

Philosophy and Film: An Annotated Syllabus

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The popularity of the cinema is beyond doubt: the film industry is a multi-billion dollar industry that is international in scope; its products are enjoyed in many venues and formats (in cinemas, at home, on DVD, via the internet, etc.); and both the industry and its products are the source of endless commentary and discussion by people from all walks of life. It is popular and ubiquitous—but is it worthy of serious consideration? Or is it merely the detritus of consumer culture?

This semester, we are going to take film seriously, and we will submit it to the variety of rigorous inquiry that we would give any artistic, literary, or philosophical text. To that end, we will begin by looking at the ways in which film is philosophical. In this part of the class, we will look at how film makers have explored traditional questions in philosophy (truth, knowledge, mindedness, personal identity) as well as how film can be a mode of philosophical inquiry. In the second part of the class, we'll examine how film can illustrate norms of femininity, masculinity, and race and raise questions about justice. Finally, we'll turn to more literary themes: the nature of adaptation, satire, authorship, and the morality of cinematic representations.

Along the way, we'll wonder about what sorts of things are relevant to the interpretation of a film (e.g., the script, facts about production, interviews with filmmakers, deleted scenes, affiliated websites, and the like) as well as appreciate the difference between enjoying a film and understanding why it might be a good (or bad) film.

■ **N.B.** This syllabus is a combination of the syllabi from two different versions of this course.

Course Format

The overall arc of the course will be this: on the first day of a topic, I'll lecture in order to introduce the philosophical topic we're addressing and frame the issues as they relate to the films. On subsequent days, we'll discuss how the assigned films relate to, highlight, explain, etc. these philosophical analyses or issues. There will be *two* films assigned for each topic. Students will be responsible for watching *both* films. However, the class will be divided into two groups, and members of each group will be assigned to comment on one of those films. The class time will then be divided equally, with each group getting a chance to discuss their film while the other group observes (and perhaps participates, should individual members so desire). These discussions will be preceded by a brief student presentation that helps frame and motivate the discourse.

Required Texts

Besides texts made available online (see links, below), there is one required text for this course:

- Dick, Bernard F. *The Anatomy of Film* (Sixth Edition). Bedford/St. Martin's Press. 2010.

Topics, Readings, and Films

1. Truth: Documentaries

Texts:

- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 5 (pp. 119–22; 183–88)
- “Truth,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/>, §1, 3, and 6
- “Assertion,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/assertion/>, §1, 5, and 6

Films: *Jiro Dreams of Sushi & Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.*

Alternate films: *Fahrenheit 9/11 & Grey Gardens*

■ This section examines how assertions work and how they might be related to truth. The philosophical work on assertion focuses on explicitly formulated, linguistic representations, and so some work is done to highlight how assertion might work in a medium like film.

2. Narrative

Texts:

- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 8 (pp. 268–76)
- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 9 (pp. 321–44)
- “Film Narration (Philosophy of Film),” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/film/#FilmNar>

Films: *Memento & Rashōmon*

■ Building on what we learned about truth and assertion in the non-fiction context, what can be said about these matters in fiction? In particular, how do we interpret fictional texts with radically unreliable narrators?

3. Skepticism

Texts:

- Descartes, “First and Second Meditations,” from *Meditations on First Philosophy* <http://www.wright.edu/cola/cartes/mede.html>
- “Skepticism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>, §1

Films: *Waking Life & Chinatown*

■ Given the complexities of interpretation we saw in *Memento* and *Rashōmon*, how might we think about our epistemic access more generally? After all, our perceptual faculties and memories can (and do) fail us.

4. Artificial Intelligence

Texts:

- Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” <http://mind.oxfordjournals.org/content/LIX/236/433.full.pdf+html>
- Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs,” <http://www.bbsonline.org/documents/a/00/00/04/84/bbs00000484-00/bbs.searle2.html>

Films: *Blade Runner & Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*

■ So far, we’ve helped ourselves to a notion of “we”—that is, we’ve simply assumed we knew what sort of thing could be a knower. In this section and the next, we inquire about what it is to be the kind of thing that could be “one of us.”

5. Personal Identity Through Time

Texts:

- §1–3 of “Personal Identity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>
- Locke, “Of Identity and Diversity” (Book II, Chapter XXVII) from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Films: *Memento* & *Blade Runner*

■ As a follow up to our discussion of “one of us” and skepticism, we might inquire about what makes each person the same person through time *despite* the changes we undergo. In particular, what is the relationship of memory to selfhood?

6. Femininity

Texts:

- Frye, “Sexism”
- Bartky *Femininity and Domination*, chapter 5 (“Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization Power of Patriarchal Power”)

Films: *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* & *Good Hair*

■ In the following weeks, we’ll continue examining particular elements of being “one of us”: our embodiment as persons within institutions of race and gender. First, we’ll examine how some forms of femininity work as a system of norms that embodies power structures.

