting a paper, but you are doing so in presentation format. Your presentation should be roughly 8-10 pages written but can be longer in presentation format. MLA citations are preferred. I will ask that you submit your materials on Canvas prior to presenting.

Course Materials: All readings will be on Canvas in PDF Format. All assigned screenings will be available through Penn Course Materials or Van Pelt Library.

SCHEDULE

Module 1: May 23

Introduction, syllabus discussion, expectations, how to write on film

Why do this? Every super cool class needs an origin story. Analysis of *Dünyayı Kurtaran Adam*[1] (Çetin İnanç 1986)

Prior to our next session, I ask you to submit a chronological list of 10 films that you believe are essential viewing for anyone aspiring to film literacy on Canvas. These should be films that you consider essential for film literacy. The films can be any length, and can include documentaries, avant-garde cinema, and animation. They can be in any language (or silent) and made in any country. The main thing is that the list is personal—the recommendations that you would make to someone wanting to be educated in film. Or, put another way, the list is composed of movies that you love and would like to share with others—films that you think they should see that you have seen, or would like to see multiple times. This could function as a list of films you have to see before you die or an attempt to educate an audience.

May 25 *What The F Is Cinema?* Theorizing the Blockbuster

Reading:

- Scorsese, Martin. “Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema. Let Me Explain.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 Nov. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/martin-scorsese-marvel.html>
- Williams, Raymond. . Chapter 1

Screening:

Howard the Duck. Directed by Willard Hyuck, Universal Pictures, 1986.

Weekly Response Film:

Catwoman. Directed by Pitof, Warner Brothers, 2004.

Module 2: May 30 Auteur, Legacy and Style

Reading:

Keathley, Christian. *Cinephilia and History, Or, The Wind In the Trees*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. [Ch 1, 2, 7]

Screening:

Plan 9 From Outer Space. Directed by Ed Wood Jr., Reynolds Pictures, 1957.

Weekly Response Film: *Ed Wood*. Directed by Tim Burton, Touchstone Pictures, 1994.

June 1 Film Technique, Narration, Narrative Agency

Assignment 1 Due

Reading:

Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

- *Vsevolod Pudovkin from Film Technique [On Editing]*
- *Brian Henderson Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style*
- *Tom Gunning Narrative Discourse And The Narrator System*

Screening:

Troll 2. Directed by Claudio Faragasso, Filmirage, 1990.

Weekly Response Film: *Best Worst Movie*. Directed by Michael Paul Stephenson, OJO Entertainment, 2009.

Module 3: June 6 Cinema and Ideology

Reading:

Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

- *Jean-Louis Baudry The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches To The Impression Of Reality In Cinema*
- *Noel Carroll From Mystifying Movies: Jean-Louis Baudry And "The Apparatus"*
- *Jean Comolli And Jean Narboni Cinema/Ideology/Criticism*

Screening:

They Live. Directed by John Carpenter, Alive Films, 1988.

Weekly Response Film: *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*. Directed by Nicholas Webster, Jalor Productions, 1964.

June 8 Genre and Representation in Cinema

Reading:

Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

- *Robin Wood Ideology, Genre, Auteur*
- *Thomas Schatz from Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and the Genre Film*
- *Robert Stam And Louise Spence Colonialism, Racism, And Representation: An Introduction*
- *Manthia Diawara Black Spectatorship: Problems Of Identification And Resistance*

Screening:

Billy Jack. Directed by Tom Laughlin, Warner Brothers, 1971.

Weekly Response Film: *Reel Injun*. Directed by Neil Diamond, PBS, 2009

Module 4: June 13 Cult ft. Cannon

Assignment 2 Due

- Wollen, Peter. *Paris Hollywood : Writings On Film*. Chapter 15
- Eco, Umberto. "Casablanca: Cult movies and intertextual collage"

- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. *Essential Cinema : On the Necessity of Film Canons*. Baltimore, US: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 5 January 2017. Copyright © 2010. Johns Hopkins University Press Chapter

Screening:

The Room. Directed by Tommy Wiseau, Wiseau Film, 2003.

Weekly Response Film: *The Disaster Artist*. Directed by James Franco, New Line Cinema, 2017.

June 15 Horror, Terror and Other Such “Feminine” Predilections

Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

- *Linda Williams Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, And Excess*
- *Cynthia A. Freeland Feminist Frameworks For Horror Films*
- *Tania Modleski The Terror Of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film And Postmodern Theory*
- Maisha Wester (2012) Torture Porn and Uneasy Feminisms: Re-thinking (Wo)men in Eli Roth's *Hostel* Films, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 29:5, 387-400, DOI: [10.1080/10509201003719258](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509201003719258)

Screening: *The Hottie and The Nottie*. Directed by Tom Putnam, Purple Pictures, 2008.

Weekly Response Film: *Hostel*. Directed by Eli Roth, Splat Pack, 2005.

June 20 Presentations

June 22 Presentations

June 27 Last Class,