

FST 500 INTRODUCTION TO FILM STUDY AND PRODUCTION
CRITICAL STUDIES PAPER AND VIDEO PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENTS
(UPDATED 8/16/20)

Professor Todd Berliner
Thursday 5:00-9:15 pm (KI 101)

Fall 2020

This handout explains the group paper and video production assignments for the critical studies portion of FST 500. For each of these assignments, your group may choose to submit either a short paper or short video exercise.

Each student will complete two of the assignments, plus a final project (described on the last page). Each student must write at least one paper by the end of the semester: So students may do three papers, two papers and one video production, or one paper and two video productions.

Your *Papers* should present original aesthetic analyses about whatever film you are studying, advancing a focused and organized set of points and drawing on observable details from the film as evidence. I encourage you to use film frames to illustrate points about a film's visual properties.

Your *Video Productions* must illustrate an understanding of the critical studies material for that unit. Production projects can be shot on a phone and edited on your computer, but you may also arrange to use department production equipment. Submit your productions using Vimeo or another format.

The assignment options are listed below, keyed to each unit.

UNIT 1 MISE-EN-SCENE

Groups

3. Evan Grysko and Jonathan Furnell
4. Robert Karmi and Hugh Feldmann
5. Patrick Hutchens, La-Rel Easter, and Kiersten Houser

Pick one of the following topics.

Paper topics

1. Examine Jacques Tati's staging techniques in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*. What makes Tati's staging unique and interesting? Feel free to focus on one or two scenes to illustrate your points, but you should also explain the ways in which the staging in these scenes is indicative of staging techniques used in other parts of the film.
2. Trace the various lighting techniques used in *Touch of Evil*. You may focus on just one or two scenes, but you should explain how those scenes participate in patterns of lighting devices across the film.
3. Expanding on James Naremore's analysis of Katharine Hepburn's acting, examine Hepburn's persona and performance in *The Philadelphia Story*. Using detailed analysis of Hepburn's face, body, and voice, explain and illustrate what Hepburn brought to the role of Tracy Lord and the qualities that make Hepburn a unique performer.

Video Production Topics

1. "*Another way to stage it.*" Recreate a moment from one of the films we have seen in the course, but change some key devices in the mise-en-scène (such as setting, costume, makeup, lighting, or style of performance) to that of another genre, filmmaker, or film movement. In voiceover or in a separate document, explain what you changed and the genre, filmmaker, or film movement that you drew the devices from.
2. "*Light it up.*" Create a video essay demonstrating different lighting techniques, using stills (or clips) from movies we have seen in the class to illustrate your points.
3. "*Déjà vu all over again.*" Pick a shot (or a still frame) from a film we have seen that uses a particularly interesting and complex lighting set up. Recreate the lighting design of the shot (or frame) as closely as possible, using the lighting resources you have available. Submit both the original and your recreation.

UNIT 2 CINEMATOGRAPHY

Groups

3. Anna Williams and Pearl Marley
4. Tristan Turner and Drew Spenny
5. Matthias Smith and Megan McDeavitt

Pick one of the following topics.

Paper Topics

1. Examine the ways in which *Night and City* illustrates (or fails to illustrate) the film noir lighting techniques described by Patrick Keating. What makes the lighting in the film interesting, expressionist, mannered, or beautiful? How do the filmmakers “modulate” the lighting (Keating’s term) in the movie, adjusting it to the movie’s changing tones and story content. How does the film alter the lighting for different characters according to their gender, body type, and role in the narrative? When is the lighting more or less obtrusive? Illustrate your points with detailed descriptions and still frames from the film.
2. Analyze the cinematography of *The Wonder Ring*. How does Brakhage record people and spaces in a distinctive way? How does he use the camera to create aesthetic experiences unavailable through more conventionally photographed movies? Illustrate your points with detailed descriptions and still frames from the film.
3. Analyze the cinematography in *Cameraperson*. How does Kirsten Johnson use cinematography technique to illustrate her thoughts about being a cameraperson? How does she use her own absence (behind the camera) from the images she shoots to give the spectator a sense of her interests, aesthetic goals, and personality? How do the different film formats, cinematography styles (handheld, home movie, etc.), and perspectives on the action help create meaning, establish mood, and tell a story?

