

## Introduction to Film: Course Portfolio

### Portfolio Purpose

#### *Portfolio Objective*

Consistent with the rationale described on [courseportfolio.org](http://courseportfolio.org), my purpose in developing this document is to better define the objectives, evaluation instruments, learning outcomes, course materials, and methods of instruction for the *Introduction to Film* course that I currently teach. By making these course documents public, my students and I will benefit from the scrutiny of my colleagues who are teaching similar courses.

More specifically, the goal of submitting this course portfolio is to document and test teaching methods as they apply to learning objectives that include (1) ethical reasoning, (2) media literacy, (3) diversity, and (4) civic engagement.

#### *Reflections*

Speaking for my own personal experience, film is the medium that motivated my current career path as a scholar and educator in the field of media and communication. As a high school and college student my primary objective was to study film and make small, personal movies that reflected my own personal vision. As I continued in my studies, I gradually turned away from film production and focused instead on the cognitive, structural, and semiotic analysis of film and other media.

I like to use the German term “das Gesamtkunstwerk” (synthesis of the arts) to argue for the importance of film education. Owing to its collaborative, interdisciplinary, adaptable and inclusive nature, film is indeed a synthesis of many arts, skills, and professions. As such it deserves special attention in academics and education. Further reinforcing this point is the fact that film plays a central role in shaping, reflecting, reinforcing, and challenging culture. Teaching students the language of film production, perception, cognition, and analysis will improve their media literacy, make them more aware of the network of cultural forces surrounding them, and more articulate at describing and critiquing the larger society within which film is embedded.

Toward the end of achieving the stated objectives of improving ethical reasoning, media literacy, diversity, and civic engagement, I have prepared teaching materials, assignments and assessments to establish an adaptable framework through which these and multiple other related goals can be met. In the reflections section at the conclusion of this portfolio, I will include plans for modifying the course to achieve more specific objectives in each of these categories. First, however, it’s essential to describe the structural elements of the course.

## Course Design

### *Description & Context*

The current course description of *Introduction to Film*, as it appears on my institutional Course Information Outline is as follow:

“Through the study of representative major works of world cinema, students are introduced to the history and development of film as a creative medium of artistic expression and mass communication. Discussion topics include First Amendment issues, technological breakthroughs, technical elements of film making, film genres and the influence of business, economics and socio-political contexts. Students are encouraged to approach film analytically and critically, to consciously examine elements beyond actors and plot, and to expand cinematic interest into realms beyond the Hollywood mainstream production.”

I have recently revised this description to center around five perspectives including Production, Industry, History, Psychology, and Sociology:

“Through the study of representative major works of world cinema, students are introduced to the history and development of film as a creative medium of artistic expression and mass communication. Topics include production practices, cinema as an industry, the relationship between history and cinema, the psychology of cinema, and socio-cultural factors related to cinema. Students are encouraged to approach film analytically and critically, to consciously examine the language and aesthetic forces of cinema, and to expand cinematic interest into realms beyond Hollywood mainstream productions.”

### *Goals & Learning Objectives*

1. Expose students to a broad range of historically important films.
2. Provide students with a better understanding of how film operates on technical, institutional, historical, psychological and sociological levels.
3. Introduce students to history, theory, and criticism as they relate to film.
4. Improve argumentation skills through debate and discussion in the classroom setting.

### *Course Context & Student Population*

*Introduction to Film* satisfies our college wide Diversity/Global Perspective requirement and is a humanities general education elective. Because the course is designated COM 234 and functions as a restricted elective for the Communication program, a number of students are sophomore level Communication majors. However, because of the diversity requirement and its status as a humanities general education elective, there are often a number of majors represented in the classroom.

## Teaching Methods

Due to a broad range of course objectives and status as a diversity requirement and humanities general education elective, *Introduction to Film* must employ multiple pedagogies and principles to be effective. Central to the course are the five perspectives referenced above (Production, Industry, History, Psychology, Sociology).

Fundamental to the understanding of how film is perceived and psychologically processed is a basic knowledge of the mechanical functioning of the medium itself and its relationship to the human perceptual system. To accommodate this need, I demonstrate the apparatus of film using the traditional tools of the craft (celluloid film, cameras, traditional editing equipment, and projectors) and supply students with a self-authored online presentation of 100 slides covering the three stages of film production in a step-by-step fashion. Awareness of practices and technology also sheds light on the division of labor and the institutional structures created by it. The perceptual and psychological effect of film also builds on this basic production knowledge to the extent that the apparatus of film production and exhibition is fundamental to understanding the power of the medium as a form of psychological transportation and intersubjective awareness. Through their understanding of production practices, students are asked to investigate the internal states or “psychological space” of the spectator, director, and/or onscreen character. Insofar as spectator, director, and character are situated in historical and cultural contexts, these aspects of criticism are capable of being addressed as well.

To supplement instruction of basic film production practices, students are required to read weekly chapters from Bordwell and Thompson’s *Film Art: An Introduction*. This text familiarizes students with the terminology of film criticism and provides a broader institutional context for understanding the history of the medium. The knowledge gained from the PowerPoint and textbook is assessed through a standard exam and actively employed through classroom discussion and analysis of selected films.

Lastly, students receive a weekly email with a series of suggestions for how the film might be approached from each of the aforementioned perspectives. This is intended to further define and distinguish each of the perspectives and provide a starting point for critical essay writing.

## *Course Materials*

Students are exposed to a broad range of historically important films. It is obviously impossible to cover anything more than a sample of such films in a fifteen week course, so those that are selected must not only, themselves, be important, but they must also be representative of larger artistic movements or critical figures in the art of cinema. As a consequence, they have to be influential to later works through innovations in at least one aspect of their production methods. To illustrate this point, the following table lists a selection of potential films and provides a rationale for each based on its representation in a larger movement, innovation in technique, or the oeuvre of an influential filmmaker.

