

Cedar Crest College

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Office hours: T and TR., 2:30-3:30 p.m.; W, 11:00 a.m.-noon; and by appointment

Women Go to the Movies

Or

How to Read a Film

ENG 280 00 2 (3 credits) Fall 2009 Wednesday Section

Texts:

Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*

Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*

Handouts: Film terms, archetypes, outline of *A Woman's View*, syllabus/studyguide.

Additional Readings are on two-hour reserve at the circulation desk in the library:

Ask for The Woman's View Folder, which contains required excerpts from Jeanine Basinger's book

Course Description:

The study of images of women in film, from the 1930s "Golden Age" to the present.

This class is scheduled to meet for *three* hours rather than the usual two and a half. This is to ensure that we have adequate time to view and discuss the works on the syllabus.

Discussions will focus on the ways in which movies and their portrayals of women mirror their times; the ways in which film adaptations transform the original sources; the use of various forms, techniques, and conventions of film and prose; and archetypes as keys to "reading" both literature and films. This course fulfills the categories of Humanities (new curriculum) and Arts, Arts & Society, and Self-Design (old curriculum). It does not fulfill the WRI-2 requirement.

Format: Lecture/discussion/viewing.

Course Objectives (the following are in accordance with the educational goals of the Humanities Department, as stated in the "Assessment Framework" document):

--At the completion of the course, students will have an overview of developments in film in general and in the genre of the woman's film in particular.

--Students will have knowledge of individual works and their cultural contexts.

--Students will have mastered strategies for reading a novel/work of nonfiction and watching a film critically.

--Students will have knowledge of basic film and literary terms.

--Students will gain an appreciation of literature and film.

Course Outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate knowledge of selected films and written texts, along with their cultural contexts
- Students will demonstrate critical thinking and synthesis in the analyses of film and written texts.
- Students will demonstrate competence in viewing and reading.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of film and literary terms and film history.

Course Requirements:

- Attendance is required.** Because of the nature of this film course, it is important that you attend class. You are allowed two absences; these include medical and sports excuses, so plan your cuts carefully. More than two absences will affect your final grade by at least one-third of a letter grade. Excessive lateness and early departures will count as absences. Five absences will result in a grade of **F**.
- Completion of all **assigned readings**.
- Preparedness for occasional in-class response writing.
- Participation in **class discussions**.
- Completion of **three tests**.

Assessment (Grading):

- There will be **three tests. You will be responsible for the following:** films viewed in class, content of class lectures and discussions, required reading, and course handouts (syllabus/study guide, lists of archetypes and terms, and critical excerpts).
- The first test will consist of multiple-choice questions and an essay section. The second and third tests will consist of multiple choice and true and false questions.
- The essay answer on Test #1 (30 points) must address the question fully and clearly, providing support/examples. If weak sentence structure or other grammatical errors are serious enough to detract from clarity of content, up to 10 points will be deducted.
- The class grade will be based on attendance and meaningful contributions to discussions on a regular basis.

The **final grade** will be the average of the three test scores and the class grade.

Grading Scale and Equivalents:

| | | |
|--------------|----|-----|
| 97 and above | A+ | |
| 93-96 | A | 4.0 |
| 90-92 | A- | 3.7 |
| 87-89 | B+ | 3.3 |
| 83-86 | B | 3.0 |
| 80-82 | B- | 2.7 |
| 77-79 | C+ | 2.3 |
| 73-76 | C | 2.0 |
| 70-72 | C- | 1.7 |
| 66-69 | D+ | 1.3 |
| 60-65 | D | 1.0 |
| 0-59 | F | |

Additional Student Responsibilities:

--**Make-Up Policies:** If you miss a class, you are responsible for viewing the film on your own. Some of the films will, after showings in both sections of the class, be available at the reserve desk for in-library use. The only excuse honored for missing an exam will be a note signed by medical personnel; you will have a maximum of seven days to make up the exam.

--The Cedar Crest **Honor Code** and the **Classroom Protocol Code**, as stated in the Customs Book, will be in effect at all times.

