



FIL 2000 - Film Appreciation

UNIT ONE:

**Main Film Genres**



Dramas are serious, plot-driven presentations, portraying realistic characters, settings, life situations, and stories involving intense character development interaction. Usually, they are not focused on special-effects, comedy, or action.

Dramatic films are probably the largest film genre, with many subsets.

Action films usually include high energy, big-budget physical stunts and chases, possibly with rescues, battles, fights, escapes, destructive crises (floods, explosions, natural disasters, fires, etc.), non-stop motion, spectacular rhythm and pacing, and adventurous, often two-dimensional 'good-guy' heroes (or recently, heroines) battling 'bad guys' - all designed for pure audience escapism. Includes the James Bond 'fantasy' spy/espionage series, martial arts films. A major sub-genre is the disaster film.

Adventure films are usually exciting stories, with new experiences or exotic locales, very similar to or often paired with the action film genre. They can include traditional swashbucklers, serialized films, and historical spectacles (similar to the epics film genre), searches or expeditions for lost continents, "jungle" and "desert" epics, treasure hunts, disaster films, or searches for the unknown.

Comedies are light-hearted plots consistently and deliberately designed to amuse and provoke laughter (with one-liners, jokes, etc.) by exaggerating the situation, the language, action, relationships and characters. Various forms of comedy through cinematic history have included slapstick, screwball, spoofs and parodies, romantic comedies, black comedy (dark satirical comedy), and more.

Crime (gangster) films are developed around the sinister actions of criminals or mobsters, particularly bank robbers, underworld figures, or ruthless hoodlums who operate outside the law, stealing and murdering their way through life. Criminal and gangster films are often categorized as film noir or detective-mystery films - because of underlying similarities between these cinematic forms.

Epics include costume dramas, historical dramas, war films, medieval romps, or 'period pictures' that often cover a large expanse of time set against a vast, panoramic backdrop. Epics often share elements of the elaborate adventure films genre. Epics take an historical or imagined event, mythic, legendary, or heroic figure, and add an extravagant setting and lavish costumes, accompanied by grandeur and spectacle, dramatic scope, high production values, and a sweeping musical score.

Horror films are designed to frighten and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time in a cathartic experience. Horror films feature a wide range of styles, from the earliest silent Nosferatu classic, to today's CGI monsters and deranged humans. They are often combined with science fiction when the menace or monster is related to a corruption of technology, or when Earth is threatened by aliens. The fantasy and supernatural film genres are not usually synonymous with the horror genre. There are many sub-genres of horror: slasher, teen terror, serial killers, satanic, Dracula, Frankenstein, etc.

Sci-fi films are often quasi-scientific, visionary and imaginative - complete with heroes, aliens, distant planets, impossible quests, improbable settings, fantastic places, great dark and shadowy villains, futuristic technology, unknown and

unknowable forces, and extraordinary monsters ('things or creatures from space'), either created by mad scientists or by nuclear havoc. They are sometimes an offshoot of fantasy films, or they share some similarities with action/adventure films.

Musical/dance films are cinematic forms that emphasize full-scale scores or song and dance routines in a significant way, or they are films that are centered on combinations of music, dance, song or choreography. Major subgenres include the musical comedy or the concert film.

War films acknowledge the horror and heartbreak of war, letting the actual combat fighting (against nations or humankind) on land, sea, or in the air provide the primary plot or background for the action of the film. War films are often paired with other genres, such as action, adventure, drama, romance, comedy (black), suspense, and even epics and westerns, and they often take a denunciatory approach toward warfare. They may include POW tales, stories of military operations, and training.

Westerns are the major defining genre of the American film industry - a eulogy to the early days of the expansive American frontier. They are one of the oldest, most enduring genres with very recognizable plots, elements, and characters (six-guns, horses, dusty towns and trails, cowboys, Indians, etc.). Over time, westerns have been re-defined, re-invented and expanded, dismissed, re-discovered, and spoofed.

### ***Narrative (Text/Subtext) – Horror (Halloween is approaching)/Sci-Fi Film Examples***



“Some movies aren’t just movies. They’re closer to voodoo; they channel currents larger and more powerful than themselves.” - Owen Gleiberman (Film Critic)

What makes some movies transcend their respected genre and become a lasting part of the cultural zeitgeist? The answer is the same thing that makes a movie not just an incredibly good drama, comedy, horror, or, science fiction film, but thought-provoking to its very core. This secret ingredient is going to sound rather dry: it’s the film’s *subtext*.

