

FILM 2332.004 - Understanding Film

Fall 2025 | Friday 10:00 AM - 12:45 PM | FN 2.104

Instructor: Rachel Catlett (she/they)

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Student Hours: Wednesday 10 AM - 11 AM on Teams, or by appointment

Course Description

Understanding Film explores the history and stylistic elements of cinema as a mass medium and an art form. The course analyzes visual language and film style, cinematic codes, and the ways that films can embody or criticize popular ideas and attitudes. Emphasis is on film analysis, film in relation to the other arts and mass media, films as artifacts, and understanding the ways that films are put together and how they function expressively. This course is designed to introduce students to the various formal elements of cinematic language as well as the practice of film analysis, thus enabling students to think and write critically about film in terms of ideology, culture, and politics.

Student Learning Objectives

In addition to being a prerequisite for upper-level film studies courses, this course serves as a creative arts core credit. This category of courses focuses on the appreciation and analysis of creative artifacts and works of the human imagination. Creative arts courses seek to expand students' abilities to critically think, communicate, collaborate, and develop social responsibility. In this course, students will achieve their creative arts requirement as they:

- Reevaluate what it means to “watch movies”
- Identify the various formal elements of film
- Develop a vocabulary for discussing and writing about cinema
- Understand how film operates within historical and cultural contexts
- Learn to analyze film and develop arguments about cinematic texts

This class also counts toward the fulfillment of UTD's minor in Film Studies (18 credit hours) or major in Visual and Performing Arts with a film studies concentration. For more information:

<https://catalog.utdallas.edu/2022/undergraduate/programs/ah/minors#ah-minor-film-studies>

Required Texts and Materials

Reading:

- **Pramaggiore, Maria and Tom Wallis. *Film: A Critical Introduction*, 4th ed.,** Laurence King Publishing, 2020. ISBN-13: 978-1786275776
 - eBook version available for free [through the UTD library](#)
- **Additional required readings will be uploaded to e-Learning**
- If writing about cinema is something that you are passionate about or want to learn about more deeply, then I recommend the following book: Gocsik, Karen and Dave Monahan. *Writing About Movies*, 5th ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. ISBN - 13: 978-0393664904

Screenings:

- All films and media are available through online streaming services (Kanopy, Amazon, Netflix, YouTube, etc.). This is a film class, so watching the films is a requirement. While many of our assigned films are available on various streaming services, you may need to rent some films; it is easy to do so through Amazon Prime, YouTube, or Apple. Since the textbook is available for free, even if you rent every film you will likely not pay more than \$30-40 for the semester.
- For each class meeting, you need to have completed the reading and watched the required film(s). Come prepared to discuss the assigned material each week.
- JustWatch (www.justwatch.com) is a useful resource for finding available platforms to stream, rent, or purchase movies.

A note on sensitive material in films:

Some of the films we will be watching this semester will contain materials that might be considered challenging for certain viewers such as sexuality, nudity, violence, gore, etc. Enrollment in this course requires watching all assigned films. If you find content warnings helpful, the website <https://www.doesthedogdie.com/> is a good resource.

Classroom Policies

Structure: Each class, we will have a discussion of the films and reading materials assigned for that week. We will also have a lecture with supplementary materials to enrich your outside reading and viewing. Students are encouraged and expected to ask questions and participate during both the discussion and the lecture.

eLearning: Lecture slides, additional readings, and other resources will be uploaded to eLearning. Students will complete exams and submit papers through eLearning, which will then run your assignments through Turnitin. You are required to have the means to access all online materials throughout the semester.

Digital Devices: You may use laptops or tablets to take notes but should not use them to be playing games, browsing social media, completing other coursework, or anything else that may be a distraction to you or your classmates. Phones and earbuds should be out of sight during class to best enable you to stay focused and take notes. It is worth noting (ha ha) that many intelligent people who understand brain science generally recommend that you take notes by hand, as you are more likely to remember what you write when it is handwritten.