Video Production Topics

1. “*Cinematography recreated.*” Select a moment from a film that we have seen in this course and recreate the sequence using a different set of cinematography techniques (e.g. using handheld cameras, staging as a walk-and-talk rather than stationary [or vice versa], changing the distance of framing or the focal point of the shots, staging in deep focus, choreographing actorial movement rather than camera movement [or vice versa], eliminating shot/reverse-shot, using only POV shots, shooting from unusual camera angles, etc.). In voiceover or in a separate document, explain the reasons behind the changes you made.
2. “*Do it in one take*” Examine some historical uses of the “long take,” focusing on movies made before the 21st century, such as *Rope*, *The Earrings of Madame D*, *Hard Boiled*, *The Shining*, *Soy Cuba*, *Raging Bull*, *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and *Wavelength*. Then produce a long take that involves camera movement. In voiceover or in a separate document, explain which long takes from film history you drew on to create your own.
3. “*Had I been a filmmaker then.*” Shoot a silent sequence using cinematography techniques associated with an historical film movement (e.g. Soviet cinema, Direct Cinema, Dogme 95, etc.). In voiceover or in a separate document, explain the historical movement you selected and the techniques that you drew from it.

UNIT 3 EDITING

Groups

3. Alexis Dickerson and Kiersten Houser
4. Robert Karmi and Justin Clark
5. Tanner Benson, Christina Dietz, and Jonathan Furnell

Pick one of the following topics.

Paper Topics

1. Examine and explain the distinctive editing techniques in a film we have viewed in this class that does not strictly follow the principles of classical editing. For example, how does *The Wonder Ring* or *A Movie* link moments, ideas, and images through editing? How do Tati's or Ozu's unusual editing techniques create aesthetic effects different from those of classical Hollywood cinema?
2. Select a film we have viewed in class that has been edited according to the principles of continuity editing and demonstrate how the film uses classical Hollywood editing technique in a creative way—a way that creates interesting, unusual, or emotionally resonant aesthetic effects within the classical Hollywood paradigm.

Video Production Topics

1. “*False advertising.*” Take shots or images from a film we have seen and create a trailer in a different historical style (German Expressionism, French Impressionism, Art Cinema, Classical Hollywood Cinema, Italian Neorealism, etc.). In a separate document, explain the historical style you were going for and how you used editing techniques to recreate it.
2. “*Intellectual Montage.*” Using a film we have viewed in class, take a sequence originally edited according to continuity editing principles and re-edit it so that images collide to create new concepts (à la Sergei Eisenstein).
3. “*Lost and found.*” Create a “found footage film” in the style of Bruce Conner’s *A Movie* that plays with the conventions of continuity editing and that finds interesting graphic and thematic relationships between shots taken from different sources. Draw your footage from anywhere you like (Youtube, National Geographic, etc.)

UNIT 4 SOUND

Groups

3. Genie Mason and Drew Spenny
4. Anna Williams and Margaret Lansaw
5. Claude Lilford and Chelsea Lea

Pick one of the following topics.

Paper Topics

1. Examine one or two sequences from either *Veer-Zaara* or *Chi-Raq* and explain the ways in which the sequences mix music, dialogue, and sound effects to tell a story and convey the narrative's emotional development. Explain the ways in which the sequences participate in patterns of sound devices used across the film.
2. Pick a sequence from a film we are viewing in this class that uses sound in a creative and original way (such as music and noise in the opening of *Touch of Evil*, voiceover in *The Girl Chewing Gum*, near silence in *Tokyo Story*, *Son of Saul*'s use of sound to convey off-screen story information—pick any sequence we have viewed that uses sound in an interesting way). Describe the sequence's sound devices and explain what makes the sound design creative and original. Your objective is to help your reader understand how a creative use of sound makes an aesthetic contribution to the sequence.

Video Production Topics

1. “*Run that sound by me again.*” Rethink and redesign the sound of a sequence from a film we have viewed in class, using techniques associated with a different genre (musical, gangster, etc.). In a separate document, explain the genre you were going for and the ways in which your sound design conveys those genre properties.

UNIT 5 STYLE AS A FORMAL SYSTEM

Groups

2. Tanner Benson and Hugh Feldmann
3. Alexis Dickerson and La-Rel Easter
4. Evan Grysko and Justin Clark
5. Patrick Hutchens and Christina Dietz

Pick one of the following topics.

