

Thomas Epstein

Filming Life: Self, Other, and the Good

### Required Texts

Orna Raviv: *Ethics of Cinematic Experience: Screens of Alterity*

**Overview:** This course, designed for Boston College seniors (that is, for you), combines an intellectually challenging interdisciplinary study of a group of twelve diverse films of film art with a semester-long formative discussion of each film's relationship both to fundamental life questions and to your individual lives.

What does it mean to be human? What does my human condition allow me to do, what does it oblige me to do? What does it mean to be a self? Who is that other sitting next to me, or ten thousand miles away from me, or the other/stranger in myself? What choices can I make to have a purposeful and good life? All the films chosen for this course ask/frame these questions in sometimes clear and obvious, sometimes in latent and subtle ways.

This does not mean we will ignore the artistic-aesthetic or the specifically filmic dimensions of the films we will watch. Indeed the entry point to any of our formative conversations will be each film on its own terms: how it was made, how it achieves the effects it does, what it says about the purpose and goals of (film) art.

Although the films of this course are connected thematically, I have divided the course into four units. The films of the first unit, all from the 1950s, all shot in black and white, all about ordinary people facing ultimate questions, participate in a central aesthetic-ethical movement in film of the post World War Two period: neorealism. We will watch three films that grow out of this style, three cinematic classics: the Italian Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (The Road, 1954), the Japanese Akira Kurosawa's *Akiru* (To Live, 1952), and the somewhat lesser-known American Leland Mann's *Marty* (1955). Our first readings will look concretely at the films we watch and about the overall meaning and significance of neo-realism, and we'll also have an initial encounter with theory.

The films of the second unit, all from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all made by filmmakers who build on the neo-realist legacy, focus on human relations and their commitments; that is, on *relationships*, mediated by social institutions such as the family, the church, the state, and educational systems. Here we'll follow the Dardenne brothers' look at life in the lower depths of contemporary Belgium (*The Child*, 2005); at the Russian André Zvyagintsev's unflinching exploration of a failing family and the extreme measures taken to save it (*Elena*, 2011); and finally with three masterpieces of the New Romanian cinema; Cristian Mungiu's heart-stopping retrospective depiction of friendship, faith and betrayal between two college students in Bucharest just before the fall of the communist regime (*Four months, three weeks, two days*, 2007), and with his incisive portrait of the stakes and costs of success in a now westernized East Europe (*Graduation*, 2017). We end this section with Cristi Puiu's Tolstoyan masterpiece *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2000). With these films we will continue to read practical film criticism, film theory, and now add a focused look at the philosophical and theological dimension of film ethics and life ethics: of what being for others actually means and entails.

In unit three we will bring together what we've learned to this point to read more deeply into film theory as we encounter two major figures of another 'new wave,' that of Iranian cinema: filmmakers Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016) and Jafar Panahi (b. 1960). These writer-directors (*auteurs*) are major, internationally renowned film artists whose works confront thorny social, political, and philosophical issues within a refined and experimental aesthetic.

We'll end the semester with the longest film of the lot (just short of four hours), which we'll explore over a two-week period: Lav Diaz's *The Woman who left*, winner of the Leone d'oro (Golden Lion) at the 2016 Venice Film Festival. This intentionally extremely "slow" (that is, human), subversive, depressive, ecstatic, and demanding portrait of Philippine life is based on a short story by Leo Tolstoy, which we will read. We'll also in the last weeks take a stab at reading part of a work of film theory based on a reading of the thought of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (*Phenomenology of Film: A Heideggerian Account of the Film Experience*), which our readings of Raviv and others will have prepared us for. As for the last films: those are yet to be decided. You'll see that I have slotted three possibilities for the last two weeks. I'll ask you to do some research into the three, based on which we'll decide collectively the ones we want to watch and discuss. We may also/instead take our class (literally) to the movies, since there's bound to be something new and exciting for us to take in as the semester draws to a close.

Clearly, this course is intellectually rich, and will be, I expect, fun; but how will we turn it (equally) into a 'capstone' (culminating) intellectual-formative experience? — one

that gives you the chance (and obligation) both for reflection and projection: on where you've come from, where you are presently, where you hope to go/to be/to do. As the syllabus demonstrates, the course is structured to include these subjects in discussion and in writing (see below). The selection of films and readings is designed to bring essential life questions to the fore; but the key to the success of the class, to creating an atmosphere for free and open exchange, will be the fostering of an atmosphere in the classroom of acceptance, support and safety. That will be the job of all of us.