Instructor Communication: Communication is a core part of your course experience, and I am here to help and support you however I can! There are several important ways that you can communicate with me, and it is always better to communicate sooner rather than later, *especially* if and when you feel you are falling behind or not doing well. Here are the primary ways you can communicate with me:

1. **During class sessions:** Ask questions during the lectures or discussions, especially if you're feeling lost! I try to check in with you for understanding, but if you need clarification on something, odds are you are not the only one. I promise you that professors love questions. Additionally, you can ask me questions about the materials or assignments before or after our class session.
2. **Office Hours:** Come visit me during office hours, even if it's just to talk about movies! I love talking about movies! You can come talk to me during the scheduled times, or you can email me to arrange a time to meet in-person or on Teams outside of my office hours.
3. **Email:** You can email me any questions you have or just to tell me your thoughts on the course! Email me as quickly as possible if you're having difficulty with the class. I try to check my email regularly and respond quickly, but please allow 24 hours for response. Also, it is preferable that you email me through your UTD email.

Missed Classes: You are responsible for the materials that you miss on days you are absent. I will upload my presentations to eLearning after each class, but these presentations will not have all of the lecture info and discussions on them, so you may also want to make friends with people around you to get access to notes on days that you must be absent. If we have in-class screenings scheduled on the syllabus and you are not in class, it is your responsibility to watch these films independently, as they may be covered on the exams.

University Policies

It is expected that students are aware of and understand these policies. All relevant course-wide university policies can be found here:

<https://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies>

AI Addendum: The use of generative AI is not permitted in this course, with the exception of Grammarly exclusively for the revision of grammar and spelling. (GrammarlyGo is not acceptable because it is GenAI.) Assignments will be processed through Turnitin, which has reliable AI detection software. If Turnitin determines 50% of your paper is Generative AI, I am required by UTD to report the assignment to the Office of Student Conduct. To view UTD's full AI policy, [go here](#).

Assessment & Evaluation

Grading Philosophy: Even if you are not someone who is pursuing an academic or professional career in film, there is much to be gained from this class if you are willing to put in the work. Your grades will reflect your effort, so please make sure to actively participate during class, ask questions during and after class whenever you need clarification (or if you're just curious!), take notes, and come to office hours (even if it's just to talk about movies!). When grading, your grade will reflect the following: how deeply you understand the class content we have discussed as shown through the submission, how closely you followed the assignment's instructions, and how thoroughly you extended our course content into new ideas or deeper critical thinking.

Deadlines: All assignments are due by 11.59 PM on the due date listed on the course calendar at the end of this syllabus. All assignment instructions can be found on eLearning and will be discussed in class. Please dedicate time to each assignment, as they are designed to help you become more thoughtful film viewers and critics.

Submitting Assignments: All written assignments must be submitted as .doc, .docx, or .pdf file formats. I will not accept Google doc links or any other file type. Please make sure you keep a copy of your Turnitin receipt for each submission (sent via email) as sometimes that platform can make errors. Written assignments should be double-spaced and written in 12-pt font.

Academic Integrity: Any of the various forms of academic dishonesty, as outlined in UTD policy (<https://conduct.utdallas.edu/integrity/>), including but not limited to plagiarism, will not be tolerated, and will result in a failing grade. If an assignment is considered "open materials" that does not mean that you collaborate with your peers unless directed to do so—all work submitted must be uniquely yours.

Late Work: Late work is not accepted without discussing it with me in advance.

Grading Breakdown:

A+	97-100	C+	77-79
A	94-96	C	74-76
A-	90-93	C-	70-73
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	86-84	D	64-66
B-	80-83	D-	60-63
		F	0-59

Grading Distribution: Details about each assignment can be found later in this syllabus. Grades will be weighted as follows:

Assignment	Percentage of Grade
Attendance	15%
Film Journal	20%
Short Paper	10%
Film Analysis Presentation	25%
First Exam	15%
Second Exam	15%
(Optional) Shocktober Extra Credit	(Up to) 2%

Assignments

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory. Students must attend every class session in order to receive full credit for attendance; however, students can have one free unexcused absence without their grade being penalized. After that, each unexcused absence drops your final grade by 3 points (3%). Your fifth absence will automatically result in a failing grade (F).