While it's safe to assume the average filmgoer does not select a film based on its sub-textual weight, they'd be misinformed if they didn't think it contributed mightily (and when at its best, stealthily) to a film's overall narrative (story) involvement. For instance, it is highly dubious anyone chooses to view The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) for its 1970's post-Vietnam era allegory about the Have-Nots of America feasting upon the privileged, oblivious youth of our nation.

And yet, it is the subtle underlying social and political subtext of that film's story that brings the otherwise exploitive terror into some other realm of consciousness. The characters and plot tell a story as an allegory for the very real horror taking place in the here and now of the world at that time. It gives the film an extra layer of reality that at its best is undetectable, yet is working on audience members all the same.

While the following is in no way meant to be a comprehensive one, these horror/Sci-Fi films are excellent examples of films that transcended their genre in large part due to their ability to use their stories as allegory to tap into the all too real terror quietly eating away at our unconscious lives (again, during a particular point in historical time).

Night of The Living Dead (George A. Romero, 1968)



The kids in the audience were stunned. There was almost complete silence. The movie had stopped being delightfully scary about halfway through, and had become unexpectedly terrifying... Nobody got out alive. It's just over, that's all. – Roger Ebert

The casting of black actor (and University Professor) Duane Jones as the calm headed hero in a film made in 1968 was, to say the least, audacious. "Night of The Living Dead," about a cross section of Americans holing up in a country house to fight for their lives against hordes of the living dead took place in the time of Martin Luther King's assassination, the year of Civil Rights

advocate and presidential front runner Robert Kennedy's assassination, three years after the Watts riots, and smack dab in the middle of the most important and tumultuous time in the American Civil Rights Movement.

And yet time and time again, Romero has claimed Jones got the part because he was the best actor he knew in Pittsburgh, where they shot the feature on a shoestring budget. But this only makes the casting that much more bold for its honesty, for its integrity. In a sense, Romero is saying: "Here is a man, a good if flawed man who is our hero, our everyman. Yes, the pigment of his skin happens to be black, who cares? There are flesh-eating ghouls out there and you want to talk about race? Get over it."

Upon subsequent viewings, "Night of the Living Dead" reveals itself to be absolute perfection in horror as a pure visceral thrill ride which has its horror amplified to "11" by the all too real social-political horrors of 1968 America: racism, class inequality, and the death of a free, loving society. But its messages are covert, truly engaged as pure allegory as 1968 America was already bubbling over with chaos one didn't have to work too hard to bring subtext to the audience, in fact one needed to work against that happening.

Had there ever been a film where a black man appears as a blonde white woman's knight in shining armor? Romero's statement is this: why should this be a statement?! Ben even slaps Barbara, knocking her out when her hysteria reaches feverous proportions. Again, it is this film's lack of overt politics that makes its statement so potent. We are all the same here, trying to maintain our humanity against a rising tide of psychotic violence in our world.

Later, more classes of America are revealed, as hiding in the basement is a Middle Class family along with a free-spirited 60's couple, and the horror begins to turn inward as their survival strategies and inability to work together as a cohesive group (i.e., the United States of 1968) eventually lead to their demise. Again, the character of Ben emerges as a leader in this group, but he is not without his missteps. His plan to get gas literally goes up in flames. His insistence not to hole up in the basement actually proves wrong-headed. He is not the noble "magic African-American" of liberal fantasies as was popularly featured in Stanley Kramer's, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner of 1967. Ben is merely a decent man trying to survive.

Come daybreak, when Ben, the lone survivor, is shot between the eyes by the hicks we'd been watching on the news, the film suddenly becomes a tableau of disturbing newspaper photos beneath the end credits scroll before returning at the tail end to motion picture as the dead corpse of Ben is thrown in with the other ghouls into a giant bonfire of the dead, this incendiary image an allegory for the self-incinerating United States of 1968.

## The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973)



Directed by William Friedkin and written by William Peter Blatty based upon his own novel, which itself was based on an actual possession case about a boy in Maryland in the 1940's, The Exorcist is often rightly considered one of the scariest movies of all time. It was even re-released in 2000 as "The Version You've Never Seen" and managed to once again be a box office hit. What is it about this film as opposed to countless other Exorcism rip-offs (and its own sequels) that continues to cast its spell?

Academy Award winner Ellen Burstyn plays film actress and single mother Chris MacNeil, temporarily living in Georgetown to film a movie she is starring in. The movie within the movie, while unimportant to the thrust of the film's story, does however clue us in to some of the deep undercurrents of dread working below the story of her young daughter Regan's (an eleven-year old Linda Blair) possession.

