A Brief Guide to Film Analysis

General Overview: This course inquires into the ways by which social and political meanings are generated through popular culture. We study how the American way of life and its system of values are revealed through Hollywood feature films. In particular we focus on how films generate images of significance in our culture. A film is a series of interrelated visual episodes (connected images) that tell a story. In this course we study the film as a cultural artifact. That is, we systematically analyze Hollywood feature films because these constitute an important vehicle for producing and reproducing images of cultural significance.

Basic Film Composition: As a series of connected images that tell a story, a film is analogous to a book. Like a book it is composed of sentences (shots), paragraphs (scenes), and chapters (sequences). A shot is a single continuous take, filmed in a single session from one camera setup. The basic grammatical unit of the language of film, a shot may range from a single frame taken from a fixed position to a setup involving complex camera movement. A scene is a complete unit of film narration. A scene consists of a series of shots (or less frequently a single shot) that take place in a single location and which deal with a single action. A sequence is a number of scenes linked together by time, location, or narrative continuity to form a unified episode in a motion picture. It is often likened to a chapter in a book, the scene being the equivalent of a paragraph and the shot the equivalent of a sentence. Traditionally, but not always, a sequence begins with a fade-in and ends with a fade-out or some other optical transitional device (Katz, Film Encyclopedia). A montage is a series of shots arranged in a particular order for a particular purpose. In a montage sequence, the shots are arranged so that they follow each other in rapid succession, telescoping an event or several events of some duration into a couple of seconds of screen time.

Viewing films in this class: In this class a film begins when the screen first lights up, or when sound begins, whichever comes first. A film ends when the screen finally darkens or the sound ends—whichever comes last. It is impossible to know how all of the choices are made in a film, but a film is intended to begin and end with an image—sometimes produced by a sound rather than a picture. Remember, we study all of the images in a film to determine their cultural significance. Thus, the logo representing the studio that produced the film, the maintitles (which provides the film's title and may well contain opening credits), and the end credits (which sometimes contain additional scenes) potentially are important parts of the film and subject to our analysis. While rare, studio logos sometimes are used to emphasize something in the opening. For example, in Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, the studio logo becomes the setting for the opening shot and scene of the film. A film contains thousands of images. How do we know which ones are the most important for our purposes? Which shots, scenes, and sequences reveal the cultural significance we seek? Only time and experience this semester will entirely answer this question. But, for now, here are some rough guidelines to get you started in your analysis. As you watch the film concentrate on:

- Opening and closing shots in a scene
- Unusual or striking shots in a scene
- Opening and closing scenes in a sequence
- Opening and closing sequences in the film
Some practical advice: Take notes as the film progresses. Don't just let the film wash over you in the darkness as we usually do when we are viewing the film for entertainment. You must concentrate and learn to observe details that are ordinarily absorbed, if at all, subconsciously. Above all, remember it is not sufficient to summarize a film's plot and identify its major characters. We are looking for the elements of film composition that provide significant images of our culture. The biggest cultural indicators may be found in the smallest details. Be patient. Initially it tends to be difficult and frustrating to view films in this way. But, it gets easier with practice and hard work. Also, intelligent and perceptive people disagree about compositions as complex as films. We see different things. We interpret things differently. That is why we will discuss the films in class. A final warning--it is a serious mistake to rely on so-called expert opinions about what a film means for our purposes. View the films yourself and think about them. Feel free to consult any source about them. I encourage you to view these films with others and to talk about them. Just don't let others do your thinking for you!

Specific concerns for the analysis of war films: We are studying cinematic war to understand and critically assess its contribution to the images of America and Americans that emerge from this film genre. We seek to explore the contribution of Hollywood films to our national capacity to know if, when, why, and how to wage war. Specifically we are concerned with the war film as it emerged during the Vietnam and Post-Vietnam eras and its impact on “moral clarity” in American culture. Thus, for each individual film as we view them, and then for the films as a whole when all have been viewed, we are concerned with answering four questions:

1. How do Americans fight?
2. Why do Americans fight?
3. What image of America and Americans emerges from the film(s)?
4. Do these images directly or indirectly reinforce or subvert the perspectives on America, Americans, and America’s responsibilities in the world reflected in the assigned reading?

Final concerns: To be prepared for discussions each student must view the films on schedule; i.e., before the first class meeting after the film is screened. Remember, we are concerned with the images that emerge from film. An image is a reproduction of the form of a person, object, or an event; it is not the person, object, or event itself. It is a mental picture of something not real or present. Culturally, it is the concept of something that is held by the mass public. It is the essential nature and character of a person, object, or event, which is projected to the public--especially as interpreted by the mass media. Most commonly, images are produced over time, in fragments that eventually come together to form the mental picture of the object, person, or
event. For the films included in our study of Cinematic War, to determine the “images” within films remember to look for and take notes about:

- The most significant (key) characters
- The most significant (key) shots, scenes, and sequences
- The most significant (key) dialogue
- The most striking use of film “techniques” (camera angles, lighting, music, etc.)
- The implicit or explicit presence of the myths of American Exceptionalism, Redemptive Love, and Redemptive Violence

To interpret these images, pay attention to the use of:

- Protagonists & antagonists
- Heroes, and villains
- Anti-heroes

Then, as the number of films viewed grows look for patterns—similarities and differences among films that reveal continuity and discontinuity, consistency and inconsistency in the portrayal Cinematic War.