Criticism is an act of ordering, of organizing relationships, of identifying and observing patterns that make the cinematic experience meaningful as well as emotional, comprehensible as well as felt.

--Bywater and Sobchack, *Introduction to Film Criticism*

Bywater and Sobchack are talking about *cineliteracy*, or reading the film text. We rarely think of a film as a text, but, in fact, every film is a complex layer of *language systems* that when synthesized create meaning. These language systems include photography, mise en scène, movement, editing, sound, acting, drama (sets and costumes), story (narrative structure), writing (screenplay), ideology, and theory/criticism. Note that criticism is only one of the many language systems we use to read the film text, for, in film, we cannot separate content from form. In other words, to understand what a film is saying, we must understand how it is saying it because form and content work together to create meaning.

Louis Giannetti has pointed out in his introduction to *Understanding Movies* that the time for including cineliteracy in American education is long overdue. Though we spend a lot of time in this country watching moving images, we tend to watch them, as Giannetti says, “uncritically, passively, allowing them to wash over us, rarely analyzing how they work on us, how they can shape our values.” For example, when Clark Gable removed his shirt to reveal his bare chest in 1934’s *It Happened One Night*, men’s undershirt sales plummeted. When Humphrey Bogart wore a trenchcoat in *Casablanca*, trenchcoat sales doubled. When Diane Keaton wore her baggy trousers, vests and ties in *Annie Hall*, she changed the way a generation of young women dressed. When Cuba Gooding, Jr. shouted “show me the money” in *Jerry McGuire*, the catchphrase came to signify our culture’s materialistic obsessions. These are simple examples, but they illustrate the power and influence of film texts.

**Outcomes:**

In this course, our **goals** are to

- be more active, intelligent readers of the film text
- understand the complex, intricate relationship between content and form in movies
- interpret the messages that both reflect our culture and shape our behaviors
- think about and discuss why we respond to these moving images the way we do
- gain familiarity with several filmic critical approaches, as well as the basic filmic language systems, know when to apply them, how they help create meaning, and understand how to synthesize them
- write clear, well-developed film reviews and scholarly essays, using relevant critical approaches and language systems
- use specific examples from the films and scholarly sources to support your arguments
Critical Approaches:

Our written text, Bywater and Sobchack’s *Introduction to Film Criticism*, focuses on the major critical approaches to film:

- Journalistic
- Humanist
- Auteurist
- Genre
- Social Science
- Historical
- Ideological/Theoretical (Semiology, Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, Cultural Criticism)

Many of the filmic critical approaches have been “borrowed” from literature; thus, we will refresh our memory of literary criticism by reading relevant sections in Charles Bressler’s text, for example, that dovetail with cinematic critical approaches. I will also ask you to read several short articles, such as Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Horkeimer and Adorno’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” from their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and others. We’ll also study a relatively new form of criticism, *star studies*, first introduced by Richard Dyer, and take a look at *critical synthesis*, which uses several critical approaches to analyze one film text. You will discover that when you apply the language systems of film and critical theory, the result is a sophisticated, intelligent analysis of the film text.

Work Requirements:

You will write one film review (three to four pages); two critical analysis papers (five pages), each applying one of the critical approaches; and one longer critical analysis paper (10 – 12 pages) using a synthesis of the language systems and any relevant critical approaches to analyze your film text(s). All source material must be properly cited and documented according to the MLA form, and all sources must be legitimate and credible (no Rotten Tomato reviews or Joe Smith’s Film Blog, for example).

For your final, you will work in teams and select a three-minute scene from a film of your choice. Set up your clip. Where does it fall within the narrative structure? Show the scene and discuss it in terms of the filmic language systems. How do they help convey the meaning of the scene? Discuss what critical approaches you might use to analyze the film, give examples of how you would use these critical approaches, and talk about why you would use these particular critical approaches. This analysis will be presented during the final period. Your grade will be based strictly on the presentation of material. No written paper is required.

As always, your participation is essential for lively, meaningful class discussion.

Grading:

- 10% Class Participation
- 10% Film Review
- 20% Critical Analysis Paper #1
- 20% Critical analysis Paper #2
- 30% Synthesis Paper
- 10% Final presentation
General Policies:

- Class attendance and participation are necessary in order for you to pass the course. **You will lose one letter grade for each absence after your second one.**
- I often hold one-on-one conferences. Failure to attend a scheduled conference may result in a lower grade.
- As a rule, I do not accept a paper after that set of papers has been graded and returned. Under extenuating circumstances, I may accept a late paper, but I will deduct one letter grade for each day it is late.

A plagiarized paper (in whole or in part) will receive an automatic F and may result in failure of the course. Policy dictates that I report all instances of plagiarism to the Dean of Academic Affairs. Students will conduct themselves in a manner befitting the College policy on Academic Integrity. Consult this section in your Undergraduate Catalogue for official definitions of cheating, misconduct, plagiarism, and providing false information (and their consequences).

- Turn off all cell phones and put them away before you come into class. If you are texting, tweeting, etc., I count you absent—because you’re not really in the class. You are somewhere else. Laptops are also unnecessary, unless I specifically ask that you bring them to class.
- If you fall asleep in class, I count you absent—because you’re not really present. You are in dreamland.
- Purge the word “like” from your vocabulary, unless, of course, you are using it correctly. Saying “like” every other word makes you sound illiterate—not something you want to strive for in college.
- Maintain a respectful attitude toward the course, your fellow students, and me. I will do the same for you. Know that disrespectful behavior—online or in class—will affect your grade.