Seen acting in her movie, Chris' character is a strong, fiercely independent woman, fighting her way through a mob demonstration to the podium where she grabs the megaphone from the male speaker to deliver her own stirring words of inspiration to the crowd. And cut. Her work day over, she strides back, alone, to her townhouse to the strains of Steve Boeddeker's haunting (and chart topping theme) "Tubular Bells". She is the epitome of the independent woman of the times.

Why is this scene even in the movie? We know she's a film actress, isn't that enough? How does this move the story forward? But Friedkin and Blatty have something else working up their sleeves and beneath their horror, as "The Exorcist" is as much a film about the undercurrents, support and backlash of female empowerment, a surging movement in 1973 (the year of Roe vs Wade's passing) that was taking hold in America and within its households.

For instance, in one scene, Chris yells angrily at her never seen ex-husband on the phone for not taking Regan for the weekend. Regan overhears this in her bedroom, and from that moment forward, the shaking bed and screaming begins. Earlier in the film, before the

mayhem begins, Regan teases her Mom that the director of her movie, Burke Dennings, likes her and that maybe she likes him.

Later, Chris throws a sensational gathering at her townhouse filled with illustrious guests such as a Senator, an Astronaut, a Bishop and Burke Dennings. Chris is having fun, flirting with them, living her life to the fullest when Regan comes downstairs in a trance, and after telling the Astronaut that he's going to "die up there" proceeds to urinate on the carpet. Later in the film, it is Burke Dennings, the object of her mother's affection and Regan's curiosity who winds up being the first murder in the film with even Chris suspecting Regan as having committed the crime. Demon possession or a child's sinking into the mysteries of mental illness and depressive rebellion?

Now this is not to suggest that Regan does not become literally possessed by the devil, after all a child's "acting out" repertoire does not usually include turning her head around three hundred and sixty degrees and projectile vomiting pea soup. We are in the realm of horror as allegory here.

The 1970's contained one the first generation of Mothers en masse who had to choose whether to be the so-called "stay at home Mom" (a derisive term at the time) or join their friends in their rightful pursuit for equality. Many joined the movement yet retained an insidious degree of guilt that they were neglecting their children, a price many feminists had decided they were willing to pay so that their daughters could flourish upon the roads they had paved for them.

Friedkin and Blatty prey upon this underlying fear and guilt of the era expertly. After all, a demon possession, frightening as that prospect is, is quite a stretch from our reality. But there is no fear more grounded than that of a parent losing one's child to the absolute horrors of mental illness that they may have inadvertently caused by their own neglect.

Perhaps the subtext of "The Exorcist" can best be summed up by the words of Entertainment Weekly critic Owen Gleiberman: "The Exorcist spoke at the time to a larger, if unconscious, collective fear...the real birth of girl power."

Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979)



Ridley Scott's seminal 1979 masterpiece has been called a haunted house movie in space or "Jaws in Space." Both of these are crude genre shorthand summations for what screenwriter Dan O'Bannon and Scott were really examining about our society with their taunt sci-fi horror. Scott's second film is in a sense a fitting one after years creating commercials for the corporate world, for the real antagonist of "Alien" isn't so much the creature itself, but the soulless, faceless entity referred to as: *The Company*.

A team of deep space mineral miners, running what is essentially a giant oilrig through space, are returning from their successful mission en route back to earth, when they discover the ship's operating system, referred to affectionately and ominously as "Mother," has taken them into the orbit of an unknown planet due to a distress call. Captain Dallas (a gritty, terrific Tom Skerritt) and Science Officer Ash (a terrifyingly calm Ian Holm) remind them of their contract: if they don't respond to possible distress calls, they forfeit their entire pay. They have no choice. This sets the stage for allowing an Alien being on board their craft and the mayhem of surviving its ever-evolving transformations.

But without the help of The Company's "Mother" computer as well as the proverbial Company Man in the (later revealed) android Ash, the Alien would not have been found, would not have been let aboard the ship and would not have been protected at every stage of its development. When Sigourney Weaver's Ripley (in her brilliant debut) is forced to take over as acting Captain, she finds that this has been The Company's true mission all along as told to her by Mother: Alien Priority One, All Crew Expendable. Had Ripley taken special note of the graphic emblem The Company had placed upon all the doors of Nostromo, she might have been struck by their unmistakable resemblance to the insignia for Purina Dog Chow. In Ridley Scott's sick production design joke he expresses his film's message most succinctly: Corporations see humans as grist for their mill. In simpler terms: They're Alien food.

In essence, "Alien" is a film whose social-political subtext would fit in quite well with today's 99% movement. O'Bannon's script takes this reality of 1979, that Corporations have the same rights as Personhood (a reality in America since the 14th Amendment of 1848) to its logical future: Not only is The Company a Person, this "Person" desires an offspring. One of its own kind; powerful, relentless, with acid for blood, a giant phallus for a head, and one who couldn't give a damn about the individual life of human beings. "Alien" is in fact the first child of a Corporation.

