

**MOVIE CLIP ASSIGNMENTS:  
RANDOM-OBSERVATIONS PAPERS, MOVIE CLIP OUTLINE, AND MOVIE CLIP ESSAY**

FST 200: Introduction to Film Study  
Professor Todd Berliner

**General Instructions**

This series of assignments culminates in an essay that analyzes a brief clip from one of the following movies:

- Group 1: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *North by Northwest*, or *Citizen Kane*.
- Group 2: *Duck Amuck*; *Good Morning*; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *Meshes of the Afternoon*; *Breathless*; or *Do the Right Thing*.

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

Type and double-space everything.

On the Blackboard page for this class, you will find sample Random Observations papers, outlines, and Movie Clip essays written by students in previous classes.

Consult the course schedule for due dates.

**Some Hortatory Advice about Writing About Movies**

- If you contribute to the understanding of the aesthetics of any part of a movie, however small that part is, you will have done your job.
- We care most 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.
- 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?*
- Say something about a movie that could not also be said about a plot summary of the movie. Write about the movie *as* a movie. Don't write about what the movie is about.
- Write something about a movie that could be said only about that one movie.
- 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.

*"Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint."*

–Vladimir Nabokov

## RANDOM OBSERVATIONS PAPERS

### What You Will Do

A Random Observations Paper is a numbered list of aesthetic observations about a movie clip. At least once during units 2-4 and once during units 5-8, you will bring to class a typed list of 10-20 aesthetic observations of a clip from a movie we are studying in that unit; the clip must be shorter than four minutes. Your observations will vividly describe interesting elements in the frame and/or soundtrack of your clip. They will be the basis for class discussion, as well as the basis for your outline and final essay. You may write as few as two and as many as seven Random Observations papers, which are due at the very beginning of discussion section. (If you must miss class, you may email your paper to your discussion section leader no later than one hour before it is due, then follow up with a hard copy in his or her campus mail box as soon as possible.)

Since Random Observations papers are designed to provoke class discussion, there is no use turning them in late, and we won't accept one that is not in our hands at the beginning of class. We advise you to plan to write more than the minimum two, since something might interfere with your ability to complete these papers. You are also likely to want options when deciding which list of observations to turn into an essay. Moreover, no matter how many of these papers you write, only your top score from unit 2-4 and your top score from unit 5-8 count toward your final grade.

- At the top, briefly *describe the plot* of the clip you are observing to identify the clip.
- *Number* your observations.
- Write *clear, complete, grammatical* sentences.

### Selecting your Clip

You're going to spend a lot of time with your clip, so pick one that intrigues you—one that you *loved*, one that you will want to write a paper about. Pick any clip you want, as long as it comes from a movie we are studying that unit and is no longer than four minutes. You may write about a single shot or even a single frame. Randall Library has copies of the films, some of them streaming. We have also placed brief clips from each movie on the Blackboard page for this class: If you can't obtain a copy of the movie, you'll have to observe one of the clips we have selected. However, we prefer that you select your own clips.

### Observing your Clip

Your task is to become the world's expert on your clip. Watch it closely and frequently. Your observations may be random (unrelated to one another) but not gratuitous: Do not describe all of the actions and shots, only *interesting* things. This is not a shot breakdown and we don't want a blow by blow of your clip. *Skip shots that have no aesthetic interest.* Observe various artistic devices, emphasizing devices pertaining to the current unit (e.g., cinematography). Observations should be truthful, insightful and focused on nuanced stylistic details. Write vividly: *Help your reader see what you see in the frame or hear what you hear in the soundtrack.* In short, describe the *art* in the clip: What makes it beautiful, enjoyable, interesting, or otherwise worth observing?

### Examples of Random Observations

You should look at some of the exemplary Random Observations papers on the Blackboard page for this class, but here's one observation to get you started:

1. In *The Godfather's* "murder montage," the sounds of organ music and the Latin liturgy bridge over images of hit men preparing guns and killing people, making their behavior seem ceremonial.

Checklist:  typed  double-spaced  stapled  plot description of your clip at the top  
 numbered observations  complete, grammatically correct sentences.

