

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 377 AMERICAN CINEMA SINCE 1961

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SPRING 2018

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Cite all of your sources. Failure to cite sources is plagiarism.

Prepare your papers using MLA formatting and style. Click [here](#) to go to the Purdue Online Writing Lab, which explains MLA format and provides examples.

On the Blackboard page for this course, you will find sample papers—exemplary work written by students in previous courses.

Submit your written work as an email attachment (MS Word documents only) by the due date indicated in the course schedule. The title of your documents should start with your last name (e.g. “yourlastname_paper.docx”). I will comment on your work using the “track changes” feature in MS Word and email the document back to you.

Some Advice:

- Be sure to ask yourself the most urgent of all academic questions: *So what?* Or, to put the question more delicately, *Who would want to read what I’m writing?*
- I care about the specificity of your ideas, the precision and vividness of your analyses, the originality and ambitiousness of your project, and, in particular, the clarity and validity of your thinking and prose.
- Above all, tell the truth. Don’t say anything you don’t believe. Don’t say anything you don’t understand. Don’t hunt for “the answer.” Look at the truth and don’t assume it will be either exciting or nugget-like or important or similar to the kinds of things you are used to finding (or putting) in artworks when you study them. The truth is usually good enough and always better than its alternative.

CRITICAL RECEPTION REPORT AND WORKS CITED

Locate several reviews (at least seven, more if your film was a blockbuster) of an American film released between 1961 and 1980, and write a report that summarizes the critical reception of the film at the time of its release. Do not review the movie yourself; instead, report on the reviews the film received then. Pick any American film that you yourself have seen made within those 20 years. Write a brief essay (2 pages tops, plus a Works Cited page) that explains how film reviewers responded to the film immediately after it was released theatrically.

Don't include recent reviews, only reviews from the period of your film's original theatrical release—say, within one year of the theatrical release date. This assignment is designed to give you experience conducting archival research, dealing with primary texts (in this case, movie reviews), and explaining historical events to readers unfamiliar with them.

For help finding reviews, start with [Randall Library's website devoted to this course](#), which has a section on finding film reviews. Also, consult the reference librarians in Randall library.

Synthesize the critical reception for your reader. What did reviewers agree or disagree about? Don't organize your report review-by-review. Instead, organize *point-by-point*: Explain the main issues that reviewers remarked on, dealing with one issue at a time and citing individual reviews as support: One issue per paragraph.

You may turn in your report late. Any excuse for lateness will be accepted, no matter how improbable, up to one week past the due date. Late work will receive no written comments from me; there is no other penalty. (After a week past the due date, your paper loses 1% point for every half-hour it is late).

Provide a "Works Cited" page, in MLA format, of all of the reviews you cite in your report. Use the MLA format *specifically* tailored to movie reviews, which may be found at the Purdue Online Writing Lab [here](#). Scroll to the section titled, "A Review."

- Checklist:
- At least seven reviews (more for blockbusters), all written within a year of the film's initial release
 - MLA parenthetical referencing in the body of the paper
 - Works Cited page in the MLA format for movie reviews (including date of the initial review)
 - Email as MS Word attachment (document title starts with your last name, e.g. "yourlastname_TheShining.docx").

FILM HISTORY PROJECT

Students will complete the following series of assignments:

- A) Individual Conference with Professor Berliner in which you identify a research *question* you will answer, a *justification* of your question, and a *methodology* for your paper;
- B) Abstract, Film History Paper, and List of Works Cited.

I encourage you to collaborate on these assignments: Other people are far less likely than you are to buy the ideas you are selling. If you collaborate, come as a group to your conference and submit one copy of your final paper with all of the authors' names.

The assigned readings and movies in the course offer only starting points for your research. To write an original essay, you must know more about what has already been written about your topic. Consult scholarly books and articles, films, and other materials (such as reviews, popular articles, or scholars on campus) outside of those assigned. But I want original research and analysis, not book reports: The background research you conduct is *merely* background. Familiarize yourself with the existing scholarship and historical material on your topic and add something truthful, insightful and original to it.

Everyone's project must engage with American film history during the period of this class.