The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)



From the opening shots of Colorado canyons through the rooms, hallways and ballrooms of the empty Overlook Hotel, Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining" slow burns into our unconscious viewing a horror much different than the one Stephen King had in mind in the source material the film was based upon.

Rather than a film about the ghosts in the head of an alcoholic writer being amplified amidst the past tragedies at The Overlook, Kubrick infuses his version with the horrors of a battle scarred and bloodied land where the grand hotel serves as an allegory for the American Class wars that danced upon these Native American graves.

Take for instance the opening sequence where working class teacher/writer Jack Torrance (a Grand-Guignol performance by Jack Nicholson) interviews for a job as the Winter-caretaker with The Overlook's placid, smiling owner Stuart Nelson (perfectly cast television actor Barry Nelson), his office strewn with Native American decor. As Nelson tells Jack the blood-soaked background of the Hotel – that it's built upon a Native American burial ground, that a past Caretaker mutilated his own family here – an unsmiling, silent assistant looks on, eyes shifting back and forth as if to ask constantly "is he with us or against us." Jack is poor, humbled and needs the money, so he'll ignore all other concerns. Kubrick, the ex-patriot, is saying: "Take the money and don't look back, this is the American way."

As the winter goes on, Jack, a man on the brink to begin with, meets ghosts from the hotel's history who convince him the only way he can join The Ruling Class of the Hotel's Golden Ballroom and escape his scruffy working class life, wife and child, is if he slaughters them. Kubrick and Diane Johnson's screenplay infuses the surface horror with the horror of a country built upon slaughter, this hotel upon blood. And so the ghosts of America are asking Jack,

paralleling his first interview: Don't you wish to join the ranks of the Conquerors rather than remain a member of the conquered?

Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining," like "Poltergeist" is on the one hand another expertly executed haunted house movie, and yet its intensity of terror is built upon our nation's collective unconscious guilt at the horror our happiness and prosperity is built upon. No wonder Stephen King was so upset about this film, for this was not the intention of his book, but it makes for one hell of a potent cinematic concoction.

### Poltergeist (Tobe Hooper, 1982)



To the subversion of the suburbs comes Tobe Hooper's, Poltergeist. Much has been written and rumored regarding the true "author" (auteur) of 1982's "Poltergeist." Produced, co-written and with a story by Steven Spielberg, but directed by Tobe Hooper, it certainly has all the earmarks of a Spielberg production crashing into the rough-hewn horror of Tobe Hooper's darkness on the edge of town feel. Coming off of "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and the underrated "The Funhouse" Hooper's imprint in the film's sub textual energy provides the razor sharp talons that rip its way through (albeit, just the right amount) to reveal a much darker message about eighties conformism then was customary for a Steven Spielberg production.

The Freeling family lives in what are known as Sub-divisions, that is, suburbs where every house looks exactly the same and so do most of the families. The head of the household Steve Freeling, (played with down to earth charm by Craig T. Nelson), even works for the real estate developers selling these identical houses to new families of similar social economic status. "They all look the same!" complains one of his potential buyers.

Then things get weirder. The "TV people" start talking to the Young Carol Anne after the programming for the day shuts down. When her pet bird dies, her mother Diane (the lovable JoBeth Williams) goes to immediately flush it down the toilet, but Carol Anne catches her. At

this moment the camera zeroes in on the shadow of the dead bird on the toilet seat. Why? Because Tobe Hooper is giving us a “foreshadow” effect that the dead and children have something in common – a vibrant love and respect for life, that the adults seem to be flushing down the proverbial toilet with their conformity.

By the film’s end it is revealed that the Developer, as Steve screams, “only moved the head stones!” from the cemeteries he had built Cuesta Verde houses upon (Cuesta Verde means “Green Slope” a reference to the sloping slide into the hell of eighties greed.) As nice and as singularly independent as the identity of the Freeling family is, Steve and Diane have sold their souls in this eighties era of conformity. They have in essence, become the living dead, and it has taken the dead stealing their youngest daughter away to have them snap out of their stupor, save her, and leave Cuesta Verde’s slope of green to truly become alive again.

*Written by, Jeremy Sklar (Malcolm Armstrong, edits) © 2019*

### ***The Director***



The director's vision shapes the look and feel of a film. He or she is the creative force that pulls a film together, responsible for turning the words of a script into images on the screen. Despite the director's pivotal role, most Hollywood movies are designed to pull you into the story without being aware of the director's hand.