--**Plagiarism**, which is the appropriation of and uncredited use of another's work, is a serious offense. Here is A reminder of the statement on plagiarism distributed to all students in WRI 100: It is dishonest to present oral or written work that is not entirely the student's own. . . . Any language taken from another source, whether individual words or entire paragraphs, must be placed in quotation marks and attributed to the source, following the citation format specified. Paraphrased material from an outside source must also be attributed. In addition, if the student is indebted to another source for a specific perspective or line of argument--regardless of whether the student has directly quoted the source or not--that debt must be acknowledged.

It does not matter if the work is by an established author, a term-paper writer who sold his work to a plagiarism site, your best friend, or a blogger whose writing you find appealing. **Plagiarism** is theft; it is unethical. It is a waste of your time, integrity, and money and a waste of your classmates' and my time and energy. **An act of intentional plagiarism or cheating on an exam will result in a grade of F for the course.**

--**College Policy Regarding Learning Disabilities:** Students with documented disabilities who may need academic accommodations should discuss these needs with their professors during the first two weeks of class. Students with disabilities who wish to request accommodations should contact the Learning Center.

--**Cell Phone Etiquette:** Because of the emergency notification system, phones should be put on vibrate. They should also be put out of sight. If a cell phone rings during class, please hand it to me to answer. I will explain that you are in class and unavailable. Please refrain from checking your phone/texting during lectures, discussions, and films. Those tiny lights are very annoying to the people sitting near you, and you may miss information that you will need for one of the tests.

Before you leave class on the first day, make sure that you have the phone numbers/e-mail addresses of two of your classmates.

Syllabus/Study Guide

August 26

Introduction to the Course

Film: *Rachel Getting Married* (2008). Directed by Jonathan Demme; screenplay by Jenny Lumet. Kym (Anne Hathaway) leaves her rehab facility to come home for the wedding of her sister Rachel (Rosemarie DeWitt). While we have the classic Hollywood ending of a marriage—we'll also find a number of other subjects we'll be returning to this semester. Hathaway was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Actress in a Leading Role. Note the use of the handheld camera.

September 2

Film: *It Happened One Night* (1934), directed by Frank Capra; screenplay by Robert Riskin, based on Samuel Hopkins Adams' short story "Night Bus."
Claudette Colbert plays the role of Ellie Andrews, a run-away heiress; Clark Gable plays Peter Warne, a reporter who falls in love with her. The famous motel scene provides a good introduction to the effects of The Motion Picture Production Code.
Question to consider: what makes Colbert's character sympathetic?

September 9

Required Reading for this date: *Rebecca* (1938), novel by Daphne du Maurier, Chapters 1-7.

Also, read by date of first exam: Basinger, "The Genre" and the beginning of "The Woman Herself," from *A Woman's View*, pp. 3-25 (on reserve).

Film: *Rebecca* (1940), directed by Alfred Hitchcock (this was the first film Hitchcock made for an American studio); screenplay by Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison. Stars Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine (Fontaine played similar roles in Hitchcock's 1941 *Suspicion* and Orson Welles's 1944 *Jane Eyre*). Watch (and listen) for references to the Cinderella story. Who does Mrs. Danvers remind you of?

This film belongs in the gothic horror category; Mary Ann Doane's term is "paranoid gothic" (*The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, 1987). Early reviewers of the novel called it "romantic"—but is it?

September 16

Required Reading: *Rebecca*, Chapters 19-21 (Note a significant difference between the novel and film versions).

Film: *Now, Voyager* (1942), based on Olive Higgins Prouty's 1941 novel of the same title. Directed by Irving Rapper; screenplay by Casey Robinson.

This is an example of what Mary Ann Doane calls the "medical discourse film" (in which the protagonist is suffering from a physical or psychological affliction); see also *Girl, Interrupted*, on our syllabus.