Paper Topics

1. Select a stylistically distinctive film or filmmaker we have seen in this class and examine how the filmmaker limits the stylistic devices he or she uses in his or her film. Examine the devices used in one or two key scenes and also explain how the filmmaker repeats and varies the devices across the film. What aesthetic effects does the filmmaker achieve as a result of such limitations?
2. Adopting a neoformalist approach, as outlined by Kristin Thompson in *Breaking the Glass Armor*, analyze one of the films we have seen in the course that uses a prominent and unusual stylistic device (or set of stylistic devices) in a way that organizes the film's overall form. Find the "dominant" in the film, then use appropriate methods to analyze the ways in which the film foregrounds the device (or devices) and uses it to structure and situate other narrative and stylistic devices. Explain how the concepts explained in the Thompson chapter pertain to your paper's methodology.

Video Production Topics

1. "*Film, interrupted.*" Take on one of the following five "obstructions" and reshoot a moment from a film we have seen in class observing that obstruction: 1) No shot can be more than ½ second, 2) film and edit the entire sequence using split screen, 3) for every shot, the camera height must remain 3-feet above the ground, 4) use only one light and no ambient light, 5) the camera and actors must be in constant motion. Your objective is to explore what can be gained aesthetically by severely limiting the stylistic options available to you.
2. "*What if someone else had directed it?*" Select a moment from a film we have watched in the course and direct a new version of it, employing filmmaking techniques associated with a different filmmaker that we have studied (e.g. Tati, Lee, Ozu, Welles, Brakhage, etc.). In a separate document, identify the filmmaker and explain the film techniques you drew from him or her.

UNIT 6 NARRATIVE AS FORMAL SYSTEM

Groups

2. Claude Lilford and Megan McDeavitt
3. Genie Mason and Margaret Lansaw
4. Matthias Smith and Chelsea Lea
5. Tristan Turner and Pearl Marley

Pick one of the following topics.

Paper Topics

1. Examine the ways in which one of the non-classical narrative films we have viewed in the course uses “oblique storytelling” techniques—storytelling that is not explicit or direct. How does the film withhold narrative information or reveal it in oblique ways? What is gained (or lost) aesthetically from this type of indirect storytelling?
2. Examine the ways in which one of the Hollywood films we have viewed in the course complicates the spectator’s story construction processes through ambiguity, surprise, incongruous information, complication, or other narrative devices that thwart straightforward storytelling. Explain how such devices, as they are used in this *particular* Hollywood film, create a more interesting or challenging aesthetic experience for the audience.
3. Explain how a narrative film we have viewed in this class manipulates the audience’s “range of knowledge,” withholding and doling out narrative information to create curiosity, suspense, and surprise.

Video Production Topics

1. “*Same story, different words.*” Select a scene from a film that we have observed in class and rewrite the script so that it uses a different dialogue style that we have also observed in class. Indicate at the top of your script the style you were going for (e.g. “*Son of Saul* by David Mamet,” “*Touch of Evil*, a screwball comedy,” “*The Philadelphia Story* by Yasujirô Ozu,” “*Stagecoach* as film noir,” etc.).

FINAL PROJECT

You may complete your final project either individually or in a group of your choosing. For your final project, you may write a paper or create a video production; however, if you have not yet written any papers for this class so far, you must write a paper for your final project.

Select one of the following options:

1. In light of commentary from me and what you have learned since you completed your project, revise or redo one of the papers or productions you made for this class earlier in the semester. This is not an opportunity to merely tinker with what you have done. This assignment is designed to help you rethink your project from the ground up. *For papers*, that means making your analyses and overall argument more precise and detailed, clear and coherent, organized, ambitious, informed, persuasive, and valid. It also means incorporating an understanding of film production into your critical studies research. *For video productions*, it means accomplishing the aesthetic goals of your project more successfully and better demonstrating your critical understanding of film style and form.
2. Select one of the assignments above that you have *not* already done, and write a paper or make a video that successfully accomplishes the goals of the assignment. If you make a video, your production must also demonstrate that a critical understanding of film style and form has deepened your production skills. If you write a paper, it must demonstrate that your understanding of production has informed your analysis of film style and form.
3. Develop your group presentation topic into a polished paper that includes an original formal/aesthetic analysis of a film or films we have viewed in class. Your paper must demonstrate your understanding of film production.