**Philosophical Films**

**(Expository Writing 20, section 235)**

**Spring 2020**

**Classroom: Sever 104**

**Meeting Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:00-4:15pm**

**Course Website:**<https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/70634>

**Ben Roth**

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**Office: 1 Bow Street, #237**

**Office Hours: Thursdays 1:30-2:30pm. No office hours on days between when drafts are handed in and end of conferences. I’m also almost always available to talk right after class.**

**Course Description:**

How should society be organized?  What should individuals do when they disagree with the reigning order?  Protest?  Revolt?  Withdraw?  Our class will approach these perennial philosophical questions though a number of recent films.  At the beginning of the semester, we will watch Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer*, Jordan Peele's *Us*, and Ruben Östlund's *The Square*, which in very different settings—a frozen post-apocalyptic world, an African-American family’s vacation house, and a contemporary art museum—offer critiques of the stratification of wealth and opportunity between haves and have-nots.  As students develop their interpretations of one of these films in their first paper, we will also learn the basic vocabulary of cinematography and editing.  Then, in the middle of the semester, we will watch two documentaries: in *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley investigates her family's secrets, while in *The Act of Killing* the filmmakers interview perpetrators of mass killings in Indonesia, who openly admit to and recreate their brutal actions. After reading Nietzsche’s “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,” students will put his provocative claims about the importance of forgetting in conversation with one of these films in order to consider the role of memory in relation to how organize our lives and societies.  Finally, at the end of the semester, we will read some short theoretical selections about the relationship between philosophy and film, attuning students to larger issues as they write a research paper about a philosophical film or filmmaker of their choice, such as *Memento*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Stalker*, Claire Denis, Spike Lee, Akira Kurosawa, David Lynch, or Terrence Malick, among many other possibilities.

**Our course will be organized into three units,**

**each based on different sources and a different kind of paper:**

In **Unit 1**, we will watch three recent films that, in very different ways, consider inequality in society.  In Bong Joon-ho’s *Snowpiercer* (2013), climate change and failed geoengineering have brought on a new ice age.  The only survivors reside in a train constantly moving around the world—poor at the back, rich at the front—when a revolution begins.  In Jordan Peele's *Us*(2019), an upwardly mobile black family on vacation at their lake house is attacked by nightmarish copies of themselves, and an insidious backstory is slowly revealed.  In Ruben Östlund's *The Square*(2017), the rarified world of a curator at a contemporary art museum in Sweden crumbles as he opens a politically provocative exhibit and accuses an immigrant boy of robbing him.  For the first paper, students will defend an interpretation of one of these films.  Since the close reading of film, rather than literature, will be less familiar to many students, we will also learn some of the vocabulary used in film studies to describe choices of cinematography and editing and the effects they have on viewers, so that students can draw on these as evidence, in addition to interpreting what the characters say and do.

In **Unit 2**, we will watch two documentary films that investigate the relation of memory to history, both personal and political.  In *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley delves into her family's secrets, discovering that her father might not be who she thought.  *The Act of Killing*explores the Indonesian Genocide of the 1960s, when hundreds of thousands of accused Communists were killed with support from the state.  Unconventionally, the filmmakers not only interview some of the killers, but invite them to recreate their brutal actions, which they do openly and with strange stylization.  As part of this unit, we will also read Nietzsche’s second untimely meditation, “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,” in which he considers different orientations toward the past and argues that forgetting is essential for health. In their second papers, students will either test one of Nietzsche’s provocative claims against one of the documentaries, or use it to interpret one of them.

We will begin **Unit 3** by reading together as a class a number of short theoretical selections about the relationship between philosophy and film.  This will help students see some of the larger issues in play as they develop individual research projects about a philosophical film or filmmaker of their choice.  They might focus on interpreting one film, but now in conversation with existing work by critics and scholars; they might pursue a specific connection between a philosophical idea and a film, or use a specific film to test a scholar’s idea about the relationship between film and philosophy; or they might focus on the way a filmmaker develops an idea across a couple of works.  I will provide a list of good options, but students will have quite a bit of freedom, so long as they can convince me early on that the proposed work is worthy of close attention, there are sufficient sources about it to enable research, and they have a promising idea about it.

**Each unit will follow the same general sequence of activities and assignments:**

First, we will discuss a number of **sources**, the works that you will eventually be writing about. These discussions will allow you to test your understanding of the sources, try out possible claims and arguments, calibrate your sense of what counts as good evidence, and hear from and debate other students who interpret things differently.

Early in each unit, you will write a short **response paper**, based on a prompt. This will focus on a particular aspect of writing and also allow you to begin thinking about your full draft. You will receive feedback from your classmates on this first bit of slightly more formal writing.

Throughout each unit, we will work on a number of **exercises**, both in class and at home. These will allow us to think about and practice specific writing moves and skills. During each unit, we will also think about **transferability**, or how the skills we are working on will be useful beyond Expos in other classes, and beyond your time at Harvard.

As you are developing your papers, we will discuss a number of **models**, usually real student papers from the past, to help you think about how to structure your own.

In the middle of each unit, you will hand in a full **draft** of your paper.

We will then think about how to improve and revise your drafts in two venues. One class meeting each unit will be dedicated to a **workshop**, during which we will discuss two student drafts. Doing so will help the writers of those drafts but, even more, it will help everyone figure how to think about, discuss, and go about revision in general. In addition, you will have a one-on-one **conference** with me, during which we will discuss how you are revising your draft.

At the end of each unit (actually, we will have begun the next one), you will hand in a final **revision** of your paper. This is the only assignment, each unit, that receives a grade. The amount of reading and viewing assigned in the class is limited so that you can have a lot of time to revise your papers; this means we expect to see a great deal of improvement during the process.