Bette Davis stars as Charlotte Vale, who journeys from madness to moonlight. A kindly psychiatrist (Claude Rains) helps repressed and lonely Davis, who finally finds strength (and beauty)--and romance. Here's the description from *Movies Unlimited*: "Features a lush Max Steiner score, classic dialogue ('Don't let's ask for the moon when we have the stars'), and tips on multiple cigarette lighting." Note how the film manages to incorporate all this and more, including the theme of maternal sacrifice. It's also a film for *fashionistas*: note how Charlotte's clothes function as symbols.

Note: Prouty also wrote *Stella Dallas--A Story of Mother Love* (1923), the basis for three film adaptations (including the 1990 *Stella*, starring Bette Midler) and the first radio soap opera. Fans of Sylvia Plath might be interested to know that Prouty provided Plath's scholarship for Smith College.

September 23

Film: *Mildred Pierce* (1945), based on the 1941 novel of the same name by James M. Cain. Directed by Michael Curtiz; screenplay by Ranald MacDougall and Catherine

Turney. Joan Crawford won an Academy Award for her performance as the title character in this blend of woman's film and *film noir*.

Mildred Pierce is a successful restaurateur and the mother of the extremely demanding Veda (played by Ann Blyth). Watch the opening scene of the flashback carefully; see how this scene in Mildred's kitchen sets up Mildred's character and reveals her motivation for everything that she does (Julia Johnson, "Mildred Pierce," *Magill's*). The film tamed down the story line considerably; also, the entire "who done it" portion was added to the film.

Note the effects of lighting (illumination and shadows).

Question for discussion: What mixed/double message about a woman's place does this film send?

September 30 Test #1 Part I will be multiple choice; Part II will be an essay question.

October 7

Required Reading: Basinger, *A Woman's View*, pp. 203-209, on *Imitation of Life* and "the male gaze."

Films: Two adaptations of *Imitation of Life*, based on Fannie Hurst's best-selling 1933 novel: *Imitation of Life* (1934), directed by John Stahl; screenplay by William Hurlbut (credited), Sarah Y. Mason (uncredited), and Preston Sturges (uncredited).

Imitation of Life (1959), directed by Douglas Sirk (this was Sirk's last Hollywood film); screenplay by Eleanore Griffin and Allan Scott.

Get out your handkerchiefs for this women's weepie." Hurst's rags-to-riches story of a white maple syrup salesrep and her friendship/partnership with a black woman was originally published in serial [magazine] form under the title *Sugar House*.

The 1934 film version followed the novel's plot fairly closely, with two major exceptions: the film adaptation's ending is more hopeful, and Bea's love interest is an ichthyologist (all the better to send him off and away on long research trips?). There are references to the Depression and to the color bar, but the tone of this version is much lighter than that of the novel or the 1959 version. The 1934 version also stars Rochelle Hudson as the teenage Jessie Pullman, Louise Beavers as Delilah Johnson and Fredi Washington as the teenage Peola Johnson. We'll also see a preview that features Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington.

The 1959 version of *Imitation of Life* retains the black and white pairs of mother and daughter and the subplot of "passing" (for white), but the backdrop for the opening credits will give you a strong clue as to how this 1959 adaptation departs from the original work. The heroine has a new name, is now an actress, and shows far less spunk than her 1934 counterpart. And while Lana Turner, who stars as Lora Meredith, does have to acknowledge that she hasn't been a very good mother, her story has a far happier ending (in the traditional sense) than that of Hurst's Beatrice Pullman. This film manages to be both melodrama raised to an art and an indictment of an empty consumer society. The 1959 version stars Lana Turner as Lora Meredith, Sandra Dee as the teenage Susie, Juanita Moore as Annie Johnson, and Susan Kohner as the teenage Sara Jane Johnson. (Note: the names for all four female principal players were changed.)

Watch the mirror scenes closely. In *From Reverence to Rape* (1974, 1987), Molly Haskell points out that mirrors and frames are Sirk's visual trademarks. Two questions to consider: Why is this the perfect title for a movie, and how important is the metaphor of acting (the theater) in this version?