## MOVIE CLIP OUTLINE AND ESSAY

Pick one of your lists of random observations to develop into a detailed outline and, ultimately, an essay that illuminates something about the clip you observed. Your thoughts should no longer be random: Organize your essay around a *thesis*: one point about the aesthetics of your clip, a point you intend to demonstrate. Support your thesis with vivid, detailed evidence from the clip.

Your paper may discuss the ways in which your clip relates to other parts of the movie (for example, ways in which the clip creates, satisfies, or fails to satisfy spectator expectations or incorporates stylistic devices that other parts of the movie also use). However, your assignment is to closely examine and illuminate something about that one clip.

Don't include all of your random observations in your outline and essay, only those pertinent to your thesis. Watch the clip you have chosen again and again, and develop more observations that serve or complicate your essay's thesis.

*Tip:* Excellent essays will not only provide insightful analysis of a movie clip; they will also show how the aesthetics of the clip function within the aesthetic design of the movie as a whole.

### Submitting Your Outline and Essay

Submit your outline and essay as email attachments (MS Word documents only) to your discussion section leader by the due dates indicated in the schedule. The title of your documents should start with your last name (e.g. "yourlastname\_outline.doc"). We will comment on your work using the "track changes" feature in MS Word and email the document back to you. Do not paste your work in the body of your email.

### Instructions for Outlines

On the date indicated in the schedule, you will turn in a detailed outline of the essay to come.

1. Your outline should be no more than two double-spaced typed pages.
2. It must include a strong thesis statement and all of your supporting points and evidence. An outline is everything that will go in the paper, except the rhetoric.
3. Make sure that your thesis statement is in fact a thesis statement—a statement you are trying to demonstrate or prove—not just an observation or a topic.
4. Your supporting points should also be theses (not topics).
5. Your outline must include evidence for your points, referencing details from the film.

*Tip:* Read the Sample Outlines on Blackboard and "Ten Notes about Strong Theses" below.

Students will bring in drafts of their outlines to the *peer editing workshop* on the due date indicated in the syllabus. During the workshop, students will critique each others' work in small groups.

You will turn in your final outline to your discussion section leader. You may turn in your final outline 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 (there is no other penalty). After a week past the due date, however, your outline loses 1% point for every half-hour it is late.

Checklist:  Includes thesis, supporting points, and evidence  
 Email document as MS Word attachment  
 Attachment title starts with your last name (e.g. "yourlastname\_outline.doc")

## Instructions for Movie Clip Essays

Your essay will likely differ from your outline; we assume that you will change your thesis and supporting points as you continue to observe your clip and address criticisms of your outline.

Essays must be turned in by the due date. One percentage point will be deducted from your essay grade for every half-hour past the time it is due.

Underneath the title and before the beginning of your essay, state your thesis (your paper's conclusion) clearly and explicitly.

*Tip:* Exemplary sample essays, written by students in previous courses, are on the course Blackboard site.

Checklist:  Thesis statement at the top  Descriptive essay title  Email document as MS Word attachment; attachment title starts with your last name (e.g. "yourlastname\_essay.docx")

### TEN NOTES ABOUT STRONG THESES (AND SUPPORTING POINTS)

Since the supporting points of your outline and final paper should also be theses, these 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 sometimes grotesque" is a thesis.)
3. 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: "A 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.
4. 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).*
5. Write about your movie *as* a movie; don't write about what the movie is about. In other words, don't use the clip 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.")
6. 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.
7. Your thesis should not be obvious. If we already know and agree with your thesis before we read your paper, what's the point of reading (or writing) the paper?
8. Your thesis should be true. If *you* don't believe what you're saying, your reader certainly won't.
9. Your thesis is the *result* of your research, not the starting-point: Your thesis is your conclusion. Your paper's thesis, in its final form, is the *last* thing you come up with before you write your final draft.
10. Before you hand in your Movie Clip outline and essay, ensure that your thesis statement and that each of your supporting points is a statement to be demonstrated or proved that is clear, specific, about the movie, demonstrable, not obvious, and true. If so, then your points are probably in excellent shape.