**Some big-picture premises that will guide our approach:**

**Writing is a process:** Good writing doesn’t happen overnight; it is the result of a process that includes conception, planning, drafting, revision, and a lot of other work behind the scenes that isn’t explicitly included in (but very much affects) what is finally handed in. In our course, we will self-consciously break the writing process apart, practicing and discussing it stage by stage, each building on what came before. In most of your classes, your instructor will ask for only a final draft—by forming good drafting and revision habits now, your work will be much better in the future.

**Writing, reading, and thinking are deeply intertwined:** Writing is not just a form of communication, but often the best way to discover what you think about something. Writing regularly, not just when required, will help you to understand difficult ideas, develop your beliefs, and your reasons for them. Reading what others have written about a topic or question is often the best way to begin to develop your own thinking. But it serves this purpose only when you read actively, not as a passive spectator. When I ask you to “read” something this is what I mean: that you should read it multiple times, with pen in hand, marking important claims, writing questions in the margins, and so forth. If you’ve really read something, you should be able to summarize its main claims and arguments, and have questions and possible objections, having begun to develop your own view. In the long term, one of the best ways to improve your writing is to read as much as you can. Reading works within a particular discipline helps you learn the argumentative, rhetorical, and stylistic moves of that discipline. More generally, reading good writing allows you to internalize more complicated grammar, syntax, and idioms, and to develop your own style and voice.

**Writing is a conversation:** Most writers don’t develop their views in isolation. They talk to others—literally, figuratively by reading, and rhetorically by discussing others’ views in their own writing.All the writing you do in our course is public: you will share it with me and your peers and, especially in workshop, we will use some of your drafts as our central texts of discussion. If, at any point in the semester, you submit a piece of writing that you would prefer other students not read, let me know—such a request should be rare, however.

**Required Texts:**

-- Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss(Hackett, 1980). ISBN: 9780915144945.

Available at the Coop. <https://tinyurl.com/300-W20-EXPO-20-235>

-- I will try to host one screening of each film. You are also welcome to watch them online via any service you have access to (note that you will need to rewatch them while writing/revising, so I would not recommend single-view online rentals). DVD copies are also on reserve at Lamont.

-- All other readings will be posted on Canvas or distributed in class.

**Outside Reading/Viewing:**

Our first paper asks for *your* close interpretation of one of the films we have discussed together, and our second paper for *your* argument putting Nietzsche and one of the documentaries in conversation. I know that it is a matter of deep habit for many of you to immediately Google things you are thinking about, reading things like blog posts, reviews, and Wikipedia pages, and watching Youtube and other videos. For the first two units, I am asking you *not* to do this. If you do, you need to acknowledge and cite anyone else’s points that have influenced you, but that just takes away from the space you have to develop your own argument—which is what we’re trying to practice in these first two units, and what you will be graded on. Instead, channel these energies in other ways: back to paying more, closer attention to the work(s) you are writing about, to more general reading/viewing about philosophy and film, and to watching other films. In our final, research-based unit, you’ll be free from these constraints. Watching and reading things *not* specifically about our Unit 1 and 2 works, earlier in the semester, is a great way to get ready for choosing your final topic. To that end, under “Pages” on our Canvas site, you can find a list of recommended philosophical films that students are free to add to.

**Technology:**

I don't allow laptops, tablets, or other devices in class, and phones should be turned off and put away. Because of this, you are required to print out physical copies of any electronic readings that the course schedule notes we will be specifically discussing in class. Our meetings will be grounded in discussion, requiring your full presence and attention. Note-taking will include marking up handouts and jotting down a few ideas, never extensive transcription. If you need to use a device for reasons of access, please come talk to me right away at the beginning of the semester.

**Communication:**

You should check your Harvard email at least daily, and are responsible for updates I send you there. If you email me, I will almost always get back to you within 24 hours, but don't count on a faster response than that (especially at night and on weekends), so don't wait until the last minute with important questions (and check the course website, syllabus, and unit packet too).

**Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance:**

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. *If you are absent without medical excuse* ***more than twice****, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean*. Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences.* If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Missed conferences will count as an absence and usually won't be rescheduled. Two latenesses of more than ten minutes will be counted as an absence. Chronic tardiness will lower your participation grade.

**Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Completion of Work:**

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

**Submission of Work:**

You will often be asked to bring a physical copy of a completed exercise, response paper, or draft to class. Additionally, you will submit your major drafts and revisions (and some smaller assignments) electronically by uploading them to the course website. It is your responsibility to make sure your files upload correctly, and are not corrupted. (N.B.: please don’t upload work directly from Pages, as it only uploads a link, not a copy that I can comment on directly within the Canvas interface.) If I cannot open or read the file, it is subject to penalties for lateness. Computer problems are not a valid excuse for late work. Get into the habit of regularly backing up you work. Do not count on me to remind you to upload or print work; due dates are all on the course schedule and Canvas.

**Late Work:**

Late revisions will be docked a third of letter grade per day. Late response papers and drafts will affect your participation grade. Our assignments build on one another, so it is very much in your own interest not to fall behind.

**Policy on Collaboration:**

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the *Student Handbook,* “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

**Policy on Academic Integrity:**

Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action.

**The Writing Center:**

At any stage of the writing process – brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, approaching revisions – you may want some extra attention on your essays. The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. Regardless of its strength or weakness, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center's web site at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours at other campus locations; see the Writing Center website for details.

