

VES 70: The Art of Film

Spring 2016

Visual Essay Instructions

The second assignment for “The Art of Film” is a visual essay that consists both of a **visual component** (4-5 minutes) and a **written component** (4-5 pages).

The main goal of this assignment is that you demonstrate a firm understanding of the four major **film techniques**—mise-en-scène, narrative, editing, and cinematography—as well as a substantial knowledge of the four **cinematic movements**/film styles that we discussed in class and that shaped the development of film form between the 1920s and 1940s: German Expressionism/Weimar Cinema, French Poetic Realism, Soviet Montage Cinema, and Classical Hollywood Cinema.

I. PREPARING FOR YOUR VISUAL ESSAY / DEVELOPING YOUR ARGUMENT

Since this assignment is specifically oriented towards advancing your **visual competencies** and practicing your “**visual thinking**,” you should, first of all, try to develop your argument from looking at and comparing a significant number of films from the cinematic movement(s) that you would like to focus on in your project.

As a starting point, you can think about the following ideas for your visual essays:

- **German Expressionism/Mise-en-Scène:** Create a ‘Montage of the 1920s Metropolis’ that captures how films from German Expressionism, the Weimar Street Film, and/or the City Symphony Movement have aimed at portraying urban life in the 1920s. Your montage can be based on similarities or contrasts between these different sub-genres.
- **French Poetic Realism/Narrative:** Trace a storyline across different films that demonstrates how films from French Poetic Realism (or French Silent Cinema) often subordinate their narratives to the overall creation of a mood, a tone, an atmosphere. Try to underline your argument through an (almost) seamless montage across films.
- **Soviet Montage Cinema/Editing:** Create a montage by re-editing sequences from different films according to at least three different principles of montage outlined by Eisenstein (metric montage, rhythmic montage, tonal montage, overtonal montage, and intellectual montage). Your montage can be focused on examples from Soviet Montage Cinema or you can take other examples that you re-edit in a ‘Soviet montage style.’
- **Classical Hollywood Style/Cinematography:** Explore how films from Classical Hollywood Cinema (comedies, musicals, gangster films, westerns, etc.) have shaped a certain film style through their use of cinematography, framing, image composition, etc. You can either focus your visual essay on one particular genre or trace a technique (based on similarities or contrasts) across different genres from Classical Hollywood Cinema.

Your visual essays should be based on at least **4-5 different films**. Apart from these first suggestions, you are also allowed—and encouraged—to develop your own arguments that might extend beyond the topics indicated above. Other options for your visual essay include:

(1) **Comparison across different cinematic movements:** Develop an argument that compares and contrasts the use of a specific cinematic technique across two or more cinematic movements.

(2) **Comparison with contemporary cinema:** Compare the use of a certain technique in one (or more) of the cinematic movements mentioned above and its variations in contemporary cinema (e.g. by focusing on examples from one specific genre).

If you choose one of these two additional options, please make sure that your argument is based on a **precise analysis** that allows you to comment on the **differences and similarities** between these films from different cinematic movements resp. from different periods in film history.

II. MATERIAL AND GUIDELINES FOR YOUR VISUAL ESSAY

For your visual essays, we have prepared a shared **Dropbox folder**, in which you will find a substantial number of films from the different cinematic movements mentioned above. You can use these films as a starting point for your visual essay, but you are also encouraged to include other examples (by visiting the Film Study Library and/or using online sources).

You can access the Dropbox folder with the following link:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/p5wwiqd3aqgncqk/AABDseEwzy7_4Rdysp-dyKdAa?dl=0

Furthermore, on the course website (under “Assignments”), you will find a “**Further Viewing List**” for each of the cinematic movements that you can consult when you start your research.

The crucial aspect for your visual component will be that you edit the different film clips—from at least **4-5 different films**—in a way that they **clearly demonstrate your argument**. Remember the quote by Matthew Kirschenbaum that the best visual essays should “**simultaneously communicate and complicate**” your main argument. As you create your visual component, think of it as an exercise to develop a “**visual argument**” **in its own right** that is productively complemented by (but not a simple visual companion of) your written essay.

