Film Genres:
Investigating the Mystery Film

Student Learning Outcomes
By the end of this course, you will be able to
- Identify and define major features of a significant moving image genre
- Identify and use basic concepts of film analysis;
- Use appropriate terminology for film analysis, applying these terms correctly in class discussion and critical writing;
- Analyze how cultural, gender, class, and identity work in moving image narratives;
- Use close reading skills in analyzing both films and critical texts;
- Apply research skills incorporating use of academic databases, cinematic resources, academic resources (online and in print), and film reviews;
- Demonstrate skill in identifying relevant resources for developing a research topic exploring a film/theory/theme, resources such as books, articles, book chapters, and reviews.

General Education
Successful completion of this course provides General Education credit for the A3. Build Knowledge in the Humanities and B4. Develop Information Literacy outcomes.

Course Description
This course will delve into the genre of the mystery film, long one of the most popular genres in cinema. We will seek out clues that establish hallmarks of the genre, as well as those films that push its limits. The course will investigate the mystery at the heart of detective films. Critics have suggested that detective stories work to restore order in the world but that narrative arc raises the question of what sorts of order are presented: is it political? Economic? Gendered? Racial? And what happens if a solution is not found? You can thus see how sleuthing will discover that mystery films are not just mindless thrills. Our investigation will interrogate films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* and *Insomnia*, as well as suspects such as *Gosford Park, The Third Man, The Maltese Falcon, The Usual Suspects, Chinatown, Zodiac, Mystery on the Orient Express, and Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. We will map out the characteristics of the genre, as well as why such films are often labelled “thrillers” or “suspense.” We’ll also take a look at films that bend the genre, blending mystery with parody, spy films, horror, etc.

A note on the class: A film course is like any other—you will be expected to prepare ahead of time by reading (and screening) the assignments, and then you will need to come to class prepared to discuss these texts. If conversation flags, if a critical mass of those enrolled seem uninformed of the texts discussed that day, I reserve the right to “encourage” better preparation
through the use of quizzes and the like. Also, you will need to think critically, both in class and in your essays, about the movies we watch. You will also need to have some knowledge of basic cinema studies vocabulary: types of shots, angles, etc. For those who would be glad of a brush-up, I’ll provide some resources you can refer to on Sakai.

**Class Policies**

Students will need to be in class—and prepared—every class meeting. **You should read the assigned Sakai reading before class and have it with you during our meeting.** There will also be an info sheet on each film we screen on Sakai. Because the course will stress detailed discussion of the films, I highly recommend you take notes when you watch the films on your own. You will want to make sure that you arrive and leave on time so as not to disturb our discussions. Turn off cell phones and beepers. The basic rules of courtesy apply—no texting, email, or work for other classes during our meetings. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to make up all work, screenings, and notes for that meeting.

**Documented Disability**

If you have a documented disability, please contact me early in the semester so that we may work out reasonable accommodations to support your success in this course. Please be sure as well to take advantage of the resources available at Disability Services for Students, Office of Student Life, 330 Memorial Union, 874-2098.

**The Academic Enhancement Center and Writing Center:**

The work in this course is complex and can be challenging. To make the most of your time and effort, it’s a good idea to visit the Academic Enhancement Center (AEC) or the Writing Center in Roosevelt Hall. AEC tutors and academic counselors can answer questions, clarify concepts, check your understanding, and show you how to study more effectively. You can make an appointment or walk in anytime during office hours – Monday through Thursday from 9 am. to 9 pm, Friday from 9 am to 1 pm, and Sunday from 4 pm. to 8 pm. For a complete schedule — including when tutors are available specifically for this class — go to [http://web.uri.edu/aec/](http://web.uri.edu/aec/), call (401) 874-2367, or stop by the fourth floor in Roosevelt Hall.

**The Writing Center**

The Writing Center, located in **Roosevelt Hall 009**, supports ALL writers, across ALL disciplines, at ALL stages of the writing process. Our goal is to help you become a better writer, not just write a better paper. One-on-one and group appointments are available with friendly, supportive, highly trained student tutors who have experience working with students at all levels in all subject areas. To view the current schedule or to make an appointment, visit [https://uri.mywconline.com/](https://uri.mywconline.com/) (you will have to set up a quick account). Find more info at [http://web.uri.edu/aec/writing/](http://web.uri.edu/aec/writing/). Walk-in appointments are often available, but we encourage you to make an appointment ahead of time to ensure availability.

**SUMMER SCHEDULE:** Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays 11 AM - 5 PM; Opens May 28.

- We help ALL writers, in ALL disciplines, at ALL stages of the writing process.
• Appointments are always FREE. An average appointment lasts up to 45 minutes. Walk-ins may be accommodated, but appointments are recommended to ensure availability. Students can book in advance online at uri.mywconline.com.

• There is no limit to the number of appointments students can make, although we encourage spreading them out enough to allow writers to develop and revise their work on their own between appointments.

