Post-Cinema (Winter 2019)

FILMSTUD 215/415: Post-Cinema

Seminar: Post-Cinema
Prof. Shane Denson
Tue 4:30-7:20pm
Office: McMurtry 318
Room: McMurtry 370
Screenings:
Thurs 6:30-9:20pm
Room: McMurtry 350

Office Hours: TBD
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Course Description:

In this seminar, we will try to come to terms with twenty-first century motion pictures by thinking through a variety of concepts and theoretical approaches designed to explain their relations and differences from the cinema of the previous century. We will consider the impact of digital technologies on film, think about the cultural contexts and aesthetic practices of contemporary motion pictures, and try to understand the experiential dimensions of spectatorship in today's altered viewing conditions.

In addition to viewing a wide range of recent and contemporary films, we will also engage more directly and materially with post-cinematic moving images: we will experiment with scholarly and experimental uses of non-linear video editing for the purposes of film analysis, cinemetrics, and a variety of academic and creative responses to post-cinematic media.

The course addresses key issues in recent film and media theory and, especially in its hands-on components, encourages experimentation with methods of digital humanities, computational media art, and other creative practices.

Course Themes and Objectives:

In this course, we set out from the apparent "chaos" that contemporary cinema often presents to us: the seemingly incoherent and unmotivated camerawork and editing, for example, by which many action films of the twenty-first century mark their departure from the "classical" norms of Hollywood-style narration and formal construction. From here, we seek to make sense more generally of cinema's transformation in terms of new technologies and techniques (e.g. digital imaging processes, nonlinear editing, and attendant editing styles), in terms of new modes of cinematic distribution and reception (e.g. DVD, Blu-Ray, and streaming services, HD TVs, smartphones, and tablet computers, but also IMAX 3-D and similar transformations of the big screen), in terms of non-classical narrative styles (e.g. recursive, database-like, non-linear, and even non-sequitur forms of storytelling), and in terms of broader phenomenological and environmental shifts that inform our experience, our embodiment, and our subjectivity in the digital era.

Several key concepts will help to orient our thinking about twenty-first century cinema and its relation to earlier cinematic modes. The first is "chaos cinema," a term which Matthias Stork popularized in a compelling set of video essays focused particularly on recent action cinema; beyond this context, however, Stork's notion of "chaos" resonates with the feelings and fears of many critics and theorists in the face of digital-era cinema. This broader perception of chaos is sometimes traced back to the digital unmooring of images from the indexical referents to which photographic films remained tied; on this basis, the somewhat oxymoronic term "digital film" is often linked to an even more unsettling, because more basic, sense of chaos: according to some critics, the digital (and the moving images it produces and supports) is correlated with a sweeping transformation of human society and subjectivity itself. On the other hand, though, not all critics are similarly alarmed by digital-era chaos. David Bordwell's concept of "intensified continuity" effectively denies the radical stylistic break announced in Stork's analysis; Bordwell sees the newer films as perhaps faster and even more hectic than classical Hollywood fare, but basically constructed according to principles of classical continuity – just intensified. By way of contrast, Steven
Shaviro’s notion of “post-continuity” – developed in the context of his analysis of “post-cinematic affect” – provides another view of contemporary moving image culture, one which links formal and aesthetic transformations not only with new technologies but also with broader social, cultural, and economic changes underway right now.

As we think through these and related concepts, we will engage a variety of recent movies from formal, phenomenological, affective, cultural, and environmental perspectives. We will seek to understand whether a radical change has taken place in recent cinema, to assess what its significance might be, and in this way begin to think through the implications of and for our viewing habits in the twenty-first century. Crucial to these explorations will be a hands-on engagement with post-cinematic moving images: we will dissect, analyze, compile, synthesize, juxtapose, quantify, and deform digital images in an attempt to understand and respond to post-cinema through new and emerging scholarly and creative practices.

Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas. Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.