Film Texts:

A work of art, like a film text, is a product of its time and the culture in which it is created. The film both reflects and influences the culture. The filmmaker often has an ideology, or a way of looking at the world, that influences how the narratives play out. Sometimes the filmmaker’s intention is to unmask wrongs, guide us toward solutions, or just make us think about social issues that affect us all. We revel in the art, the technique, and the mastery of image-making that underscores the content of the film, for—always—in this medium of storytelling form and content create meaning. To repeat the point, how a film is made (form) must support what the film is trying to say (content).

This semester, we will focus primarily on 2018 film texts—all of which address issues unfolding in our present-day culture. Some of them set their stories in the past or future and ask us to make connections to our present. However, to understand where and who we are now, we need to take a look at where we’ve been, so our first few films will reflect our past. Think of
them as benchmarks, standards of measurement, that have influenced how we see, think, and talk about films in our own time.

All film texts and dates are subject to change, depending on our progress through the course. Most we will watch together in class and at least one you will watch on your own outside of class. We will also be viewing clips from various films that illustrate the concepts, language systems, and critical theories we are discussing.

*It Happened One Night* (1 hour, 45 minutes, Frank Capra, 1934)
*Casablanca* (1 hours, 42 minutes, Michael Curtiz, 1942)
*Annie Hall* (1 hour, 33 minutes, Woody Allen, 1977)
*Crazy Rich Asians* (2 hours, Jon M. Chu, 2018)
*Black Panther* (2 hours, 14 minutes, Ryan Coogler, 2018)
*The Hate U Give* (2 hours, 13 minutes, George Tillman, Jr., 2018)
*Bohemian Rhapsody* (2 hours, 14 minutes, Brian Singer, 2018)
*Widows* (2 hours, 9 minutes, Steve McQueen, 2018)
*A Quiet Place* (1 hour, 30 minutes, John Krasinski, 2018)
*A Star Is Born* (2 hours, 16 minutes, Bradley Cooper, 2018)

**Schedule:**

**Jan 15/17**

Introduction to the Course
The Studio System/Star Studies
Acting
Screenplay/Narrative Structure
Journalist Approach
Film Reviews
Assignment: Read Chapter 1—The Journalist Approach—for Thursday
Assignment: Read Chapter 2—The Humanist Approach—and Chapter 6—The Historical Approach—for Tuesday, Jan 22nd

**Jan 22/24**

*It Happened One Night*
Discussion
Application: Journalist Approach, Humanist Approach, Historical Approach, Narrative Structure, and Acting
Assignment: Read Chapter 4—The Genre Approach for Tuesday, Jan 29th

**Jan 29/31**

The Genre Approach: *It Happened One Night*
Photography/Mise en Scène
Sets & Costumes
Editing
*Casablanca*

Film Review Due Thursday, Jan 31st
ENG/FS 404/Page 5

Feb 5/7  
*Casablanca*

Discussion

Application: Humanist Approach, Historical Approach, and the language systems

Assignment: Read Chapter 3—The Auteurist Approach for Thursday, Feb 7th

Feb 12/14  
The Auteurist Approach: Woody Allen

*Annie Hall*

Discussion

Application: Genre Approach, Auteurist Approach, and the language systems

Assignment: Read Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” for Tuesday, Feb 19th

Assignment: Read Chapter 7—Ideological/Theoretical Approach—pages 183-85, Feminism

Feb 19/21  
Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Feminism, pages 183-85

*Crazy Rich Asians*

Discussion

Applications: Genre Approach, Feminism Approach, and the language systems

Assignment: Read Chapter 5—The Social Science Approach for Tuesday, Feb 26th

**Critical Analysis Paper #1 due Thursday, Feb 21st**

Feb 26/29  
The Social Science Approach

The Hero’s Journey

Ideology

*Black Panther*

Discussion

Application: Social Science Approach, Genre Approach (Super Hero), Hero’s Journey, and Ideology

Mar 5/7  
Finish *Black Panther* /discussion

Mar 6  
*Bleasby Colloquium: Ukranian poet Ilya Kaminsky*

Mar 9 – 17  
**Spring Break**

Assignment: Read Chapter 7—The Ideological/Theoretical Approach—for Tuesday, Mar 19th

Mar 19/21  
*The Hate U Give*
Discussion
Application: Social Science Approach and the language systems
Assignment: Read Horkeimer and Adorno’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”

**Critical Analysis Paper #2 due Thursday, Mar 21st**

Mar 26/28  
Realism/Classicism/Formalism  
Cultural Criticism  
Sound  
Movement

Apr 2/4  
*Bohemian Rhapsody*  
Discussion  
Application: Ideological/Theoretical Approaches and the language systems

Apr 9/11  
*Widows*  
Discussion  
Application: Ideological/Theoretical Approaches and the language systems  
Assignment: Watch *A Quiet Place* for Tuesday

Apr 16  
*A Quiet Place*  
Discussion  
Synthesis

Apr 18 - 22  
Easter Break

Apr 23  
Monday Classes Meet

Apr 24  
Undergraduate Research & Arts Celebration  
No Classes

Apr 25  
*A Star Is Born*  
Synthesis Paper due Thursday, Apr 25th

Apr 30/May 2  
*A Star Is Born*  
Discussion  
Synthesis

May 3  
Last Day of Classes

May 6, 7, 8, 9  
Final Period