• Professor verification forms are available upon request if students would like to demonstrate to you that they participated in a tutoring session.

Plagiarism

All submitted written work must be your own; if you consult other sources (class readings, articles or books from the library, articles available through internet databases, or websites) these sources MUST be properly documented, or you will be charged with plagiarism and will receive an F for the paper. In some cases, this might result in a failure of the course as well. If you have any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, visit the following website: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/.

Texts

There are no books to buy for the course. However, you will be responsible for watching the assigned films ahead of time. I’ll put all films for the course on reserve in the library but if you choose to find them online, make sure you line up your providing source ahead of time. Most are available through Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, and Youtube. Rentals are generally $3-$4; please see the list below. In addition, there will be a few essays to read for each class; you can find them under “Resources” on the class Sakai site.

Chinatown ($2.99 rental on Youtube; Amazon Prime)
The Maltese Falcon (1941 version) ($2.99 rental on Youtube)
The Third Man (Netflix; $3.99 rental on Amazon/Youtube)
Zodiac (Amazon Prime; $2.99 rental on Amazon/Youtube)
The Usual Suspects ($2.99 rental on Youtube)
Vertigo ($3.99 rental on Amazon/Youtube)
Rear Window (1954 version) ($3.99 rental on Amazon/Youtube)
Memento ($2.99 rental on Youtube; $3.99 rental on Amazon)
Insomnia (2002 version) ($2.99 rental on Youtube)
Shaft (1971 version) ($2.99 on Youtube)
Devil in a Blue Dress (Free w/ ads on Amazon)
Silence of the Lambs (Netflix; $2.99 on Youtube; $3.99 on Amazon)
Copycat (1995 version) (Netflix; $3.99 on Amazon/Youtube)
Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy (2011 version) ($3.99 on Amazon/Youtube)
Blow-Up (1966 version) ($2.99 Youtube)
The Big Lebowski ($3.99 on Amazon/Youtube)
Gosford Park ($3.99 on Amazon/Youtube)
**Class Grade**

Attendance is required; only one unexcused absence will be permitted. Excused absences (illnesses, religious holidays, etc.) will require documentation. In addition, I reserve the right to levy reading quizzes as appropriate! These quizzes will fall under the class participation heading of the participation grade.

Short paper (5-7 pages): 30%
Annotated Bibliography: 10%
Final paper (8-10 pages): 40%
Class Participation: 20%

**Grade Scale**

A=93-100%
A-=90-92%
B+=88-89%
B=82-87%
B-=80-81%
C+=78-79%
C=73-77%
C-=70-72%
D+=68-69%
D=60-67%
F-59% and below

**Class Calendar**

All readings available through the Sakai site for the course.

M, May 21—**Intros:** In class: screen *Chinatown*

W, May 23—**Generic Beginnings:**
Before class: watch *The Maltese Falcon* (1941 version); read Rick Altman, from *Film/Genre*; W.H. Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage”
In class: screen *The Third Man*

M, May 28—holiday, no class
W, May 30—**Contemporary Takes and Structuring Detection:**
Before class: watch *Zodiac*; read David Bordwell, from *Narration in the Fiction Film*; Victor Shklovsky, from *Theory of Prose*; Tzvetan Todorov, from *A Theory of Prose*
In class: screen *The Usual Suspects*

Fri., June 1—URI make-up class for Monday; **Hitchcockian Mastery and Mystery:**
In class: screen *Rear Window* (1954 version)

M, June 4—**Christopher Nolan Deconstructs Detection**
Before class: watch *Memento*; read Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*; Garrett Stewart, from *Framed Time*  
In class: screen *Insomnia* (2002 version)

W, June 6—Short papers due; **Masculinities and African-American Sleuths:**  
Before class: watch *Shaft* (1971 version); read Philippa Gates, from *Detecting Men*  
In class: screen *Devil in a Blue Dress*

M, June 11: Annotated bibliographies due; **Detecting Gender: The Female Sleuth**  
Before class: watch *The Silence of the Lambs*; read Philippa Gates, from *Detecting Women*  
In class: screen *Copycat* (1995 version)

W, June 13: **Puzzling Detectives:**  
Before class: watch *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011 version); read from Robert Rushing, *Resisting Arrest*; John T. Irwin, from *The Mystery to a Solution*  
In class: screen *Blow-Up* (1966 version)

M, June 18: **Parodies and Finales:**  
Before class: watch *The Big Lebowski*; read Peter Graham, “From *Mansfield Park* to *Gosford Park*”; Marc Singer, “‘Trapped by Their Pasts’”; Emily Dill and Karen Janke, “‘New Shit Has Come to Light’”  
In class: screen *Gosford Park*

W, June 20: Final essays due by 5 PM to Sakai Dropbox
**Essay Assignments**

**Short Essay**
For your first essay, you will explore one film we have watched in class. Your essay should consider not only character and theme but also the technical cinematic devices (camera work, editing, etc). Rather than disparate points, be sure to blend your points together into a single, coherent argument, one clearly identified in your essay. Supporting evidence from the film in question is vital, so you will need to watch it several times, taking notes. Your essay should be 5-7 full pages. I strongly recommend for focus and development reasons that you discuss no more than 3 key facets and that these components are linked together in your master argument. Remember: the focus here is on your argument and reading of the film, not on summarizing all the details of someone’s else’s interpretation. Also, a major component of your grade for this essay will be using detailed analysis (not summary!) of specific shots and scenes to make a larger case. Papers will be assessed according to the rubric in the syllabus and will be due in class on **Wednesday, June 6**.