October 14 No class meeting on this date

October 21

Film: *Baby Boom* (1987), directed by Charles Shyer; original screenplay by Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer. J. C. Wyatt (played by Diane Keaton) discovers that motherhood changes her life. Sam Shepard plays Dr. Jeff Cooper.

What makes this "new woman's film" especially interesting for us in this course? See last section of "Terms" handout (Doane and Hollinger).

Please note that films shown in the following weeks contain *strong, mature content*.

October 28

Required Reading: *The Color Purple* (1982), novel by Alice Walker, pp.1-79, 136, 203.

Film: *The Color Purple* (1985), directed by Steven Spielberg; screenplay by Menno Meyjes. Whoopi Goldberg plays Celie; Oprah Winfrey plays Sofia. Goldberg, Winfrey, and Margaret Avery (Shug) were all nominated for Oscars.

Walker uses the epistolary or letter form; what challenges does this pose for adaptation? Note the theme of community in both the novel and the film. Note some significant differences as well: in the film, what happens to the relationship between Celie and Shug? Also, what subplot have Spielberg and Meyjes added? (It has to do with a theme that dominates Spielberg's films.)

One criticism of this film is that it was "overproduced" (watch the opening scene carefully and compare it to the first pages of the book).

November 4

Test #2 Quiz on *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), *Baby Boom*, and *The Color Purple* (book and film).

Film: *Thelma and Louise* (1991), directed by Ridley Scott; original screenplay by Callie Khouri.

Louise (Susan Sarandon) and Thelma (Geena Davis) go on the ultimate road trip after a weekend getaway becomes violent. This female buddy film *still* generates controversy. Class discussions will focus on the categories of female friendship, revisionist western, and "deadly doll" film (the last phrase is Christine Holmlund's). Pay careful attention to the end; how does this film avoid a tragic conclusion?

November 11

Required Reading: *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), novel by Amy Tan, pp. 1-83 ("Feathers from a Thousand Li Away").

Film: *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), directed by Wayne Wang; screenplay by Ronald Bass and Amy Tan. Ming-Na plays June; Lisa Lu plays An-mei.

Both the novel and the film adaptation interweave the stories of four Chinese women (the members of the Joy Luck Club) and their American-born daughters. Note the ways in

which the film simplifies the stories; what is lost? In her essay "Thematic Deviance or Poetic License? The filming of the Joy Luck Club," Suzanne D. Green says, "While the film version . . . is beautiful and moving, it does not effectively communicate the deeper messages of the text that rank this novel among the best of the twentieth century."

November 18

Required Reading: *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), memoir by Susanna Kaysen (complete work).

Film: *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), directed by James Mangold; screenplay adaptation by James Mangold, Lisa Loomer, and Anna Hamilton Phelan.

Winona Ryder plays Susanna Kaysen; Angelina Jolie won an academy award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance as Lisa Rowe.

What challenges did adapting Kaysen's memoir pose for the screenplay writers? Are there significant differences between the two versions? How does this movie incorporate and update the characteristics of what Doane calls the woman's "medical discourse film"?

A successful adaptation is one that remains true to the spirit of the original work; can we conclude that *Girl, Interrupted* is a successful adaptation?

November 25 No class meeting on this date—Thanksgiving Break

December 2

Read: Melissa Silverstein's interview with Courtney Hunt at *Women & Hollywood* <<http://womenandhollywood.com/2009/02/16/interview-with-courtney-hunt-director-of-frozen-river-2/>>.

Film: *Frozen River* (2008). Courtney Hunt wrote the original screenplay for and directed this independent film, in which two single mothers turn to border smuggling to earn money to support themselves and their children. Melissa Leo plays Ray Eddy, and Misty Upham plays Lila Littlewolf. Both Hunt and Leo were nominated for Academy Awards (Best Original Screenplay and Best Actress in a Leading Role). Upham won the American Indian Movie Award for Best Supporting Actress; she has commented on how much she liked the role because it wasn't stereotypical.

Please Note: Test #3 will be given on this date (the test will cover content of classes dating from November 4). This is the third and last test; there will not be an additional exam during finals week.

Last Words

The End