**Grades:**

Revision of Paper 1: 20%

Revision of Paper 2: 30%

Revision of Paper 3: 40%

Participation: 10% (Participation includes contributions to class discussions, workshops, and conferences, and sincere efforts on exercises, response papers, and drafts. Chronic tardiness, late submission of ungraded assignments, failure to come prepared, and distractions caused by electronic devices will lower your participation grade.)

**Grading Rubric:**

For each essay, you will receive the particular goals of that assignment in the unit packet. Common to all three essays, however, is a fundamental goal: that your work *expresses an original idea in a way that engages, enlightens, and educates your readers*. It will help you reach that goal if you envision your work as intended not simply for your fellow students in this class, nor simply for me, but rather for a broader audience of educated, interested readers. It is a minimum expectation that your essays will be free of grammatical, spelling, and formatting errors (since such errors distract your readers, making it harder to focus on your ideas). Essays consistently exhibiting such errors may be penalized. In addition, grading becomes more stringent as the semester goes along, since you will have mastered certain skills and techniques from earlier essays. On the meaning of the letter grades themselves:

**A:** Work that is excellent (which is not to say perfect) and complete. It has a fully realized beginning, middle, and end, and addresses (which is not necessarily to say definitively answers) the questions that it raises. Such work is ambitious and perceptive, skillfully expresses an argumentative thesis, grapples with interesting and complex ideas, and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly. It pays attention to alternate interpretations or points of view, avoids cliché, and engages the reader. The argument enhances, rather than underscores the reader’s and writer’s knowledge; it does not simply repeat what has been taught or what someone else has said. The language is clean, precise, and often elegant.

**B:** Work that is good and succeeds in many significant ways, but has one or more important areas still in need of work. Often this means that while the essay is an engaging and intelligent discussion, certain aspects don't yet live up to the rest of the essay, or to the promise the essay offers. The evidence is relevant, but it may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that a reader has to make the connections that the writer should have made more clearly. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not.

*Or*: Work that reaches less high than A work but thoroughly achieves its aims. Such work is solid, but the reasoning and argument are nonetheless rather routine. The argument’s limitations are in its conception rather than its execution.

**C:** Work that possesses potential, but in its current form is flawed. Such work has problems in one or more of the following areas: conception (it has at least one main idea, but that idea is usually unclear); structure (it is disorganized and confusing); evidence (it is weak or inappropriate, often presented without context or compelling analysis); style (it is often unclear, awkward, imprecise, or contradictory). Such work may repeat a main point rather than develop an argument or it may touch, too briefly, upon too many points. Often its punctuation, grammar, spelling, paragraphing, and transitions are a problem.

*Or*: Work that is largely a plot summary or an unstructured set of comments on a text, rather than an argument about a text.

*Or*: Work that rel­ies heavily on opinion rather than reason and argument.

**D and below:** Work that fails to meet the expectations of the assignment in a significant way.

**Class Schedule (subject to slight revision):**

**Tuesday, February 4**

-- course introduction

-- hand out syllabus and Unit 1 packet

-- discussion of “Next Floor” and “Everything & Everything & Everything”

for our next meeting:

-- read syllabus and Unit 1 packet, and come with any questions

-- start familiarizing yourself with film vocabulary through <https://filmanalysis.yale.edu/>

and Corrigan, “Glossary of Film Terms,” Bordwell and Thompson, “Glossary” (on Canvas)

-- watch *Snowpiercer*

**Thursday, February 6**

-- syllabus and Unit 1 questions

-- discussion of *Snowpiercer*

for our next meeting:

-- watch *Us*

-- read Corrigan, “Film Terms and Topics”

-- under “Pages” on our Canvas site, find the “Recommended Philosophical Films.” Add a recommendation of your own, or add your name if your choice is already listed.

-- complete get-to-know-you questionnaire (under “Assignments” on Canvas)

-- digital signup for get-to-know-you conferences

**Tuesday, February 11**

-- discussion of *Us*

-- introduction to the “Elements of Academic Argument”

**get-to-know-you conferences Tuesday, February 11 - Thursday, February 13**

for our next meeting:

-- watch *The Square*

-- read Bordwell, “The Analytic Essay”

**Thursday, February 13**

-- discussion of *The Square*

-- discussion of stance and orienting your reader

for our next meeting:

-- **write Response Paper 1** (bring printout to class)

-- go through introductions handout

-- print and read models for Draft 1: on “The Not-So-Ordinary Women of *Ordinary People*,” “Fantasy and Reality in *The King of Comedy*”

-- on Harvard Writes (<http://harvardwrites.com/>), watch the “Argument” video and look

at the “Common Ways to Establish What’s at Stake”

-- I recommend you learn and use Chicago Notes and Bibliography style in our class: <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html>. If you would prefer to learn MLA or APA style, that is fine, just use one consistently.

-- start working on Draft 1

**Tuesday, February 18**

-- **Response Paper 1 due** (bring printout to class)

-- peer feedback on response papers

-- discussion of thesis statements

-- discussion of introductions handout

-- discussion of models for Draft 1

-- introduction to cover letters

for our next meeting:

-- **finish Draft 1 and cover letter** (upload both to Canvas before class and bring a copy)

-- digital signup for conferences

**Thursday, February 20**

-- **Draft 1 due** (upload with cover letter to Canvas before class and bring a printout)

-- exercise using Draft 1 on counter-argument

-- introduction to conferences, workshops

**Tuesday, February 25 – class cancelled for conferences**

**conferences Tuesday, February 25 – Friday, February 28**

for our next meeting:

-- read workshop papers

-- complete workshop feedback (upload to Canvas before class and either bring a copy to

class or email to the author of each workshop paper)