There is, however, this theoretical directorial perspective: *Auteur Theory*

Auteur theory has influenced film criticism since 1954, when it was advocated by film director and critic François Truffaut. This method of film analysis was originally associated with the *French New Wave* and the film critics who wrote for the French film review periodical *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Auteur theory was developed a few years later in the United States through the writings of The Village Voice critic Andrew Sarris. Sarris used auteur theory as a way to further the analysis of what he defines as serious work through the study of respected directors and their films.

At first glance, auteur theory is deceptively simple; its basic premise is that a movie director, in certain circumstances, can be assigned the title of 'author'. It is, however, far more complex than that. As, Andrew Sarris, explained:

*"The strong director imposes his own personality on a film; the weak director allows the personalities of others to run rampant."*

So who is an auteur, and how might they be recognized from a 'normal' (invisible) film director?

To be considered an auteur, a filmmaker must have a body of work, which can be analyzed for ongoing themes and considerations, whether they occur intentionally or unintentionally. One example would be the theme of the distant father in Steven Spielberg's work. In addition to this, an auteur must have a differentiating style, almost instantly recognizable.

It seems like a perfectly plausible theory: the director is responsible for the film, and so can be judged as to whether or not they are an auteur. However, more than one person will work on a film, so what makes the director more worthy of praise than, say, the scriptwriter or the camera operators? Using a similar theory, a movement in Germany once believed that scriptwriters are the primal force in a film's style; after all, the director must work within the confines of the script. But conversely, you could argue that the director has the ultimate control, and is, therefore, responsible for the film's final output. In a collective medium, it is almost impossible to establish who has the most control.

Another problem with the theory is that it creates a hierarchy within film circles. Those who subscribe to it would automatically assume that an auteur is a better filmmaker than a 'normal' (invisible) director, many of whom might make wonderful films.

The most common examples given to support auteur theory are Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Akira Kurasawa, and, Jean-Luc Godard (one of the original New Wave theorists besides being a director). Of course, these directors are "old school" examples. More current directors who have been deemed true "auteurs" include Wes Anderson, Martin Scorsese, Tim Burton, Quentin Tarantino, Christopher Nolan, and Paul Thomas Anderson. (SEE HANDOUT - Director Interview CLIPS viewed in class)

So, what do you think? From a purely practical filmmaking standpoint -- Is it possible for the "one person, one film" rule to stand up to strict scrutiny?

## **Acting**



The right actor can give a screenwriter's words exciting new depth and dimensions. Actors are essential for conveying emotions to an audience, for bringing the words and ideas in a script to life. Even animated characters rely on the personalities of behind-the-scenes performers.

The actor is a conscious artist who makes major contributions to film (the key may not be directing actors, but casting them). Only the major actor has the potential to express human behavior on the screen.

Three basic approaches to film acting:

Personality Approach:

The personality approach is where the "self" of the actor dominates the performance.

The star system was built around the personality of an actor/actress.

Parts were "tailored" to the studio's talent pool. Actors were typed and to some extent "trapped" into playing only certain types of roles:

- Bette Davis as the tough (yet, vulnerable) woman.
- Henry Fonda as the "quiet" American hero.
- Fred Astaire as debonair."
- James Stewart as "every day man."

Internal Approach:

The actor/actress exposes the inner recesses of the character. The actor imagines a creative fantasy as to background personality traits.

The internal approach - a role begins within the "psyche" of the part. The role is derived from the thoughts, emotions, and feelings an actor discovers in a kind of psychoanalysis of the character.

The approach evolved from the work of a Russian actor-director-teacher, Constantin Stanislavski and was popularized by the Actor's Studio under the direction of Lee Strasberg.

In popular jargon it is called "method" acting.

- It tends to be an introspective.
- External technique of portrayal is "motivated" from within the "personality of the role."
- It has had a tremendous impact on film acting style.

- Marlon Brando, James Dean, Eva Marie Saint
- Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Meryl Streep
- Jeff Bridges, Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio

External Approach: Character emerges from the way one looks, dresses, walks, gestures, and speaks.

It is physical things that the actor/actress does, wears, and uses to build a character (characteristics).

In reality, most great actors depend on all three approaches at various degrees. No one way is better; they are indeed complimentary.

Film acting is representational art - art that masquerades as reality. Actors are the audience's representatives in the drama.

**FILMS VIEWED:**

**"READING A FILM" (Several Unit One exam questions will reference these two films, so, hopefully, enjoy the films, but PAY ATTENTION!)**

Rear Window (1954)

The Big Lebowski (1998)

*END OF UNIT ONE MATERIAL*