

English 395W. Lyric Film

Steven Dillon  
Pettigrew 307  
Office Hours: MTTh 11-12

Required Texts:

David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Film Art  
Russell Banks, The Sweet Hereafter

### **Course Schedule**

Jan 15 M MLK Day; No class

Jan 16 T 12-1 Introduction

Jan 22 M What is a Poet? What is Poetry?

Dead Poets Society (Peter Weir, 1989)  
Total Eclipse (Agnieszka Holland, 1995)

Reading: Film Art, Chapter 2, “The Significance of Film Form”

Jan 29 M Novel → Poem

The Sweet Hereafter (Atom Egoyan, 1997)

Reading: Russell Banks, The Sweet Hereafter  
Film Art, Chapter 3, “Narrative as a Formal System”

Feb 5 M Poem → Film

The Wings of Desire (Wim Wenders, 1987)

Reading: from Rilke, Duino Elegies  
Film Art, Chapter Six, “The Shot: Mise-en-scene”

Feb 12 M Jean Cocteau

Blood of A Poet (1930)  
Orpheus (1949)

Midterm Recess

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March 5 M Derek Jarman

The Angelic Conversation (1985)  
The Last of England (1987)

March 12 M Soviet Film-Poetry

The Color of Pomegranates (Sergei Paradjanov, 1969)  
The Mirror (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1974)

March 19 M Pasolini

Oedipus Rex (1967)  
Teorema (1969)

March 26 M Documentary

Daniel Reeves, Ganapati (1986)  
Isaac Julien, Looking For Langston (1989)

April 2 M Short Film/Lyric Film

Maya Deren, Meshes of the Afternoon (1943)  
TBA

Course Requirements: Regular Attendance; Prepared Questions each week; Paper proposal w/ bibliography; 20-25 pp. term paper. Class participation will only be admired. Mathematics: Term Paper =50% of final grade; everything else = 50%.

Prepared Questions: I have an official set of questions one week ahead of time, and each student will be assigned one. You don't have to make an "oral report," but something more considered and prepared than the usual moment of class participation and comment would be the idea.

Term Paper: I'll be looking for an extended argument and discussion, with appropriate criticism, research, and bibliography. You have a choice of topic, but I'm asking you to write in relationship to themes and contexts in this class. You should avoid focusing entirely on a film from this syllabus. You may wish to write about other films by directors in this class, or find other films and texts. In addition to films, you may wish to focus substantially on problems of criticism or theory; i.e. to what extent is the language of "poetry" and "lyric" used in cinema theory or the history of cinema criticism? You might also explore other directors associated with "non-narrative" film, who do not necessarily appear in the more restricted confines of "poetic cinema" I set out here (such as Jean-Luc Godard). I would be happy to guide you to other films and writings, and make suggestions. Think of "finding a term paper topic" as an important part of the class, and one that you need to find time for.

#### Logistics of Film Watching:

I'm simply going to ask people to check out videos in audio department of the library, and watch them on their own, whenever you like. This loses out on the big-screen flavor, but means not having to schedule 5 or 6 hours of extra time. Also you can watch in chunks, and watch more than once. All films will be on reserve.

Course Description: This seminar studies the relationship of poetry to film through the viewing and discussion of a wide range of (mostly European) film. Film is most often compared to the novel, and most often discussed and theorized in terms of narration, but there are substantial traditions of "film-poetry," and we will introduce ourselves to some of the inter-connecting themes and questions associated with these films. Typically, we will discuss one or two movies, read some associated criticism or theory, and also a few related poems. The seminar will depend on your careful and thorough preparation for its success. I will have a number of recurring topics and themes that I will bring back from week to week, but I invite you steer discussion to places that you want to go, as well.

**Week #1.** Questions for: What is a Poet? What is Poetry?

Dead Poets Society (Peter Weir, 1989)

Total Eclipse (Agnieszka Holland, 1995)

How are poets represented in film? How do films evaluate poetry?