Required Textbook:

Additional readings (listed in the course schedule) will be made available via Canvas.

Course Requirements:
1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.

2. Short written and/or videographic responses to the reading and viewing assignments each week. Questions or prompts will be announced in class the week prior. Please be prepared to present your text or video response in class. You are allowed no more than one missing assignment; late assignments (i.e. assignments received after class and up to 7 days afterwards) will count as half-complete (i.e., you are allowed no more than two late assignments). Assignments received more than 7 days late will not be accepted.

3. Presentation (20-30 minutes) of readings and relevant materials, followed by moderation of discussion. Your presentation should summarize readings, highlight particularly interesting or controversial aspects, and connect them to other relevant materials (texts, films, videos, artworks, etc.) and contexts, as well as formulating questions that will help focus class discussion. Your task is essentially to frame and guide our discussion of the readings, and to insert them into our larger ongoing discussion.

4. Final assignment (details below).

Grading:
Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:
30% Weekly assignments
20% In-Class Presentation/Discussion
50% Final project
Final Assignment:

There are two basic options for your final assignment: 1) a traditional term paper, or 2) a piece of scholarly videographic work (or related critical media project). Details for each type of assignment are listed below:

Option #1 – Term Paper:

Term papers (5000 words) are to be submitted by Friday, March 22, 2019 (no later than 6:30pm). As a prerequisite for the final paper, a 1-2 page proposal will be due in class on February 26, 2019; you should be prepared to discuss your progress and turn in an updated proposal or progress report on the final day of class (March 12, 2019). In your proposal, you should outline the focus or object of your analysis, explain the specific method(s) of analysis, state your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and formulate a tentative thesis statement. The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.

2. A short description of the film(s) or other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not seen the films (or other media) being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as “a difference which makes a difference,” and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn’t make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn’t belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2–3 paragraphs long.

3. An in-depth analysis of the film(s) or other media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it’s probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a “reading” of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn’t make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis sufficiently. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your
introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.

4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you’ve written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper’s overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be one paragraph in length.

5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA (or other established) style.

In addition to the above guidelines, please consult the Duke Writing Studio’s handout “Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy: Writing About Film” (https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/film.pdf) when conceiving and writing your paper. The handout includes links to several other helpful resources, including similar handouts from Dartmouth and Yale. A more comprehensive guide is provided by Timothy Corrigan, A Short Guide to Writing about Film. Eighth Edition (Boston: Pearson, 2011).

**Option #2 – Videographic Work:**

If you choose instead to produce a videographic assignment (or related type of critical media project), you should similarly submit a 1–2 page proposal in class on **February 26, 2019** (or earlier); you should also be prepared to screen an excerpt or rough cut of your project on the final day of class (**March 12, 2019**). Videographic work can be either argumentative or more experimental in nature, but you should justify in your proposal why your particular approach is suited both to your subject matter and to your own body of work and development as a scholar and/or practitioner. (A more experimental approach may seem to make more sense for students of art practice than for students of art history/film and media studies, but this is not necessarily true; I would like for you to explain briefly why your approach makes sense for you, in relation to your previous work, future projects, and larger academic or artistic interests.) You should also state the estimated length of your video piece and provide a brief rationale. The final project, which is to consist of your video work and a short (approx. 2–3 pages, in most cases) textual accompaniment, will be due on Friday, **March 22, 2019** (no later than 6:30pm).

There are many possible types and modes of videographic work that you might choose to pursue. We will watch a number of examples in class, while the quarterly peer-reviewed journal *[in]Transition* ([http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/](http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/)) might be consulted for a broader overview of existing work.

