

HOW TO READ A FILM – FILM FORM AND CULTURE

Coordinator: Moya Duffy

One of the reasons we don't pay attention to the form and structure of film is that the form and structure of film disappear behind the very story and the characters they produce. However, film is about making images and editing them into stories. We will analyze and discuss the meaning of six films and start by exploring the image through examining *mise-en-scène* and montage. We will also look at the culture that produced each film, culture in the sense of the general ideological components of society at the time the film was made. For instance, *Rashomon*, our first film, is often seen as a film about the notoriously unreliability of eyewitnesses—an exploration of memory, truth and justice. However, the film was produced in post-war Japan and is a reflection of that time. With a close reading of Kurosawa's camera, it can be viewed as an anti-war film, questioning moral certainties and the roots of violence.

Moya taught academic English at several Hong Kong universities. H.K has a vibrant film industry, so she incorporated film into her courses as a means to engage her students. She has coordinated several film courses for LP2.

Type of Study Group: Presentation followed by discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Please view the assigned film before each class, even if you have seen it before.

Rashomon 1950, directed by Akira Kurosawa

Availability: widely available: most libraries have the DVD. YouTube, streaming on Criterion Channel, HBO Max, Amazon video as download.

Don't Look Now 1973, directed by Nicolas Roeg

Availability: most libraries have the DVD. Prime Video and several streaming services.

Ju Dou 1990, directed by Zhang Yimou

Availability: some libraries have the DVD. Prime video and some streaming services.

Vertigo 1958, directed by Alfred Hitchcock

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Availability: Peacock, YouTube and other streaming platforms.

Chinatown 1974, directed by Roman Polanski

Availability: Hulu, Prime video, HBO Max and other streaming platforms

Power of the Dog 2021, Jane Campion

Availability: Netflix

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

WEEK 1

TOPIC: *Rashomon*, Akira Kurosawa

An introduction to the formal elements of film and how the traditional Japanese arts are reflected in Kurosawa's film.

READING/VIEWING:

Links to online excerpts from *Rashomon* by Paul Anderer.

If you are unfamiliar with the meaning of mise-en-scène and montage, please watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3euNFd7-TCg>

QUESTIONS:

Please view a couple of times the opening scenes. Is there a symbolic meaning to the long tracking shot of the Woodcutter entering and walking through the forest? The photo below is a still from the latter part the film. How does its strong composition inform the overall meaning of Kurosawa's film?



WEEK 2

TOPIC: *Don't Look Now*, Nicholas Roeg

Continuing the exploration of mise-en-scène and montage—openings

READING/VIEWING:

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Links provided to YouTube videos on montage and editing and excerpt from BFI's booklet, *Don't Look Now*

QUESTIONS:

The opening scene lasts just seven minutes but there are more than 100 shots. It is a textbook example of compression and encapsulation—Roeg's camera gives us the ensuing film in a nutshell. Examine the mise-en-scène and montage and comment on his use of the color red and water as symbols of what the film later reveals. What do you make of the two sisters? Here is a short clip from the film, where Roeg's camera comments on their sexuality:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1D6i-wdq1g-IPmzFz8mBA-y1xbMRieAdm/view?usp=sharing>

WEEK 3

TOPIC: *Ju Dou*, Zhang Yimou.

Fifth generation Chinese film; Confucian society

READING/VIEWING:

<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2015/cteq/ju-dou-zhang-yimou/>

Links provided to online readings from *New Chinese Cinema*.

QUESTIONS:

The beautiful Gong Li was Zhang's muse and can be seen in this film as representing women who question their role in patriarchal structures. However, this film has been criticized for indulging Western audiences' taste for orientalist imagery perpetuating stereotypes. What are your views on this matter? Zhang was a photographer before being accepted into the prestigious Beijing Film Academy and his use of colour is riveting. Please comment on how he uses this symbolically—remembering that white is the colour of mourning in traditional Chinese society.

WEEK 4

TOPIC: *Vertigo*, Alfred Hitchcock

Influence of Soviet montage on Hitchcock; commercial success vs. critical acclaim.

WEEK 5

TOPIC: *Chinatown*, Roman Polanski

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Genre in film with an exploration of film noir; this film is considered a major neo film noir.

WEEK 6

TOPIC: *Power of the Dog*, Jane Campion

Continue exploring genre in film and women directors.

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INSTRUCTIONS

Text settings: Begin each response at the left margin below the section title.

Coordinator Names: Listed in alphabetical order. (#Primary contact, *First time coordinator).

Study Group Description: Preferably 150 words or less.

Coordinator Biographies: 30 words or less per coordinator. Coordinators are listed in alphabetical order.

Type of Study Group: List all that apply: •Presentation followed by discussion; •Mostly discussion; •Seminar, Workshop, •Reports by participants, •Other (specify)

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Include approximate cost of required materials.

Books: Full title in *italics* followed by author. Add editor/translator/publisher if a specific edition is required.

Coordinator Supplied Materials: e.g., email attachments or study group website, or links to online materials. Provide up to three examples of the sources for articles and excerpts here and/or in the Syllabus.

Films, videos, DVDs: Specify if a video subscription is required.

Syllabus:

Weeks 1-3: Provide Topics, Readings and at least 3 Questions/week

Weeks 4-12: Provide Topics for each week. Readings and Questions may be added but are not required.

NEW: GUEST SPEAKER HONORARIUM POLICY

Each 12-week study group is allowed two (2) paid guest speakers @ \$200.

If you plan to have an outside guest speaker who requires an honorarium:

- Discuss with your Curriculum Committee contact
- Read the attached [Honorarium Policy](#)
- Submit [Honorarium Request Form](#) to your contact
- After the guest has finished your session, notify the IER Treasurer

N.B. This does not apply to outside guest speakers who are not paid