7. Masculinity

Texts:

- Pollack, *Real Boys*, Chapter 2 (“Stories of shame and the haunting trauma of separation: how we can connect with boys and change the ‘boy code’ ”)
- Califia, “Manliness”

Films: *High Noon* & *Fight Club*

■ Of course, men are gendered as well. So, we’ll look at how some forms of masculinity work as a system of norms that embodies power structures.

8. Race, Knowledge, and Power in African American Film

Texts:

- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 8 (pp. 200–37)
- Allen, “On The Reading Of Riddles: Rethinking DuBoisian ‘Double Consciousness’ ” <http://www.umass.edu/afroam/downloads/allen.riddles.pdf>
- “White Privilege” <http://www.beyondwhiteness.com/2012/02/18/peggy-mcintosh-white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack/>

Films: *Dolemite* & *Do the Right Thing*

■ Race, too, is a system of norms that embodies power structures, and so we’ll look at how these structures impact cinematic portrayals by examining depictions of race in African American film.

9. Adaptation

Texts:

- Ernest Hemingway, “The Killers” http://liternet.bg/publish24/e_hemingway/killers.htm
- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 8 (pp. 268–320)
- Stam, Introduction to *Literature and Film*, <http://adaptation391w.qwriting.qc.cuny.edu/files/2012/08/Stam-Intro-Theory-and-Practice-of-Adaptation.pdf>

■ Transitioning to questions about art, we begin by revisiting questions of representation. Even if we grant that all representation is *misrepresentation*, we might wonder what makes one text an adaptation of another—especially when we change media, representational format, and the like.

Films: *The Killers* 1946 & 1964

Alternate films: There are many great film adaptations of texts—too many to list here, really—but there are two adaptations that are potentially philosophically interesting vis-à-vis adaptation. The first is the film *Adaptation*, which is a self-referential film about a writer trying to make an adaptation of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*; the other is the chain of adaptations that goes from *Hairspray* (the film by John Waters) to the Broadway musical *Hairspray*, which in turn becomes a film version of the Broadway musical.

10. Satire

Texts:

- Abrahams, "Defining Satire" <http://www.pjaesthetics.org/index.php/pjaesthetics/article/viewFile/127/152>

Films: *Dr. Strangelove & Blazing Saddles*

■ Here, we inquire about a mode of comedy: satire. What makes something a satire rather than a parody? What *other* texts (or facts) do we need to know in order to understand the film?

11. Violence as a Genre Convention

Texts:

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, §1 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>
- Daniels and Scully, "Pity, Fear, and Catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics*," *Noûs*, v. 26, n2 (June 1992), pp. 204-217. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2215735>

Films: *Battle of Algiers & The Wild Bunch*

■ In addition to studying the uses of humor in film, we might also study depictions of violence.

12. What is an Author?

Texts:

- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 7 (pp. 238–54)
- Foucault, "What is an Author?"

Films: *Taxi Driver & King of Comedy*

■ Given that so many different people play essential roles in film making, we might wonder who, if anyone, counts as the film's author.

13. Morality of Film

Texts:

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Art and Ethics" <http://www.iep.utm.edu/art-eth/>
- "Art, Morality, and Ethics" http://hettingern.people.cofc.edu/Ethics_Aesthetics_and_Animals/Kieran_Art_Morality_Ethics.pdf

Films: *Freaks & Inglorious Basterds*

■ Can cinematic representations be immoral? Are there film subjects—or methods of production—that we simply should not use?

Alternate films: There are many films that one might use to highlight the problems that might arise out of film making. Naturally, *Triumph of the Will* (perhaps accompanied by *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*) comes to mind and features in some discussions. In

terms of fiction, we might use *Pink Flamingos* or *A Serbian Film* for this purpose. Blurring the line between non-fiction and fiction is *The Bunny Game*, wherein the torture of the main character is actually visited upon the actress portraying her.

Deleted Scenes: Modules I've developed but not taught

I've developed a few modules that I've not yet had the chance to use. Usually this is a result of my being too optimistic about what I can cover during a semester, but it also is a product of things like university closing for snow days or student interest in one topic rather than another. As a result, I don't have texts fully fleshed out here.

1. **Film as Philosophy**

Text:

- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (excerpts)

Films: *Rope* & *I ♥ Huckabees*

■ Some films feature explicitly philosophical content in a way that provides some meditation on a subject.

2. **Metacinema**

Texts:

- *The Anatomy of Film*, Chapter 5 (pp. 165–76)

Films: *8½* & *Cecil B. Demented*

■ How can a philosophy class not go “meta”? Here, we have two films that are about film making.

3. **Justice**

Texts:

- [Scene Missing]

Films: *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* & *Roger and Me*

■ Films can provide compelling stories that highlight the ways in which we fail to promote justice.

4. **Morality in Film**

Texts:

- [Scene Missing]

Films: *Doubt* & *Unthinkable*

■ The compelling stories of film can also make vivid the sort of difficult cases that are fertile for moral reflection.