Paper Topics

Formulate your own research question within the parameters of one of the following three topics:

- 1) Examine the controversial production and/or reception history of a controversial American film released between 1961 and 2000. Controversial films caused public disagreement or moral condemnation in an unusually vehement way. You will examine historical evidence from the period of the film's release—primary sources such as movie reviews, editorials, newspaper articles, the film's CARA rating history or distribution history, box office statistics, trade journal reports, or other evidence from the period—in order to demonstrate how the controversy was expressed at the time. And you will examine the film itself, analyzing those elements that caused controversy. Some examples of controversial films include *Lolita* (1962), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Deep Throat* (1972), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *The Warriors* (1979), *Cruising* (1980), *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), *Brazil* (1985), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), but feel free to pick another controversial film from the period.
- 2) Pick an American independent filmmaker working in the 1980s or 1990s (AKA, the "Sundance-Miramax era") and examine his or her films in light of independent film practices (financing, production, or distribution) of that time. What trends (industrial, genre, stylistic, narrative, or thematic trends) does your filmmaker participate in? How did your filmmaker obtain financing and distribution for her projects? What industrial conditions influenced the subjects and forms of her films?
- 3) Select a distinct stylistic or narrative device in American cinema of the last 50 years (e.g. Steadicam practices, alternative-future narratives, digital painting, unreliable narration), and trace its development. How and why did the device develop? What are the studio-era precedents for the device? What accounts for its emergence, development, or popularization at a given time? Did technological advances make it possible? How did industry or technology changes increase its prevalence? How has the use of the device changed over time? What are some of its exemplary instances? (This assignment is for students who want to watch a *lot* of movies.)

With my permission, you may write on a different topic. Your topic must involve research on American film history during the period of this course. Supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) paper topic in my office hours by **February 19**. Email won't do; we must have a conversation. (This meeting is separate from your conference with me, which will occur later.) I will decide whether you may write on your topic based on whether it seems feasible and relevant to the course, and you seem prepared to write about it.

A) Individual Conferences

Come to your conference with typed answers to the following five questions. Bring two hard copies, one for each of us to take notes on.

1. *Which of the three topics above are you writing about?* Topic 1, 2, or 3?
2. *What specific question is your project answering?* Within the topics listed, you must formulate a specific (narrow) question to guide your research, something related to the history of American cinema of the period. (Tip: A question ends with a question mark. Don't come in with a thesis.)
3. *Why is your question of interest and worth researching?* Justify your question. Don't tell me why you want to write about your topic; nobody cares. Instead, explain why your reader should want to read your paper. How will your approach to the topic reveal something that readers will want to know?
4. *What is your methodology?* How will you go about finding answers to your question? You need a detailed plan: What movies will you watch and what will you look for in those movies? What kinds of texts will you read and what will you look for in those texts?
5. *What film history research will you conduct?* In one way or another, every paper for this class must answer the following question: "Why did that happen then?" So what film history research will you conduct to help you understand the ways in which industry conditions at the time shaped whatever aspect of American cinema you are writing about?

Notes

- Conferences will last 25 minutes.
- I want to see you taking notes during our conference. A lot is going to happen there, and you won't remember it all.
- If you later change your topic, you must schedule another conference, prepared again with typed answers to the five questions above.

Checklist: I have two typed hard copies of answers to the 5 questions above
 I am prepared to take notes.

B) Abstract, Film History Paper, and List of Works Cited

Your final paper presents your research findings and analysis. It includes the following separate parts:

- 1) *Title Page, Byline, and Abstract.* An abstract briefly articulates your paper's conclusions (i.e. your thesis).
- 2) *Essay.* A discussion of your findings, organized according to a series of points (supporting theses) with discussions of the evidence in support of the points. Use [MLA in-text citation format](#).
- 3) *Works Cited.* A list of all of the print and online resources cited in the paper, organized alphabetically in [MLA Works Cited format](#); do not include film titles in this list.
- 4) *Filmography* (optional). A list of films cited in the paper with appropriate reference information. Separate your filmography from your Works Cited.

The length of your paper should be determined by how much you have to say and how efficient you are in saying it.

You may turn in your paper up to one week late; however, late papers receive no written comments (there is no other penalty). After a week, your paper loses 1% point for every half-hour it is late.

Checklist: Title, byline, and abstract on a separate Title Page
 Essay with [MLA in-text citations](#)
 [Works Cited page in MLA format](#)
 Filmography (if you have one) on a separate page
 Email as MS Word attachment (attachment title starts with your last name, e.g. yourlastname_paper.docx).

RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Books

- Balio, Tino, ed. *The American Film Industry*, second edition (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985)
- Balio, Tino. *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
- Berliner, Todd. *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017).
- Berliner, Todd. *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2010).
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP)
- Buckland, Warren. *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*. New York: Continuum Press, 2006.
- Cook, David. *A History of Narrative Film*, Third Edition (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).
- Cook, David. *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000).
- Hiller, Jim. *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: BFI, 2001)
- Holmlund, Chris and Justin Wyatt. *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)
- King, Geoff. *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005)
- King, Geoff. *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009)
- King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).
- King, Geoff, Claire Malloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis, ed. *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013)
- Lewis, Jon. *American Film: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007)
- Naremore, James. *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988).
- Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*, Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).
- Merritt, Greg. *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000)
- Monaco, Paul. *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).
- Neale, Steve and Murray Smith, ed. *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
- Newman, Michael Z. *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)
- Phillips, Kendall. *Controversial Cinema: The Films That Outraged America* (New York: Praeger, 2008)
- Pribram, E. Deidre. *Cinema & Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980-2001* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002)
- Prince, Stephen. *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (Rutgers UP, 2012)
- Prince, Stephen, ed. *The Horror Film* (Rutgers UP, 2004).
- Prince, Stephen. *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000).
- Prince, Stephen. *Screening Violence* (Rutgers UP, 2000).
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981).
- Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006)
- Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: U Texas P, 2001).

Databases

- **FST 377 Resource Page**
The Randall librarians have put together a resource page just for this class:
https://library.uncw.edu/guides/american_cinema_1961
- **Film Studies Resource Page**
Randall library webpage for film studies: <http://library.uncw.edu/subjects/film-studies>.

WorldCat

To find books on your topic, use WorldCat.org, which seeks to catalogue every book ever written. Once there, select “Books” and type your search words. Use [Randall library](#) and [Interlibrary Loan](#) to obtain the books you find on WorldCat.

Interlibrary Loan (ILL)

Every student must sign up for a free [Interlibrary Loan \(ILL\) account](#) through Randall Library. ILL allows you to obtain books, articles, chapters, and films unavailable in Randall. You will need ILL to collect resources for your paper. It can take a week or two to get a book or film, so order early. The library will send you a notice when something you’ve ordered arrives.

TEN NOTES ABOUT STRONG THESES

Since the supporting points of your final paper should also be theses, these ten notes pertain both to your main thesis and to each of your supporting points:

1. A thesis is a statement to be demonstrated or proved.
2. A thesis is not just what the paper is about (the thesis is not the “topic” of the paper); a thesis briefly and explicitly states the paper’s *conclusion*. (“The use of low-key lighting in *Touch of Evil*” is a topic, whereas “*Touch of Evil*’s low-key lighting makes some of the characters’ faces appear distorted and grotesque” is a thesis.)
3. Your thesis is the *result* of your research, not the starting-point. In its final form, the thesis is the *last* thing you come up with before you write your final draft.
4. Write about your movie *as* a movie; don’t write about what the movie is about. In other words, don’t movies as an occasion to discuss other issues. (Thesis that is *not* about movies: “We can see the importance of intimacy in romantic relationships by studying the depiction of romance in film noir.” Thesis about movies: “Film noir depicts romance as dangerous by surrounding sexually alluring female figures with imagery that evokes feelings of danger and mystery.”)
5. Your thesis should make complete sense to readers on its own. Readers should understand the paper’s thesis without reading anything but the thesis. (Unclear thesis: “The first fight scene in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* makes the spectator feel the impact of each blow.” Clear thesis: “During the first fight between Jen and Yu in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the dynamic changes in distance of framing, angle, and height mimic the often furious and quick movements of the characters and give the audience a sense of constant motion.”) The rest of the paper will set about *convincing* readers of what you are saying, but readers should *understand* your thesis before you try to persuade them of it.
6. Your thesis should be specific and complex enough to sustain the paper. Specific and complex theses tend to be more interesting than general and simple ones, and they are more likely to require explanation and persuasive argument. A rule of thumb regarding specificity: *Make sure that what you say about your clip or movie could be said only about that one clip or movie (not many movies)*.
7. Your thesis must be demonstrable. Your job is not merely to tell your reader what you think: Your job is to *persuade* your reader to think what you think.
8. Your thesis should not be obvious. If we know and agree with your thesis before we read your paper, what’s the point of reading, or writing, the paper?
9. Your thesis should be true. If *you* don’t believe what you’re saying, certainly your reader won’t.
10. Before you hand in your project, ensure that your thesis statement and that each of your supporting points is a statement to be proved or demonstrated that is clear, specific, demonstrable, not obvious, true, and the conclusion of your research. If so, then your points are probably in excellent shape.