

## Film & Media Theory (CMA 2300)

Professor Jennifer Fay

Class Meetings: T/R 11:00- 12:15 Buttrick 015

Office Hours: Benson, 332. Thursdays, 12:30- 2:00 p.m., and by appointment. [j.fay@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:j.fay@vanderbilt.edu)

**Course Description:** What is film? What is the relationship between film and photography and the “real” world that a film may (or may not) capture? How do visual technologies mediate vision? What do they reveal or conceal of the world and our place in it? How does a film affect, construct, or delimit a spectator? What is a film spectator? And, on what terms, might we push back on and resist the ways films construct and position us? Such questions are bound to larger concepts of technology, mediation, and the history of technology, and to the embodied experience of gender, race, and sexuality.

There is a long and rich tradition of film and media theory, a fraction of which we will read here, that is concerned with elucidating and complicating not only how we answer these questions, but how we frame such queries in the first place. This course is an advanced introduction to film and media theory as a mode of inquiry. We will read some of the major works representing significant movements in film, photography, and digital theory from the early part of the 20th century up to our contemporary moment. We will also consider films and media objects, in their own right, as theoretical experiments in thought and perception. This is a reading intensive class and the material is challenging. But it is very worth the investment!

Required Texts:

There are no textbooks for this class. All readings will be posted on Brightspace. However, you will need to buy/ rent a few films over the course of the semester:

*King Kong* (1933)

*Jurassic Park* (1993)

**Course Policies:**

**Participation:** This course presupposes *active and participating* students. Our aim is to create an intellectual community and culture of exchange. In order to achieve this, you are expected to come to class on time, having done the reading, watched the film, and ready to jump into class discussion with comments, questions, and connections you have made between this reading, the film, and other texts we have discussed in class. Come to class with passages from the reading and film that you want to explore: this is what it means to be prepared for class. I expect everyone to participate in our conversations and be considerate to me and to the other students in the class. Attendance does not count towards your participation grade. And being prepared only signifies when it is actualized.

Please no eating during class. Beverages are fine. Always clean up after yourself!

**Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets, are banned during class meetings.** Please take notes the old-fashioned way. Such electronic distractions are disruptive to you, to me, and to other students. Exceptions for laptop note-taking will be made for students with documented instructional needs.

**Attendance:** You are expected to attend all scheduled class sessions and arrive on time. Attendance does not count towards the participation grade. A student who misses more than three classes may expect a penalty of .1 for every subsequent absence on the final grade. A student who misses six or more classes will fail based on attendance alone.

**Use of generative AI is not permitted for the writing in this class.** Because writing and the organization of your ideas is crucial to the process of thinking and problem-solving, you are required to carry out this work unassisted by generative AI programs (such as Chat GBT).

**Assignments:** There are three papers for this class, plus Brightspace posts (see below). I will drop the lowest of these three paper grades. To pass the class, students must write the first paper and then at least one of remaining two. All students are encouraged to write all three papers, which will be an opportunity for extra credit.

**Brightspace Postings:** In addition to these formal papers, you are required to post responses to readings (and films in relation to the readings) at least eight times during the course of the semester. These posting, which should be a minimum of two substantial paragraphs, should be submitted to the Brightspace discussion board no later than 8 AM on the morning before our class. Late posts will not count, and you may not make up posts after the missed deadline. Your posts will serve as prompts for our class discussions, they will help you to formulate your ideas before we meet, and they will give you a sense of how other students are processing this material.

You are also expected to respond to five posts by other students (on 5 different days of class). Responses need to be submitted no later than 10 AM. You'll find more direction on the posts on the Brightspace page. If you are shy or anxious about class participation, additional postings (submitted by the deadline) may boost your participation grade and earn you extra credit. There are five days in the semester when everyone is required to post before class. These are highlighted in the schedule below.

**Students with Special Instructional Needs:** I am committed to accommodating students who have special instructional needs. If you need course accommodations due to a documented need, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me and EAD (2-4705) as soon as possible.