-- start revising

**Thursday, February 27**

-- workshop on Draft 1

-- hand out and go over Unit 2 packet

for our next meeting:

-- read Unit 2 packet, and come with any questions

-- watch *The Act of Killing*

-- keep revising

**Tuesday, March 3**

-- discussion of *The Act of Killing*

-- discussion of editing, final steps

for our next meeting:

-- watch *Stories We Tell*

-- keep revising

**Thursday, March 5**

-- discussion of *Stories We Tell*

**Friday, March 6 by 9pm**

-- **Paper 1 Revision due** (upload to Canvas with new cover letter that reflects on the work you’ve done in revision and also on how you might transfer skills you’ve practiced in this paper to other classes and writing)

for our next meeting:

-- read Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, pp. 1-25, 62-64

**Tuesday, March 10**

-- discussion of Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, pp. 1-25, 62-64

for our next meeting:

-- read Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, pp. 38-43

-- read *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* (<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/>).

-- on Harvard Writes (<http://harvardwrites.com/>), watch the “Evidence” video

-- **write Response Paper 2** (bring printout to class)

**Thursday, March 12**

-- discussion of Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 38-43

-- **Response Paper 2 due** (bring a copy to class)

-- discussion of and exercise on plagiarism

-- discussion using Response Paper 2 on sources, citation, quotation, paraphrase, summary

-- peer feedback on response papers

**Spring Break March 14 – March 22**

for our next meeting:

-- read models for Draft 2: “*Force Majeure’s* Metacriticism of Globalism” and “Gothicism and Madness”

-- on Harvard Writes (<http://harvardwrites.com/>), watch the “Stakes” video; watch the “Structure” video and do the exercise on our model papers (instead of the website’s ones)

-- start working on your draft

**Tuesday, March 24**

-- discussion of models for Draft 2

-- discussion of topics

for our next meeting:

-- **finish Draft 2 and cover letter** (upload both to Canvas before class and bring a printout)

-- digital signup for conferences

**Thursday, March 26**

-- **Draft 2 due** (upload with cover letter to Canvas before class and bring a printout)

-- reverse outline exercise on Draft 2

-- hand out and go over Unit 3 packet

for our next meeting:

-- read workshop papers

-- complete workshop feedback (upload to Canvas before class and either bring a copy to

class or email to the author of each workshop paper)

-- start revising

**conferences Monday, March 30 – Friday, April 3**

**Tuesday, March 31**

-- Draft 2 workshop

-- discussion of research questions/hypotheses, Gaipa moves

for our next meeting:

-- read selections from *The Philosophy of Film*: “General Introduction,” Carroll, “The Paradox

of Horror” and Wartenberg, “But Would You Want Your Daughter to Marry One?”

-- keep revising

**Thursday, April 2**

-- discussion of selections from *The Philosophy of Film*: “General Introduction,” Carroll, “The Paradox

of Horror” and Wartenberg, “But Would You Want Your Daughter to Marry One?”

for our next meeting:

-- read Perkins, “Technology and Technique” and Devereaux, “Beauty and Evil”

-- keep revising

-- if you’re unsure of your final research topic, come talk to me this week

**Tuesday, April 7**

-- discussion of Perkins, “Technology and Technique” and Devereax, “Beauty and Evil”

for our next meeting:

-- read *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* (<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/>): Under “Using Sources,” “Locating Sources” (and subsections), “Evaluating Sources” (and subsections)

-- continue thinking about your topic and start looking for sources

-- bring your laptop to class for library introduction!

**-- finish Revision 2** (upload with new cover letter to Canvas before class)

**Thursday, April 9**

-- **Paper 2 Revision due** (upload with new cover letter to Canvas before class)

-- discussion of how to evaluate potential sources

-- library introduction (bring your laptop!)

for our next meeting:

-- **Write Response Paper 3a** (upload to Canvas before class)

**Tuesday, April 14**

-- **Response Paper 3a due** (upload to Canvas before class)

-- topic speed dating

for our next meeting:

-- print and read models for Paper 3: “Images of Violence in Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*,” Caplan, “Sound Reasoning,” and Hagan, “*Being John Malkovich*, Being Inauthentic”

-- complete “Critical Thinking: Modeling Our Sources” handout for Caplan

-- complete “Hagan Map” handout for Hagan

-- start looking for sources

**Thursday, April 16**

-- discussion of models for Draft 3

-- discussion of topics, research strategies

for our next meeting:

-- **write Response Paper 3b** (bring printout out class)

-- keep looking for sources

-- start drafting

**Tuesday, April 21**

-- **Response Paper 3b due** (bring printout to class)

-- exercise on flow

-- discussion of annotated bibliographies

**Thursday, April 23 – class cancelled to work on drafts**

-- **Annotated Bibliography due** (upload to Canvas before normal class time)

for our next meeting:

-- **finish Draft 3** (upload with cover letter to Canvas before class)

-- upload sources to Canvas before class

-- bring one or two paper prompts (for response papers too) from your other courses

-- bring your laptop to class for course evaluations!