Films by Muybridge, Edison, Lumiere, Méliès, and Porter.	Some of the oldest surviving examples of cinema, they illustrate an early evolution of technology and technique that still informs modern production.
<i>Birth of a Nation</i> (1915)	Feature filmmaking.
<i>Battleship Potempkin</i> (1925)	Soviet Montage.
<i>Un Chien Andalou</i> (1929)	Avant-Garde and Surrealist Cinema.
<i>Metropolis</i> (1927) or <i>Nosferatu</i> (1922) or <i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> (1920)	German Expressionist Cinema.
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarves</i> (1937)	Disney and animation.
<i>Scarface</i> (1932) or <i>King Kong</i> (1933) or <i>Casablanca</i> (1942) or <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> (1942)	Hollywood Movies.
<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	Cinematography.
<i>Bicycle Thieves</i> (1948) or <i>Rome, Open City</i> or <i>Paisan</i> (1946) or <i>Germany Year Zero</i> (1948)	Italian Neorealism.
<i>The 400 Blows</i> (1959) or <i>Breathless</i> (1960)	The French New Wave.
<i>The Seventh Seal</i> (1957) or <i>Persona</i> (1966)	The films of Ingmar Bergman.
<i>Mean Streets</i> (1973) or <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> (1971) or <i>Apocalypse Now</i> (1979)	New American Cinema.
<i>Aguirre: Der Zorn Gottes</i> (1972)	The films of Werner Herzog.
<i>Videodrome</i> (1983)	The films of David Cronenberg.
Open Screening	Open Screening

This table is not definitive and will inevitably reflect the expertise and personal preferences of the individual instructor. It is essential, however, that the inclusion of any individual film be accompanied by a rationale describing how it fits into the evolution of film as an art form and cultural force.

### *Teaching Method*

My approach to this course is based on the application of perspectives and terminology in discussion and writing. In courses like *Introduction to Film*, there is a danger of lapsing into a state of critical relativism where students fall under the impression that any analysis and interpretation is valid because films seem to speak directly to our subjective points of view. Overcoming this challenge requires a rigorously structured approach to perspective. There are five perspectives identified under “course design” above and they include: production, industry, history, psychology, and sociology. Among these, “production” is critical because it is the device used to explore the remaining four perspectives. More explicitly, it is through understanding how films are made that aspects of industry, history, psychology or sociology come to make sense. For example, exploring the fictional psychology of Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) can only be accomplished by looking at how Kane is represented through the tools

of the production. Therefore, once students are familiarized with these perspectives through classroom application, discussion and writing come to center exclusively around them.

### *Course Activities*

Course activities include: (1) lectures and questions about terminology and concepts, (2) viewing films in a moderated context, (3) guided discussions that apply the production perspective to each of the other remaining perspectives.

### *Evaluation*

Aside from attendance, students are evaluated based on three criteria: (1) A standard exam used to test comprehension of reading material and notes, (2) Quantitative classroom discussion where students must earn points by making substantive contributions to conversation, and (3) Two structured “Critical Review Essays” used to evaluate knowledge of films and critical perspectives as well as the application of analytical skills. These methods have the advantage of triangulating and mutually reinforcing competencies in terminology, writing, speaking and analytical skills.

The structured Critical Review Essay has the most complex criteria for evaluation. I refer to the essay as structured because it is broken into sections with different questions that need to be addressed in each. The opening section should include vital background information about the film (e.g. director’s name, year, etc.), a description of the method of analysis, a thesis statement, and a preview of the specific scenes that will be analyzed. The body of the paper should contain the analysis of specific evidence and examples within the film. The conclusion should offer the writer’s assessment of the aesthetic value and overall meaning of the film.

### *Outcomes*

#### *Evidence of Student Learning*

Of the three forms of evaluation that occur in *Introduction to Film*, terminology and written analysis are the most amenable to providing evidence of student learning. Due to the nature of classroom conversation it is difficult to provide a rigorous qualitative evaluation of the substance of specific contributions to discussion on a subject. Therefore, a multiple choice exam designed to test students’ knowledge of terminology is one basic but very objective way of determining learning. This test, however, should be considered in tandem with the application of terminology in the Critical Review Essay, which is meant to evaluate written analytical skills.

#### *Progressive Development*

It’s also important that the essays consist of at least two drafts so that students become aware of writing mistakes and analytical weaknesses in their work. Revisions to the Critical Review Essay should be vague and focus on the problem (rather than offering the student a specific solution) so

that students have the opportunity to work through the difficult work of analysis and it's articulation in the writing process.

## Reflection

In this section I will offer a reflection on what I have learned through developing this course and the resulting method for modifying content to meet the objectives of ethical reasoning, media literacy, diversity, and civic engagement.

What I have described above is intentionally broad and capable of providing students with the analytical tools necessary to negotiate a variety of content. Thus, by selecting content that is relevant to the stated goals and specifying criteria for assignments related to them, objectives can be met and measured for effectiveness.

One particular strategy that will be implemented is the use of documentary films to educate students in the four identified goal areas. Because documentary films attempt to present the appearance of an indexical relationship to reality as opposed to the overt façade of classical narrative, they often have a natural tendency toward politics and issues of civil discourse. This results from the power of the medium to focalize events through a single perspective which is, itself, subject to political factors that may be critiqued. Thus, training students to understand and analyze documentary includes interpreting the “preferred reading” of the film and taking an “oppositional reading” so that a meta-critique may be offered of the version of reality presented onscreen.