Weekly Film Journals: Each week, you will watch two films outside of class. Then, you will provide written answers to two questions (300-400 words total for both). Your response should incorporate the ideas from the lecture and readings with your interpretation or analysis of the films. These weekly responses are a way for you to make connections between the films we watch and the materials we discuss in class, and are meant to help you process your thoughts before we discuss the films and readings in class. Students must complete a total of 10 weekly responses, meaning you can choose 3 weeks to “miss.” (On the course calendar, these are abbreviated, for example “W1FJ” for “Week 1 Film Journal”).

Short Paper - Interpretive Film Review: The interpretive film review is a short paper that will prompt you to apply the skills you build in the first part of the semester. In 3-4 pages (double spaced, 12 pt font, regular margins), you will review one film from the syllabus and answer the question “What is the primary theme of this film?” Your answer should incorporate the skills you will learn in weeks 1-5, including paying attention to the way films construct meaning in addition to characters/plot. Your review will not require additional research, however it should be structured like an academic paper with an introduction, at least two body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Film Analysis Project: The film analysis project is a semester-long project that will prompt you to apply the skills and knowledge in film analysis and interpretation that you will gain over the course of the semester to a film of your choosing that is **not** on our syllabus or discussed at length in assigned reading (ask me if you are not sure about your choice). This project has three components:

1. Proposal - You will submit a proposal (200-250 words) that outlines what film you intend to use for their project, what claim(s) you will be making about this film, what class materials they anticipate using for your analysis, and any additional research you think they may need to conduct.
2. Recorded Presentation - You will record and submit a slideshow presentation with voice-over in which you will present an interpretive film analysis with visual support. Your presentation should not just be you reading bullet points - you should be providing supplementary commentary and any bullet points on the slideshow should simply outline your ideas. This will be similar to a verbal presentation of a paper, and you can and are encouraged to write and read a script for this presentation. Your presentation must be 7-10 minutes long and should make a claim about your chosen film that shows your ability to analyze and interpret films using the skills we have learned in class, and should include a close reading of a scene. We will discuss more about what it means to make a claim about a film as the course progresses, and a more detailed rubric for this project will be presented later in the semester.

First & Second Exam: You will have two exams this semester to assess your knowledge of the materials we have covered in class: the first will be mid-way through the semester, and the second will be at the end of the semester. Both of these exams are to be completed outside of class on eLearning. There will be a mix of multiple choice and short answer questions on these exams, and you may use any notes or other reference materials that you have generated during class. You may not, however, work with your peers to complete the exam.

Shocktober Extra Credit: For up to 2% points of extra credit on your total final grade, you may participate in what I call Shocktober, my annual celebration of horror cinema. If you choose to participate, you will submit a list of five horror films before October 1st that you have never seen before, and you will watch these films during the month of October. Then, before our first class in November, you must submit a document with 200 words written for each film analyzing the film's themes, form, and your general interpretive reaction to it, in order to receive your extra credit. A note: Shocktober films do not have to be "scary" adult horror films; there are plenty of wonderful children's horror films or gently spooky films that are accessible for sensitive souls who want to participate. If you need help generating your Shocktober list, just ask!

Course Calendar

Changes to the Syllabus: This is a living syllabus and is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor as-needed. I will try to minimize course changes and will communicate any and all changes sufficiently both in class and through e-Learning.

Assigned Materials Schedule: Each week is scheduled around a specific guiding question that is relevant to a topic in film analysis/criticism. We will have the lecture for this topic *before* you watch the films related to that topic, and then we will begin our next class by reviewing the previous week's topics and discussing those films. Readings for each week can be done either before or after the relevant class for that topic - for example, the readings for Week 2 can either be done before the Week 2 class or after. The single exception to this rule is the reading for our last week of class, which should be completed before our final class.