**Writing:** As this is a Capstone course, I have decided to give you seniors considerable leeway in your writing. The 'simplest' course is to write four prompted 1,000 word essays. (The dates are listed on the syllabus). The second option would be to write two 2,000 word essays (mid-term essay and final). The third is a single 4,000 word essay, which could include research. You may also choose to write weekly essays (ten minimum) of 400-500 words. The prompts I produce will allow you to combine film analysis/interpretation with personal reflection in a balance that you will decide upon. After week 2 of the semester I will arrange to meet with each of you separately to chart your writing path.

**Course structure:** Films will be screened (and I will attend the screenings) on Monday evenings, probably at six p.m. but seven is also possible if that works best for the group. There are two reasons for asking you to watch the films in this way (that is, instead of alone/in spurts/on your devices). 1) Aesthetically, there is a marked benefit in watching our films on a (relatively) large screen. 2) There is social and intellectual benefit in watching the films *together*. We will of course review key scenes/images/moments as occasions arise in our Tuesday/Thursday class discussions but I will also introduce them when initially screened. You will have 3-5 hours per week of reading, mostly in the form of PDFs I will prepare.

**Course objectives** include: 1) honing your skills of film analysis; 2) improving your ability to identify and articulate the ways in which films present aesthetic and ethical values; 3) to reflect on, and be able to articulate the ways in which questions posed in our films touch your life; 4) to better your understanding the problematic of self and other, of social being 4) to gain a greater appreciation both for the diversity of cultures and for those values shared by all; 5) to participate in exchanges on fundamental, often thorny questions.

## Schedule of Class Meetings & Assignments

Tuesday, August 26 Introduction.

Tuesday evening: film: Marty

Thursday, August 28 — Orna Raviv, *Ethics of Cinematic Experience*. Read Introduction and first chapter.

Monday, September 1: film: La Strada

Tuesday, September 2 — Marcus, "Introduction," in *Italian Film in Light of Neorealism*

Thursday, September 4 — Marcus "La Strada," in *Italian Film in Light of Neorealism* and Raviv, Chapter 2

Monday, September 8 — film: Iriku

Tuesday, September 9 — Garret & Levinas

Thursday, September 11 — Lucken & Gordon

Monday, September 15 — film: The Child

Tuesday, September 16 — Mosley. "Responsible Realists"

Thursday, September 18 — Mosley, "Second Palme d'Or," Levinas, Mai, pp. 1-25, 103-118, Caruana, Post-secular Cinema

First Prompt, due Sunday, September 28

Monday, September 22 — film: Elena

Tuesday, September 23 — Zvyagintsev 1

Thursday, September 25 — Zvyagintsev 2, Burch — Defining Cinema

Monday, September 29 — film: The Death of Mr Lazarescu

Tuesday, September 30 — Stojanova, Introduction, Filimon, pp. 58-72,

Thursday, October 2 — Raviv, ch. 3, Pop, lazarescupop,

Monday, October 6 — film: Four months, three weeks, two days

Tuesday, October 7 — Jaffe, Introduction and Puiu/Mungiu

Thursday, October 9 – Daru Pop on Mungiu, Raviv ch. 4

Monday, October 13 — Fall Weekend, no class

Tuesday, October 14 — film: Graduation

Thursday, October 16 — review of “Graduation”, Raviv ch. 5

Second prompt, due Sunday October 26

Monday, October 20 — film: *Close-Up*

Tuesday, October 21 — The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami (Alberto Elena)

Thursday, October 23 — Abbas Kiarostami’s Cinema of Life (Julian Rice), Iranian Cinema and Philosophy (Farhad Erfani)

Monday, October 27 — film: The Circle

Tuesday, October 28 — Iranian Cinema and Philosophy (Farhad Erfani)

Thursday, October 30 — various reviews and Raviv, ch. 6

Monday, November 3 — film: Taste of Cherry

Tuesday, November 4 — Abbas Kiarostami and Film Philosophy (Abbott)

Thursday, November 6 — Interviews with Kiarostami

Third prompt, due Sunday November 16

Monday, November 10 — film: The Woman Who Left (Pt. 1)

Tuesday, November 11 — Two articles on the cinema of Diaz

Thursday, November 13 — Two articles on the cinema of Diaz, Raviv, ch. 7

Monday, November 17 — film: The Woman Who Left (Pt. 2)

Tuesday, November 18 — Tolstoy, “God sees the truth but waits,” Diaz interview

Thursday, November 20 —Loht, *Phenomenology of Film*, ch. 1

Monday, November 24 — film: either Taxi Driver (Panahi) or Grbavica: The Land of my dreams (Žbanić)

Tuesday, November 25 –interviews/reviews.

Thursday, November 27 — NO CLASS

Monday, December 1 -- Rohrwacher

Tuesday, December 2 — Loht, *Phenomenology of Film*, ch. 2

Thursday, December 4 — Loht, *Phenomenology of Film*, ch. 3

Final prompt, due Sunday December 14