**Annotated Bibliography:** By the second half of the term, you must select a research project based on class discussions and reading. You will research the library’s academic search engines such as JSTOR, Project Muse, the Film & Television Literature Index, etc. You should use the library’s main catalog to find relevant books and articles. You might also use relevant video/film clips (utilizing YouTube or Vimeo). You will then compile an annotated bibliography, a list of possible references that provides some reflection and digestion of each entry. Your bibliography should have at least 5 entries with a paragraph of at least 100 words each. This paragraph should not only summarize the source, but should also think through how this source might be used in your project. You should also consider the currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose of each reference entry. Bibliographies will be assessed according to specific, thoroughness, and discussion of how each entry might be of use to your final project. Bibliographies will be due in class on **Monday, June 11**.

**Long Essay**
Your second and final essay will have you compare two detective films (these can be films we have not watched in class). Papers should be 8-10 pages in length. Your essays will be like the first but will make a coherent and sustained argument comparing the two movies. Again, your essay should discuss both thematics (motifs, characters, etc) and cinematic form. Be sure to support all points you make with evidence from the films. **Your essay should make use of at least two articles or chapters that were not part of our assigned readings (but those you covered in your annotated bibliography are fair game).** These essays might be used to help you read a scene or narrative/cinematic device by “borrowing” or translating a reading (for example, you might use the way Philippa Gates reads *The Silence of the Lambs* as a model for considering similar issues in another film) Or they might serve as something to argue against (you could frame a reading of a detective film by arguing that W.H. Auden’s theory of detection is all wrong for an American context). Or you might use the essays to help underscore the significance of your own essay’s argument (as an example, you might use Todorov’s or Irwin’s account of detection to argue for the intellectual resonance of any detective’s work). Remember: the focus of your essay should be on developing your own argument, not in providing summaries of the films/essays you researched. Papers will be assessed according to the rubric below and will be due in the Sakai Dropbox by 5 PM **Wednesday, June 20**.
Literature and Film Rubric

A papers will have all that freshman comp good writing stuff in spades: well-organized, nice sentence variation, smooth transitions, no mechanical or surface errors, strong (and non-repetitive) introduction/conclusion, and all the rest of that. They make a tightly focused, well-developed, and well-argued case for a single clearly stated point (Translation: has a great thesis that is tightly focused; thesis is then obsessively and deeply developed/backed-up throughout body of paper). These papers are not content with the obvious but instead endeavor to get to the heart and complexities of a literary work or film, thus making a substantial argument. A papers are well-supported and thoughtful with evidence from the text. They smoothly blend in evidence with the author’s own writing; however, the emphasis is always on the writer’s ideas and voice. They consistently demonstrate a deep and thoughtful familiarity with the work that allows the reader to walk away from a reading feeling that they have been taught by the author.

B papers will also be well-written with only a few glitches. They will offer a strong and nicely developed argument, with good support for their points. The focus is generally strong. Evidence, with a few exceptions, will be handled in such a way as to maximize the impact of the author’s case and writing. B papers demonstrate a strong grasp of the literary work/film, and nicely work out its subtleties. Particularly at the upper-levels of the B range, what separates B from A papers is a matter of degree. B papers might lack the extreme tight focus and the consistently smooth, yet strong, argumentation of the A. The points and overall argument of the B are not nearly as striking as that of the A, and might not display the same consistent thoroughness in discussing its ideas.

C papers will not be as nicely written, for writing glitches will intrude to a degree that starts to disrupt the author’s discussion of the literary/cinematic text. C arguments sometimes have a faintly familiar feel. Frequently, they have some difficulties with focus, development, and organization. Use of evidence is not always smooth, and the author’s ideas are sometimes obscured. C papers might trot out quotations without providing any explanation of how they support or connect to the author’s ideas; in a similar fashion, C papers might also be characterized by assertions and allegations that are never backed up by discussion or evidence. These essays might also have trouble keeping the focus on the author’s own voice and ideas. C papers might also have an occasional fumble with demonstrated familiarity with the literary text/film (that is, they might get some big stuff wrong or mischaracterize some basic facts/tendencies).

D and F papers will, to different degrees, be handicapped by glaring writing problems. Arguments will be sketchy at best. Familiarity and comprehension of the film/literary text will be in question. These papers might be very underdeveloped and/or off-topic.

Papers that make use of an undocumented source (i.e., plagiarize) will receive an automatic zero.