Week 1	August 29th
In-Class	<p>Lecture: Course introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Syllabus Overview ● Course Mechanics (eLearning, resources, etc) <p>Lecture: Why cinema?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Film Studies ● Early Film History <p>In-Class Screenings: Workers Leaving the Factory (Lumière Bros, 1895) The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station (Lumière Bros, 1895) The Kiss (Edison, 1896) The Cabbage Fairy (Guy Blaché, 1896) The Four Troublesome Heads (Méliès, 1898) A Trip to the Moon (Méliès, 1902) The Great Train Robbery (Porter, 1903)</p>
Before Next Class	<p>Films: Sherlock Jr. (Keaton, 1924) [45 min] Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (Wright, 2010) [112 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W1FJ - Due September 4th @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>Optional Supplementary Viewing: “Buster Keaton - The Art of the Gag” by Every Frame a Painting on YouTube “Edgar Wright - How to Do Visual Comedy” by Every Frame a Painting on YouTube</p>

Week 2	September 5th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis, Ch. 1: "Introduction to Film Analysis"
In-Class	<p>Lecture: How do we watch (and talk about) films?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Film Vocabulary Crash Course • Audiences, Viewers, Spectators • What Is Film Criticism? • Textual Analysis • Writing About Film <p>Discussion: <i>Sherlock Jr.</i>, <i>Scott Pilgrim vs. the World</i></p>
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Citizen Kane</i> (Welles, 1941) [119 min] <i>Memories of Murder</i> (Bong, 2003) [132 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W2FJ - Due September 11th @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>Optional Supplementary Viewing: "Memories of Murder (2003) - Ensemble Staging" by Every Frame a Painting on YouTube</p>

Week 3	September 12th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis, Ch. 2: "An Approach to Film Analysis"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Memories of Murder</i>, <i>Citizen Kane</i></p> <p>Lecture: How does a film "say" something?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning - Expressive, Referential, Themes, Politics • Introduce Final Project
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Some Like It Hot</i> (Wilder, 1959) [120 min] <i>Sorry to Bother You</i> (Riley, 2018) [112 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W3FJ - Due September 18th @ 11:59 PM</p>

Week 4	September 19th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis, Ch. 4: "Narrative Form"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Some Like it Hot</i>, <i>Sorry to Bother You</i></p> <p>Lecture: How do films tell stories?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character • Narrative Form • Introduce Shocktober
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Psycho</i> (Hitchcock, 1960) [109 min] <i>Marcel the Shell With Shoes On</i> (Fleisher Camp, 2021) [90 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W4FJ - Due September 25th @ 11:59 PM</p>

Week 5	September 26th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis, Ch. 5: "Mise-en-Scene"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Psycho</i>, <i>Marcel the Shell With Shoes On</i></p> <p>Lecture: How do filmmakers compose images? (And why does it matter?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mise-en-scene <p>In-Class Screening: The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Wiene, 1920)</p>
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>The Night of the Hunter</i> (Laughton, 1955) [92 min] <i>In the Mood for Love</i> (Wai, 2001) [98 min]</p> <p>Assignments: W5FJ - Due October 2nd @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>Short Paper - Due Friday, October 3rd @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>Shocktober List (if participating) - Due September 30th @ 11:59 PM</p>

Week 6	October 3rd
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 6: "Cinematography"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>The Night of the Hunter, In the Mood for Love</i></p> <p>Lecture: What can a filmmaker do with the camera? (And why does it matter?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cinematography
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Do the Right Thing</i> (Lee, 1989) [120 min] <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> (Anderson, 2014) [100 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W6FJ - Due October 9th @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>Optional Supplementary Viewing: "Spike Lee - The Dolly Shot" by Richard Cruz on YouTube</p>

Week 7	October 10th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 7: "Editing"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Do the Right Thing, The Grand Budapest Hotel</i></p> <p>Lecture: What gives a film its rhythm?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editing <p>Workshop: First exam review</p>
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Rashomon</i> (Kurosawa, 1950) [88 min] <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> (Miller, 2015) [120 min]</p> <p>Assignments: W7FJ - Due October 16th @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>First exam - Opens Tuesday, October 14th @ 12:01 AM, closes Thursday, October 16th @ 11:59 PM</p> <p>Optional Supplementary Viewing: "Akira Kurosawa - Composing Movement" by EFaP on YouTube "How Does an Editor Think and Feel" by EFaP on YouTube</p>