Consider this first set of films as a way into the more obviously “lyric” poems of the class. These are both narrative films, which contain extended meditations on the role of poetry. Most of the films in this class have been considered as masterful or powerfully influential by some rather considerable set of persons; these films I consider more exemplary, than necessarily wonderful. Still, I think we can have a good preliminary discussion about what “poetry” might mean in a cinematic context.

There are quite a few films about artists, but as we might expect, fewer films about poets and novelists, than films about visual artists (especially painters) or even composers. Obviously a main problem is how to make the written word interesting or central in a visual medium. Other mainstream films we might have looked at for this week include The Barretts of Wimpole Street, about the romantic courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning or Il Postino, a recent Italian film about a poor fisherman who asks the poet Pablo Neruda to help him court a beautiful woman.

Dead Poets Society

- 1) What does “poetry” come to mean in this film? Does poetry represent lots of different things or a relatively restricted set of things? Is “poetry” complicated, varied, or simple?
- 2) What is the relationship of Poetry to Society? Is the relationship multiple or singular? Varied or repetitive?
- 3) What do you make of Robin Williams as a representative of Poetry? Is he supposed to embody the Poetic?
- 4) How does the film narrative use actual quotations or readings of poems? Are actual poems decoration or substantially deployed? Do any scenes center on poems spoken, overheard, or read?
- 5) Is the film, although undoubtedly narrative, “poetic” in any way? Is it visually “lyrical”? Does it mean to embody poetry, or aspects of poetry (“poetry” in the sense that the film defines it) in the way that it tells the story, or in the way it shows us images?
- 6) Does it seem to you that the film has a moral?—a moral having to do with poetry?

## Total Eclipse

Total Eclipse is what in America we sometimes call a “biopic,” the cinematic biography of a famous person. You may have seen Anthony Hopkins as Picasso, Nick Nolte as Thomas Jefferson, or Gary Oldman as Beethoven. Here Leonardo di Caprio is Arthur Rimbaud, the extraordinary French poet (1854-1891); David Thewlis is Verlaine. As the prefatory title-card tells us, Rimbaud is often said to have invented modern poetry. His writings and life have influenced many poets of the twentieth century (including Pier Paolo Pasolini). He wrote basically two collections of poems, known to us now as A Season in Hell and Illuminations, and then presumably gave up writing poetry at the age of 19. When he was 16 Rimbaud made this famous declaration in a letter: “I’m lousing myself up as much as I can these days. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a seer. You won’t understand this at all, and I hardly know how to explain it to you. The point is, to arrive at the unknown by the disordering of all the senses. The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, to be born a poet, and I have discovered I am a poet.”

- 1) How does Total Eclipse use actual poems by Rimbaud? How important are the words of his poems?
- 2) Verlaine is thought of as the old-fashioned, conventional poet; Rimbaud, the incomprehensible modern. Does the film itself seem “old-fashioned” and “conventional” in the way that it tells its story? Would you say that it is, basically “narrative” or “non-narrative”? Are we meant to understand the links between episodes, or do we just jump from one thing to the next?
- 3) There is some nudity and sex here, and some violence. These scenes are “from life,” no doubt. But does it seem that they are there because they show important aspects of character and intellect, or are these scenes here primarily because this is a movie, and movies require a certain amount of sex and violence? (Are the filmmakers brave or exploitative?)
- 4) Rimbaud’s eccentric life and sublimely original poetry have influenced many poets and artists. But why do you imagine the people who made the film would guess that Rimbaud’s eccentricities would interest the perhaps less obviously eccentric and sublime people in the movie audience?

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Film Art: An Introduction

This is a standard textbook in film classes through the United States. Bordwell and Thompson are much respected scholars of American and European film history, and textbook does a good job of treating complex theoretical issues in relatively clear and sensible language.

You might wish to read Chapter 1, which looks at various mechanical and production-angle aspects of movies. We won't officially discuss this chapter in class.

Please do read Chapter 2, "The Significance of Film Form," pp. 39-58.

Think about the questions on p. 57 with respect to each of our films, especially # 4

What principles of progression or development are at work throughout the form of the film?  
More specifically, how does a comparison of the beginning and ending reveal the overall form of a film?