**Tuesday, April 28**

-- **Draft 3 and sources due** (upload with cover letter to Canvas before class)

-- discussion of assignment prompts, transferability

-- signup for group conferences

-- course evaluations (bring your laptop!)

before your group conference:

-- read your partners’ papers and be prepared to lead the discussion on them

-- complete Group Conference Feedback sheet for each paper

**conferences April 30 – May 6 during reading period**

Tuesday, May 12:

**-- Paper 3 Revision Due by 9pm** (upload to Canvas with final cover letter reflecting both on this revision and your progress over the entire semester)

-- upload any additional sources you’ve added since last time to Canvas by 9pm

**Philosophical Films**

**Spring 2020**

**Roth**

**Unit 1: Society and Inequality**

**Closely Interpreting a Single Film**

To begin the course, we will watch three films that, in very different settings, take up the theme of inequality in society. In Bong Joon-ho’s *Snowpiercer* (2013), climate change and failed geoengineering have brought on a new ice age. The only survivors reside in a train constantly moving around the world—poor at the back, rich at the front—when a revolution begins. In Jordan Peele's *Us*(2019), an upwardly mobile black family on vacation at their lake house is attacked by nightmarish copies of themselves, and an insidious backstory is slowly revealed.  In Ruben Östlund's *The Square*(2017), the rarified world of a curator at a contemporary art museum in Sweden crumbles as he opens a politically provocative exhibit and accuses an immigrant boy of robbing him. In interpreting these films, we will ask what they are suggesting about inequality in its different forms, how they arise, what problems they produce, and whether they might be justified, as well as what we—both as a society and as individuals—can or should do in response. Since closely interpreting film is not something students tend to have as much (if any) experience with as compared to interpreting literature, we will also begin learning some of the vocabulary used in film studies to talk about cinematography and editing. Though the films in this first unit are all fairly mainstream ones, they do some interesting, non-realistic things formally, which we will practice explicitly describing the effects of.

**Primary Assignment (~5 pages)**: Defend a contentious interpretive thesis about one of the films we have discussed. Provide an argument for your thesis, grounded in specific analysis of evidence from the film.

**Further Guidelines for the Essay**:

**Develop a specific question**: You can start your thinking from the broad questions raised above: what is this film suggesting about inequality? About what causes it? About why it is a problem? About whether and why it might be justified? Look to make one of these sorts of questions more specific, tailoring it to some aspect of the film, and then use that question as the guiding motivation for your paper, with your thesis being a concise statement of the answer you will argue for. A thesis that answers a very broad question is likely to be less contentious, describing what most viewers of the film could see on their own. But if you set a more specific focus with your question, you’ve already done some of the work of paying closer attention to the film than most viewers—and your answer can be more specific still, revealing something more nuanced that the film is suggesting.

**Pay attention to form**: Just as good close interpretation of a novel involves interpreting not just what the characters say and do, but the specific language that the author has used to artfully form the story, good close interpretation of film pays attention to its specific formal features as a set of moving images. In the same way that you’re used to quoting and analyzing specific language from literature as evidence, and describing the effects of it on readers, to provide evidence for your interpretation of a work of literature, you should start paying attention to specific decisions filmmakers have made about things like camera movements and cuts, and the effects these have on viewers, to provide evidence for your argument.

Yale’s Film Analysis Website (<https://filmanalysis.yale.edu/>) is a good resource for beginning to learn the vocabulary of film as a form. You can also find glossaries of terms from Timothy Corrigan’s *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s *Film Art* (two of the standard books used in introductory film studies classes) on Canvas (I’ve also assigned some bits from these scholars to read as you begin working on your first papers). While it will be useful to familiarize yourself with some of this terminology, don’t get overwhelmed by it. You’re not going to be tested on it, you certainly needn’t memorize it, and indeed it is possible to go too far with your formal description of the film you are writing about, losing sight of the main task of defending your interpretive thesis. Make use of this terminology so far as doing so deepens your interpretation and allows you to provide more precise evidence for it. But you will also want to draw on the evidence of what characters say and do as part of your argument.

**Look for ways to connect analysis of specific scenes or formal patterns in the film to an overall interpretation of it**: Generally speaking, good papers about a film connect two levels: analysis of specific bits and larger claims about how to interpret the film as a whole (or at least a larger part or aspect of it). A paper that only offers specific formal analyses will read like an exercise, without the stakes of a bigger, unifying claim. A paper that only offers a bigger claim will read as unconvincing because unmoored from the kind of specific evidence that would give a reader reason to agree with it. Look to develop specific evidence for a larger interpretation. You might do this by starting from either side. On the one hand, you could focus on a specific scene or a specific formal decision the filmmakers have made, and ask what larger meaning it leads to (perhaps paired with some other specifics). On the other hand, you might start from a gut feeling about a larger interpretation, then go back and articulate exactly why you came to this conclusion, and what specific analyses will convince someone else to agree.

**Purpose**: The purpose of this kind of paper is to reveal interesting ideas and insights in a film that readers couldn’t see on their own, and to help them see how those ideas are conveyed, through careful, detailed analysis. In interpretive papers like this one, a good thesis is often a bit speculative: your case should be coherent, and supported by evidence, but by going a little farther out on a limb in your interpretation you can reveal a more surprising and interesting insight of greater significance. This is appropriate since stories merely suggest or show things, rather than prove them.

**Sources**: You should avoid reading/watching any commentary about our Unit 1 films. I want to see *your* analysis and argument in this paper. If you do draw on anyone else’s ideas, make sure to cite them, but know that you don’t get any credit for other people’s points, only how you go beyond them to your own—and if you take up much (or any) space in a short paper like this first one with other people’s ideas, you won’t have much left for your own.

**Transferability**: Practicing the skill of closely interpreting film is most obviously relevant to film and tv studies. But since film is a hybrid art, overlapping with literature (narrative), theater (acting, sets, staging), and other visual arts (images), numerous specific skills are transferable. More generally, closely interpreting something and making an argument about are done in many disciplines.

