

Humanities Seminars Program

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Mary Beth Haralovich, PhD
Professor Emerita
Fellow, Hanson Film Institute
University of Arizona

“Film & Narrative Space”

This course explores how films establish and convey narrative space — the on-screen space of storytelling — through visual style. The Set Decorators Guild -- one member of the creative team for film -- calls their work “the art of silent storytelling.”

Narrative space encompasses everything on screen — where characters live and what they wear, where story takes place and how characters interact with their environment.

Course readings are film theory essays that explore concepts such as staged reality, action staged for the camera, the specific aesthetics of cinema as compared to theater and art, and more. Readings also include production histories that explore how the filmmakers conceptualized and approached the film.

All readings and all screenings are available on the course D2L site. You will receive an email with instructions for setting up your account and for accessing the course materials.

In this course, we will:

- Delve into the role of art direction, production design and visual style in film storytelling
- Explore and apply film theory concepts
- Examine different ways that genre films deploy visual style to create narrative space that is effective for that genre

First, we use the “family drama” to introduce and explore basic concepts. In these films, the domestic space of the home expresses and represses gender roles, sexuality, and race.

We continue with three units/topics: life stories, meditations on landscape, and suspense.

- three diverse life stories films range from the personal to the epic: elaborate staging and cinematography examine class relations in a World War I prisoner of war camp (Jean Renoir); composed frames present a father-daughter relationship in 1960s Japan (Yasuhiro Ozu); and an urban aesthetic critiques life in an ethnic neighborhood of Paris (Mathieu Kassovitz)

- three meditations on landscape — Aboriginal life in the Australian outback (Warwick Thornton); the French Foreign Legion in East Africa (Claire Denis); and the political context of astronomy in the Atacama desert of Chile (Patricio Guzman).

Landscape storytelling invites us to enjoy broad vistas and natural beauty. Landscape storytelling situates human beings, characters, within this awe-producing narrative space.

- three approaches to suspense – securely stitched into suspense by the master (Alfred Hitchcock); classical Hollywood film noir (Otto Preminger); and a vague sense of uneasiness (Atom Egoyan). Sends shivers up your spine!

COURSE SCHEDULE

January 25 — INTRODUCTION - the space of the home: gender roles, sexuality, and race

Screen: *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002, 127 min.)

in class clips from:

All That Heaven Allows (Douglas Sirk, 1955)

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (R. W. Fassbinder, 1974)

1950s-1960s tv domestic family comedies *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*

Read:

Higgins, Scott. “Orange and Blue, Desire and Law: The Colour Score in *Far From Heaven*”

Silberg, Jon. “A Scandal in Suburbia: With *Far From Heaven*, Cinematographer Edward Lachman, ASC and Director Todd Haynes Craft an Elegant and Compelling Homage to the Films of Douglas Sirk”

UNIT I -- LIFE STORIES

February 1 -- elaborate staging and cinematography examine class relations in a World War I prisoner of war camp

Screen: *La Grande Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937, 114 min.)

Read:

Jackson, Julian. “Variations on Realism: ‘Interior’ Truth and ‘Exterior’ Truth”

Kracauer, Siegfried. “Basic Concepts”

February 8 -- quiet and composed frames present a father-daughter relationship in 1960s Japan, on the eve of her marriage

Screen: *An Autumn Afternoon/Sanma no aji* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1962, 112 min.)

Read:

Bazin, Andre. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image"

Ebert, Roger. *An Autumn Afternoon* (31 May 2011).

February 15: world building: the city in danger - the city as danger

Screen: *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995; 98 min.)

Read:

Astruc, Alexandre. "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Styleo"

Vincendeau, "*La haine* and after: Arts, Politics, and the Banlieu"

UNIT II — MEDITATIONS ON LANDSCAPE

February 22 -- indigenous peoples and/in the Australian outback

Screen: *Samson & Delilah* (Warwick Thornton, 2009; 101 min.)

Read:

Botsman, Peter. "Reading *Samson and Delilah*, Reading Australia."

Samson & Delilah website: samsonanddelilah.com.au

March 1 -- military bodies in desert landscape: the French Foreign Legion in East Africa

Screen: *Beau Travail* (Claire Denis, 1999; 90 min.)

Read:

Bordwell, David. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice"

Taylor, Charles. "Beau Travail."

March 8 -- seeking history in the sky above and earth below

Screen: *Nostalgia for the Light/Nostalgia de la Luz* (Patricio Guzman, 2010; 90 min.)

Read:

Sharrett, Christopher. "Nostalgia for the Light." *Senses of Cinema* 65 (November 2012). Web.

Kracauer, Siegfried, "Basic Concepts"

UNIT III — NARRATIVE SPACE OF SUSPENSE

March 22 -- securely stitched into suspense by the master

Screen: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1934; 75 min.)

Read:

Balazs, Bela. "Silent Soliloquy"

Munsterberg, Hugo. "Why We Go to the Movies"

Nehme, Farran Smith. "*The Man Who Knew Too Much*: Wish You Were Here"

March 29: subjective points of view in Hollywood film noir

Screen: *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944, 88 min.)

Read:

Aladjem, Terry K. "What Eyes Must See: The loved one lost; proof; the villain caught"

Sorrento, Matthew. "*Laura*: Noir of Identity and Illusion"

April 5 -- familiar yet strange: a vague sense of uneasiness

Screen: *Felicia's Journey* (Atom Egoyan, 1999; 116 min.)

Read:

American Cinematographer. Dillon, Mark. "Production Slate: A Dramatic Quest"

Todorov, Tsvetan. "The uncanny ..."

Wilson, Emma. "*Felicia's Journey*"