**Religious Holidays:** Students who expect to miss classes or deadlines as a consequence of their religious observance should provide me with notice (via email) of the dates of religious holidays in the first two weeks of the semester.

**Grade distribution:**

Brightspace postings	25%
Participation	25%
Paper 1	25%
Paper 2	25%
(I drop the lowest of the three paper grades).	

**Important Dates:**

Paper 1: Friday, Feb. 23<sup>h</sup> 11:59 PM

Paper 2: Friday, March 22, 11:59 PM

Paper 3: Friday April 22, 11:59 PM

**Reading and Screening Schedule**

Please have materials read/ watched for the class period in which they appear.

**Week 1 (Jan 9, 11): Where Film Theory and Film Art Begin**

- T     Intro to Class.  
       Read: The syllabus for this class.
- R     Read: Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 1-58

**Week 2 (Jan 16, 18): The Aesthetics of the Silent Film**

- T     Watch: *The Circus* (Chaplin, 1928, 71 min.) Kanopy  
       Read: Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 102-11, 134-153.  
       **ALL POST on Brightspace**
- R     Read: Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 154-160  
       Michel Chion: “When Film Was Deaf”

**Week 3 (Jan 23, 25): Changed Mummified: Bazin’s Reality Principle**

- T     Read: Hugh Grey, “Introduction to *What is Cinema?*”  
       André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”  
       Bazin, “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage”
- R     Watch: *Kon Tiki* (Heyderahl, 1950, 58 min.) Kanopy  
       Read: Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration.”

**Week 4 (Jan 30, Feb 1): The Ethnographic Gaze**

- T     Read: Fatimah Tobing Rony, “The Third Eye”
- R     **No Class**  
       Watch: *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 104 min. 1933) available on various streaming services.

**Week 5 (Feb. 6, 8): From the Cinematic Monster to the Animals of New Media**

- T     Read: Rony, “King Kong and the Monster in Ethnographic Cinema”  
       **All Post: Rony and *King Kong***
- R     Read:, Lev Manovich “What is New Media” from *The Language of New Media*

**Week 6 (Feb. 13, 15): Synthetic Realism**

- T Watch: *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993, 126 min.) available on various streaming services.  
Read: Manovich, "Illusions" from *The Language of New Media*
- R Read: Kristin Whissel, "Vital Figures: The Life and Death of Digital Creatures."

**Week 7 (Feb. 20, 22): Photography's Radical Possibilities**

- T Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography"
- R "Photography," continued.

**Week 8 (Feb. 27, March 1): The Sting of Photography**

- T Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Part I
- R Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Part II  
Recommended: Smith, "Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*"

**Week 9 (March 6, 8): Computational Photography**

- T Read: Brooke Belisle, "Surfacing Subjectivity: Portrait Mode and Computational Photography"
- R Read: Jia Tolento, "Instagram Face." *New Yorker*  
**All Post (Barthes and a computational photography)**

**Week 10 (March 12, 14): Spring Break!**

**Week 11 (March 19, 21): Whose Pleasure?**

- T Read: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"
- R Watch: *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954, 112 min) Brightspace  
**All Post on Mulvey and *Rear Window***

**Week 12 (March 27, 29): The Oppositional Gaze**

- T Read: bell hooks, "Making Movie Magic"; "The Oppositional Gaze: Back Female Spectators."
- R **No Class**

**Week 13 (April 2, 4): Baldwin's Urgency**

- T Watch: *I Am Not Your Negro* (Peck, 2016, 95 min.) Kanopy  
Read: Simon Crichtlow, "Baldwin's Rendezvous with the Twenty-First Century"
- R Read: James Baldwin, *Devil Finds Work*, Part 1

**Week 14 (April 9, 11): The Language of our Dreams**

- T Read: Baldwin, *Devil Finds Work*, Part II

Watch : *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (Kramer, 1967, 108 min.) Brightspace  
All Post on Baldwin and *Guess Who*

R      Read: Baldwin: *Devil Finds Work*, Part III.

**Week 15 (April 16, 18): Jordan Peele's Media Theory.**

T      Watch: *Get Out* (Peele, 2017, 104 min) Brightspace

R      TBA