**Philosophical Films**

**Spring 2020**

**Roth**

**Response Paper 1: Closely Interpret a Formal Detail**

Focus on a specific formal choice that caught your attention in *Snowpiercer*, *Us*, or *The Square* (if you decide later that you want to switch and write your full draft about a different one of these films, that is fine).  By "formal," I mean the *way* something is presented to you as a viewer, rather than *what* is presented: a surprising camera placement, or framing of a shot, or edit in the film, for example. You can focus on one detail, a small set within one scene, or one recurring pattern across a longer span of the film, but don’t let your focus become too broad or diffuse.

Write a couple paragraphs in which, first, you describe this formal detail as precisely as you can. Make use of the terminology we have been learning inasmuch as it helps you do this. Then describe how your understanding of the story is affected by this formal detail—that is, begin to analyze and interpret it.  (It might be useful to imagine how your understanding would be different if this formal choice had been made otherwise, more plainly or conventionally.)

The point is not to “decode” the detail—it probably doesn't have any grand meaning by itself (e.g., “this one cut proves the filmmaker doesn’t believe in god”)—just to pay close attention to, and try to articulate, how it affects your experience as a viewer of the film.  This sort of close reading plays an important role in how one presents evidence for a larger interpretation of a film.

Bring a printout with you to class.

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**Unit 2: History and Forgetting**

**Putting Philosophy and Documentary into Conversation**

Our main sources in this unit are two documentary films. *The Act of Killing*explores the Indonesian Genocide of the 1960s, when hundreds of thousands of accused Communists were killed with support from the state.  Unconventionally, the filmmakers (which include Harvard alum Joshua Oppenheimer) not only interview some of the killers, but invite them to recreate their brutal actions, which they do openly and with strange stylization. In *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley delves into her family's secrets, discovering that her father might not be who she thought. Along the way, some of her recreations might themselves be mistaken for documentary footage.  We will also read Nietzsche’s second untimely meditation, “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,” in which he considers different orientations toward the past and argues that forgetting is essential for health. For your second paper you'll put one of the documentary films into conversation with some idea or claim from Nietzsche, either interpreting the film with the help of the philosophy (what is called a “lens essay”), or testing the plausibility of Nietzsche’s idea against the case study of the film (what is called a “test a theory essay”).

**Primary Assignment (7-8 pages):**

**Interpret a documentary film through the lens of a philosophical idea**

Defend an interpretive thesis about *The Act of Killing* or *Stories We Tell* through the lens of one of Nietzsche’s ideas. Your focus should be primarily on the film, but you should examine it by looking through the theory—and make clear why we should look at this work through that theory, and how doing so helps us see the work more clearly, or differently.

*Or*

**Test a philosophical idea with the case study of a documentary film**

Defend an argumentative thesis about whether and why one of Nietzsche’s ideas is plausible/true or not, based on proffering evidence from *The Act of Killing* or *Stories We Tell*. Your ultimate focus should be on the theory, but you will need to analyze and interpret the film to provide justification for your assessment of it.

N.B.: It is not uncommon for papers to combine the two forms. For example, scholars often interpret a film in light of theory, but then go on to use that interpretation to clarify or revise the theory. You are welcome to combine the lens and test a theory approaches, just make sure that the end result is a coherent whole, and the kinds of evidence you are presenting at different moments is appropriate.

**Further Guidelines for the Essay:**

**Using a Theoretical Lens**: In the first paper, you wrote about one source. In this essay, you'll be bringing two sources—of very different kinds—together. Though this makes your task more complicated, in some ways it actually makes it easier. Faced with just a source, it might seem that you can write about anything. By looking at it through another source, a more limited set of themes comes into focus, in much greater detail. Suppose I ask you to write a paper about *Star Wars*. Many—perhaps too many—kinds of papers would be possible. But suppose I ask you to write about *Star Wars* though the lens of Freud's Oedipal Theory—suddenly certain things (Luke's relationship to Darth Vader, for example) come into focus. Do you see particular instances of Nietzsche’s claims in one of the documentaries? That resonance can be a good place to start thinking about how the philosophy helps you understand the film. Do specific moments in the films seem to contradict Nietzsche? That dissonance can likewise be a good place to start.

**A Potential Pitfall**: Resonance between a theoretical concept and a fictional particular can be a good place to start your interpretation, but you don't want to stop there. A thesis like “X is a perfect example of Nietzsche’s claim that…” isn't yet very interesting. Likewise, a thesis such as “what so and so says disagrees with Nietzsche” isn't yet very interesting. But both are good places to *start*, inviting you to then look more closely at the film, developing your interpretation of it. Within *general* alignment, it is often a *specific* point of friction that allows you to get an interesting argument going; or within general disagreement, a specific point of overlap.

**Testing a Theory**: Since the films in this unit are documentaries, they can provide real-life evidence for or against Nietzsche’s claims more straightforwardly than fictional works could. But taking one of the films as a case study, remember that it is but *one* instance. So you’ll want to consider whether or to what extent your analysis is generalizable in moving from your analysis of the film to your claims about Nietzsche’s ideas.

**Structure**: It was probably easier to see how to structure your first paper. You introduced your film and question/topic, and stated your thesis, then argued for it. The structure for this paper isn't obvious, giving us greater opportunity for thinking about how to structure papers as they get longer, more complicated, and draw on more sources. In particular, think about when and how to introduce your two sources, and how you bring them into conversation with each other.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this kind of paper is to reveal interesting ideas and insights that come into focus only when you put your two sources side by side, instead of looking at one in isolation. Beyond introductory courses, you won’t be asked to write about just one work as often, and scholars almost never do so. Rather, they build up complicated networks of different kinds of sources that mutually illuminate one another.