Video essays need not (and probably should not) be structured like an academic term paper, but they should certainly provide evidence of scholarly research and the conventions pertaining to it. In this respect, it is worth thinking through the guidelines for term papers, above, and considering how and in what respects they either do or do not apply to videographic criticism and analysis, which in terms of content and methodology might follow more traditional principles of humanities-based film studies or instead avail itself of the tools and techniques of digital humanities.
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More “experimental” approaches must also demonstrate a high level of practical and critical rigor. They should be executed in such a way as to illuminate or invite speculation about significant aspects of the work or works to which they respond – or the material, semiotic, or other central characteristics of post-cinematic media more generally. They may take the form of short videos, or they may employ other (computational or analog) means for generating images that perform such work.

In all, the emerging field of videographic (and related) studies of moving-image image remains highly experimental and open to innovation. It will thus be one of our central tasks in this course to work through ideas about goals and methods, and more generally about the relations of videographic work to traditional film studies scholarship and to critically informed creative responses.

Students with Documented Disabilities:

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://oae.stanford.edu).

Course Schedule:

01.08. Introduction: Parameters for Post-Cinema I


VIDEO ESSAYS: Matthias Stork, “Chaos Cinema”; Kevin L. Ferguson, “Volumetric Cinema”; Selected other video essays. (In-class video screenings)


01.10. Screening: Transformers (Michael Bay, 2007)

01.15. Parameters for Post-Cinema II


01.17. Screening: Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, 2013)
01.22. **Experiences of Post-Cinema I**

**TEXTS:** Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence'"; Steven Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect"; Shane Denson, "Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect"


01.24. **Screening: Unfriended (Leo Gabriadze, 2014)**

01.29. **Experiences of Post-Cinema II**

**TEXTS:** Sergi Sánchez, "Towards a Non-Time Image: Notes on Deleuze in the Digital Era"; David Rambo, "The Error-Image: On the Technics of Memory"; Shane Denson, "The Horror of Discorrelation: Mediating Unease in Post-Cinematic Screens and Networks"


01.31. **Screening: Coraline (Henry Selick, 2009)**

02.05. **Techniques and Technologies of Post-Cinema**


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02.07. Screening: Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2007)

02.12. Politics of Post-Cinema I


02.19. Politics of Post-Cinema II


02.21. Screening: Hugo (Martin Scorsese, 2011)

02.26. Archaeologies of Post-Cinema I (Paper/Project Proposals Due!)


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02.28. Screening: Speed Racer (The Wachowskis, 2008)

03.05. Archaeologies of Post-Cinema II

[Suggestions for further study: Friedrich Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter / Wolfgang Ernst, Chronopoetics / Bernard Siegert, Cultural Techniques]

03.07. Screening: Snowpiercer (Bong Joon Ho, 2013)

03.12. Ecologies of Post-Cinema


03.22. Final Projects Due! (by 6:30pm)

Bibliography:
Birchall, Clare, Gary Hall, and Peter Woodbridge. “Deleuze’s Postscript on the Societies of Control.” Video essay: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Glus7lm_ZK0.


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Denson, Shane, Therese Grisham, and Julia Leyda. "Post-Cinematic Affect: Post-Continuity, the Irrational Camera, Thoughts on 3D." *La Furia Umana* 14 (2012): http://bit.ly/T3Q5sr. Also available here:
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http://www.academia.edu/1993403_Post-Cinematic_Affect_Post-Continuity_the_Irrational_Camera_Thoughts_on_3D. Rpt. in Denson and Leyda, eds. Post-Cinema.


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Leyda, Julia. "Demon Debt: Paranormal Activity as Recessionary Post-Cinematic Allegory." Jump Cut: A Review of
Denson and Leyda, eds. Post-Cinema.
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cinema.html.
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97-121.
Pasquinelli, Matteo. "Google's PageRank Algorithm: A Diagram of Cognitive Capitalism and the Rentier of the
Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2009. 152-162. Author’s repository:
_____.. Steven Shaviro, "Melancholia or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime." Sequence 1.1 (2012):
http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/sequence1/1-1-melancholia-or-the-romantic-anti-sublime/.


http://www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory2.0/.