III. GUIDELINES FOR YOUR WRITTEN COMPONENT

Your written component of this assignment is a **critical essay** in which you should **underline and contextualize your visual argument**. In order to get an overview on the specific aspects of a critical essay, please closely review chapter 1 of Timothy Corrigan’s *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, especially the paragraphs on “The Critical Essay” (pp. 12-14), which he situates between the theoretical essay and the movie review. Furthermore, chapters 2 and 5 will give you ideas of how to prepare for your writing, collecting ideas, taking notes, etc. as well as guide you through the process of structuring your essay and reviewing your arguments (including a “Checklist” on pp. 123-125). All chapters are posted on the course website (under “Assignments”).

In addition to your critical essay, please submit the following documents:

- A **filmography** resp. a full list of the sources that you used for your multimedia component, indicating both the audio and visual material (film clips, etc.) that you incorporated.
- A **bibliography** of the sources that you consulted in the process of your research for your visual component and critical essay (books, articles, etc.).

IV. LAYOUT AND SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The visual component should be **4-5 minutes**, and the written component should be **4-5 pages** double-spaced, 12-size font with standard margins (1 inch). Before submitting, please make sure that you very carefully proofread your paper (or arrange for a proofreading with your fellow students) so that it has no spelling and/or grammatical errors.

The visual components should be uploaded to the course website (under “Visual Essay;” instructions for uploading your projects are under “Assignments”), and all papers must be submitted in hard copy and via email (as PDF file) to your section leaders on **Friday, March 11, 2016 at 8pm**. Projects submitted after March 11 will not be accepted for full credit. Projects will receive a grade deduction of 1/3 letter grade for each day following March 11.

V. GENERAL GRADING CRITERIA FOR YOUR VISUAL ESSAY

The grading criteria for your visual essay will be the following categories:

- (1) Thesis / Argumentation of your visual essay (both components) – 40%
- (2) Contextualization / Knowledge of film history (both components) – 30%
- (3) Creativity and proficiency in film production (visual component) – 30%

VI. SPECIFIC GRADING CRITERIA FOR A CRITICAL ESSAY

The following overview will show you in detail how your written essays will be graded and what kind of criteria will be used in order to define your grade for this assignment.

A, A-

Of excellent quality indicating a full mastery of the subject. Thoughtful essay informed by precise film analysis and wider reading showing clarity of thought and personal insight.

Understanding

Thorough understanding demonstrated with an insightful and creative film analysis.

Coverage

Comprehensive range of relevant evidence used, demonstrating independent thought.

Structure

Clear, fluent, integrated, and focused.

General

A = Striking insight demonstrated: creative and sophisticated.

A- = Excellent in all areas and displaying originality.

B+, B, B-

Good understanding of basic principles and relevant evidence, with a coherent and logical argument showing analytical ability.

Understanding

Good understanding of all key issues and wider implication with a convincing film analysis.

Coverage

Breadth in examples and evidence used without any major omissions; evidence of profound understanding of film analysis and mastery of film terminology.

Structure

Coherently and logically structured.

General

Excellent in some areas or of high quality in all.

C+, C C-

Sound understanding demonstrated with some analysis. An adequate and satisfactory comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to make a close film analysis. The student has met the basic requirements for the assigned work.

Understanding

Sound understanding of basic principles and main issues with some evidence of analysis or synthesis.

Coverage

Appropriate material but little evidence of extended profound understanding of film analysis and mastery of film terminology; possibly some omissions.

Structure

Clearly presented but little development.

General

Superficial and of low quality in a number of areas.

D+, D, D-

Basic understanding of the main issues demonstrated.

Understanding

General knowledge demonstrated but analysis limited in depth and breadth.

Coverage

Skeletal coverage of film analysis and basic material.

Structure

Adequately presented and generally logical.

General

Superficial and of low quality in a number of areas.

E

Work is unsatisfactory—unsystematic, incomplete, and/or inaccurate.

Understanding

Key issues not identified; poor analysis or none.

Coverage

Some inaccuracies or omissions; inappropriate material.

Structure

Argument sketchy and disorganized with loose ends.

General

Some knowledge but poorly presented, answered only in part or flawed, or unacceptably brief.