**Transferability**: This sort of paper isn't relevant to just film (or literature or other art) classes. Its general form is that of looking at something particular through the lens of a theory or set of abstract concepts, or testing an abstract theory against a particular thing as a kind of case study. Here that particular thing is a documentary film. But it could just as well be data from a psychology experiment, or people's economic behavior, or a set of field observations. And lots of fields, not just philosophy, offer general theories.

See the syllabus for full class-to-class schedule.

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**Response Paper 2: Explain an Isolated Claim**

Choose a specific claim that Nietzsche makes. In about a page, explain what it means, and what justification is put forward in support of that claim. Quote, paraphrase, and summarize where appropriate. (I would certainly recommend choosing and explaining the claim that you think you will use or test in your full draft, but you can change your mind later if you want.)

**FAQ:**

**How do I pick a claim?**

Pick something that you can not only state, but explain the meaning of, and the justification for, in a page or two. While you are not bound by what you choose now, that is about how much space you'll have in the full draft to explain the idea of Nietzsche’s you are using. Probably more toward one page if you will be using it as a lens, probably more toward two if you will be testing its truth against one of the films.

**Should I explain how the claim relates to the rest of Nietzsche’s essay?**

At this stage, you should *not* do this, and you won't have space to. Just jump right in: state the claim, explain it, and explain the argument for it. Later, in your draft, you'll work on orienting your reader and on situating the claim in the larger essay—and even then, only if that context is needed for your argument.

**Should I say whether I agree with the claim, or what I think about the argument?**

No. At this stage, just explain Nietzsche’s view. Your assessment doesn't matter yet, and by withholding it you can give the author's view a more objective presentation. In a lens essay, you might never assess the idea, just use it. In a test a theory essay, it will be your analysis of the film that leads to such an assessment, not your personal opinion.

**When should I quote?**

We'll talk about this, but some initial guidelines: Quote when Nietzsche’s specific language matters, or he says something more concisely or elegantly than you can, or when you need to provide evidence that this really is what he is claiming (essential to do if you are later going to attack it). Don’t quote when the language doesn't matter, when you can explain more concisely, when what you want to explain is mixed together with other things you don't, and as part of the process of translating the author's words into your own explanation.

**What if I think I've done what I'm supposed to do, but I only have a short paragraph?**

Mostly likely, you have only stated whatNietzsche says, but haven't explained it, or what justification he provides to make the idea plausible. Suppose a friend read your paper (you can actually do this): what questions would he or she ask, and what would you explain further?

**What if I think I've done what I'm supposed to do and I have four pages?**

It could be that you haven't yet isolated one claim, but are instead trying to explain the whole reading. It could also be that you've started analyzing, or even assessing, rather than just explaining. Focus on a specific claim, and on explaining it, paring away everything else.

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**Unit 3: The Research Paper**

**Defending a Nuanced Thesis in Conversation with Outside Sources**

This final unit will introduce you to the basics of scholarly research: how to find sources in the library and online, and how to make use of them as you develop your own ideas. At the beginning of the unit, we will read a few essays about philosophy and film, meant to attune you to larger theoretical issues. The starting place for these papers will then be a film or films of your choice (run by me). Two broad guidelines to keep in mind as you start to think about what to write about. First, the more recent your film is, the fewer scholarly sources there will be to draw on, as academia moves slowly. Engaging in research is an essential part of this paper, however, so if you want to write about something more recent, you will have to be more creative in finding and connecting sources to your film. It might be a good idea to pick something at least a decade or so old. Second, the more mainstream a film is, the less interested scholars are likely to be in its intentional message, since most blockbusters are not very thoughtful or deep. For example, scholars probably won’t care about the surface meaning of a Disney or Marvel movie. But they might be interested in an argument about the problematic messages such movies are less intentionally trafficking in, either as a symptom of subterranean cultural trends or as examples of propaganda or ideology. But it might be a good idea to pick a more substantial film.

The goal of this paper is to start breaking down the arbitrary parameters we have previously set: instead of forcing you to write, in isolation, about one or two provided sources, you will now have the entire Harvard Library System to draw on, so more freedom and therefore responsibility to follow your own interests. That said, this is still an apprenticeship work: we do not expect you to exhaust the secondary criticism or, much less, philosophical influences on your film. We just expect you to find some good sources that allow you to push deeper into interpreting it than you could on your own. The quality of your argument remains the most important thing (as, indeed, it does for professional scholars even when they are expected to know the relevant literature exhaustively).

While this is a “research paper,” don’t be misled by what that means. In the past, you might have been asked to write a research paper in which you found sources, then reported back, having synthesized what they said in a well-organized summary. In this paper, it is essential to go further. Your task is not merely to understand, combine, and report what others have said. Rather, your task is to understand those sources so that you can enter into conversation with them—by making your own, original argument. By drawing on other sources, you will be able to raise a much more specific question, and defend a much more nuanced thesis, than if you were to proceed wholly on your own. This is the main reason scholars conduct research: not simply so they can understand what others have already said, but to use what others have said in order to see new questions, and as a background against which to defend more nuanced answers.

**Primary Assignment (~8 pages): Make an Argument Shaped by Outside Research.**

Make an argument about the film(s) you are focusing on. Guided by a research question, find other sources (and carefully document them, as described below) that will help you deepen your understanding and analysis, and integrate those sources into your paper. Against the background of your research, defend a nuanced thesis about how we should understand your film(s), and what the best answer to your question is.

**Further Guidelines for the Essay**

**This paper might take a few different forms:**

**An interpretation of one film**. Much like our first paper, you might offer an interpretive thesis about one film—only now with more nuance, in conversation with what scholars and reviewers have already argued about it. You might also draw on some bits of philosophy to deepen your interpretation.