Week 8	October 17th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 8: "Sound"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Rashomon</i>, <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i></p> <p>Lecture: What role does sound play in a film?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sound design • Music
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>M</i> (Lang, 1931) [109 min] <i>Roma</i> (Cuarón, 2018) [135 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W8FJ - Due October 23rd at 11:59 PM</p>

Week 9	October 24th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 14: "Film Authorship"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>M</i>, <i>Roma</i></p> <p>Lecture: Who is the "author" of a film?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authorship/auteurship • The Hollywood studio system • New Hollywood • Introduce Film Analysis Project
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (Kubrick, 1968) [149 min] <i>I Saw the TV Glow</i> (Schoenbreun, 2024) [100 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W9FJ - Due October 30th at 11:59 PM</p> <p>Film Analysis Project: Proposal - Due Friday, October 31st at 11:59 PM</p>

Week 10	October 31st
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 13: "Genre"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i>, <i>I Saw the TV Glow</i></p> <p>Lecture: What role do genres play in making meaning?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genre • Censorship
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Akira</i> (Otomo, 1988) [124 min] <i>The Substance</i> (Fargeat, 2024) [144 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W10FJ - Due November 6th at 11:59 PM</p> <p>Shocktober Summaries (if participating) - Due November 6th at 11:59 PM</p>

Week 11	November 7th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 9: "Alternatives to Narrative Fiction: Documentary and Avant-Garde Film"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Akira</i>, <i>The Substance</i></p> <p>Lecture: What does a non-narrative film look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary • Avant-garde films <p>In-Class Screening: Excerpt from <i>Daughter Rite</i> (Citron, 1980) <i>Un Chien Andalou</i> (Buñuel, 1929) <i>Meshes in the Afternoon</i> (Deren, 1943) <i>An Optical Poem</i> (Fischinger, 1938) <i>Mothlight</i> (Brakhage, 1963) <i>Possibly in Michigan</i> (Condit, 1983)</p>
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>House</i> (Obayashi, 1977) [88 min] <i>Paris Is Burning</i> (Livingston, 1990) [78 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W11FJ - Due November 13th at 11:59 PM</p>

Week 12	November 14th
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 11: "Social Context and Film Style: National, International, and Transnational Cinema"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>House, Paris is Burning</i></p> <p>Lecture: How are films different internationally?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transnational cinema • Film festivals • Italian Neorealism • The French New-Wave
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Cléo From 5 to 7</i> (Varda, 1962) [90 min] <i>Atlantics</i> (Diop, 2019) [104 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W12FJ - Due November 20th at 11:59 PM</p>

Week 13	November 21st
Reading	Pramaggiore & Wallis: Ch. 10: "Film and Ideology"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Cleo From 5 to 7, Atlantics</i></p> <p>Lecture: What does it mean for a film to have "politics"?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideology • Identity & Film Theory • Visibility vs Representation
Before Next Class	<p>Films: <i>Double Indemnity</i> (Wilder, 1944) [107 min] <i>Portrait of a Lady on Fire</i> (Sciamma, 2019) [121 min]</p> <p>For our last week, over the break: <i>Candyman</i> (Rose, 1992) [101 min] <i>The Witch</i> (Eggers, 2015) [92 min]</p> <p>Assignment: W13FJ - Due December 4th at 11:59 PM</p>

Week 14	November 28th
Thanksgiving Break - No Class!	

Week 15	December 5th
Reading	Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film"
In-Class	<p>Discussion: <i>Double Indemnity, Portrait of a Lady on Fire</i> <i>Candyman, The Witch</i></p> <p>Lecture: What other kinds of film analysis can I do as a film scholar?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Many Flavors of Film Theory • Psychoanalytic Film Theory
After Class	<p>Assignment: Second Exam - Opens Monday December 8th @ 12:01 AM, due Thursday December 11th at 11:59 PM</p> <p>Film Analysis Project: Paper - Due December 12th at 11:59 PM Film Analysis Project: Presentation - Due December 12th at 11:59 PM</p>