**A lens essay.** If your use of one philosophical idea becomes central, your paper might become a lens essay, akin to Unit 2, in which that philosophical idea brings the film into focus in a new way.

**Tracking one director’s (or maybe writer’s or actor’s) engagement with an idea or theme over multiple films.** If you want to do this, make sure you set a specific focus, lest your discussion become too shallow as it is spread across multiple films.

**A comparison.** You might offer a comparative interpretive thesis about two (or a small set of) films, but now in further conversation with existing scholarship and reviews. Or you might compare a literary work to a film adaptation of it.

**Testing a philosophical theory with the case study of one film (or maybe a couple**). If you are especially interested in one of the overt philosophical articles we started this unit with, you might focus on it—or another philosophy reading you find in your research, or through conversation with me—using a specific film or films to help you make an argument about it, the theory. For example, does a specific horror film challenge Carroll’s theory of how horror works?

**Research:** What sort of sources might you look into? Here are some ideas:

1. Secondary sources in film scholarship and philosophy that directly discuss your film,
2. or that discuss the work and ideas of its director more broadly.
3. Reviews of your film.
4. Philosophical works that your film was influenced by.
5. Secondary work about the philosophical ideas that your film was influenced by.
6. Other philosophical ideas that help you understand your film, or can be connected to it.

1, 2, and 3 are a great place to start, and may be where you get most of your sources. Notice that, for 4, you’ll need to be targeted, as you probably won’t have time to read entire books of philosophy. Sources from 1, 2, and 3 can point you to specific works, sections, and passages (as can indexes and tables of contents). Likewise for 5 and 6, and I can also help point you toward manageable things that might be useful. It is also perfectly fine to lean on 5 instead of 4 directly, reading things like guides, handbooks, companions, and introductions to philosophers.

**Put Sources in Conversation:** In your Unit 2 essay, you got some practice putting two sources into conversation. You can now take that further, creating a network of sources in conversation with each other on different points that help you make your argument.

**Think of Your Paper in Parts:** As papers get longer, they often aren’t guided by one simple claim. Instead, they are often a *sequence* of claims that unify into one larger argument. Your thesis might be a sequence of claims that unify into a larger argument, and, if so, it could be useful to think of your paper as a series of sections, even little papers, each arguing for part of the sequence in turn.

**Documenting and Uploading Your Sources:** I will not be familiar with many of the sources that you use for this last paper, but I need to be able to check that you are using them in a responsible manner, since that is one of the things we aim to practice with this last, research-based paper. As a Program-wide policy, **you are required to upload digital copies of all of your sources (including scans or photos of any physical sources)** along with your draft and final paper. This will force you to keep track of your research, and it will allow me to quickly check, should I have any worries about the way you are citing or representing a source. As you are doing research, you should download and save copies of any online resources you consult (whether through Hollis or otherwise) and scan or photograph any physical sources you consult (you needn’t scan entire books, just whatever sections you draw on). We realize that this will add some time to your research process, but it would take us an impossible amount of time to track down the sources for all of our students. Do not wait until you are finished with your paper to document your sources; do it right from the start, as you are finding them.

**Purpose:** The purpose of a research paper is to enter into an existing scholarly conversation about your main film(s). By conducting research into what scholars have already argued about it, you can offer a much more detailed argument of your own, and push the conversation a little deeper, or in a slightly new direction, or make a connection no one has before. In turn this could help future scholars make more detailed arguments, and continue the conversation yet further.

**Transferability:** While your papers are specifically about philosophical films, and so this assignment is most obviously relevant to philosophy, film studies, cultural studies, art, and literature, your wider aim is to enter into a conversation that scholars have already begun. Biologists, economists, and other scholars, just as much as philosophers and film scholars, have debates and conversations in which they criticize, attack, draw on, and develop each others' views.

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**Response Paper 3a (Due April 14):**

**Propose a Research Project, Guided by a Question or Hypothesis**

Write a short paragraph proposing your topic, centered on the question or hypothesis that will motivate your paper. What in your film do you seek to better understand? What sort of research, into what sort of sources, might you do? This first response paper can be fairly informal, if you prefer, but should still be rich in content—the point is to get your thinking going and then to give me an idea of what it is, so that I can offer you some feedback and guidance, and perhaps point you to some relevant sources.

**Response Paper 3b (Due April 21):**

**Introduction and Thesis**

Write an introduction, ending in a thesis statement. Ideally, you will have done significant work on your draft by this point. At a minimum, you should have a solid idea of what your topic is, what question, problem, or hypothesis motivates the paper, what some of the major sources from your research you will engage with are, and what your central claim will be. Introduce the film(s) you are writing about, your topic, and motivation, set up the most important sources that you will be entering into conversation with, and try to state your thesis as clearly as possible. As in our model papers, it is likely that your introduction will be more than one paragraph. And as we saw in those models, a good introduction already reveals a clear map of the entire paper. If you do not yet have a solid sense of where you are going with your draft, what you write in this response paper might be more provisional, but hopefully will help you catch up by moving your ideas forward significantly.

**Annotated Bibliography (Due April 23):**

Prepare an annotated bibliography of three or four sources (in addition to the film(s) you are focusing on) that you expect to draw on in your final paper. Use one established bibliographical style consistently throughout, then annotate each entry with a short paragraph explaining what the source is about and how you expect to use it in your paper. You will almost certainly need to consult more sources to find a few relevant to your project. You needn't include ones that you quickly decide will be completely irrelevant (though you should keep a record of what you are reading, in case you change your mind).