

Seminar in Composition: Film
IN BAD TASTE
Fall 2014
CL 444

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Office Hours: Tues 11-12
and by appointment
CL 628M

A certain type of movie wins at the Oscars. You won't see that movie here.

You will see: B movies, television, videos posted on YouTube. In this class, you'll engage with the range of visual media tagged "in bad taste." The goal here is not (just) to revel in the pleasures of badness, but to consider how media objects earn designation as bad: What is taste, and who gets to draw the boundary between good and bad? Are certain technologies or formats more tasteful than others? What's taste's relationship to bodies and emotions, to the impact media have on an audience?

I'll ask you to work through these questions in your writing as well. In the spirit of bad taste, you'll try out forms of composing far from logical argumentation: you'll write with pictures and sound effects, in sales pitches and associative streams. (We'll talk about logic and arguments, too, and whether they're ever in bad taste.)

Your writing is the main text of this class: we'll spend most of our time together reading and analyzing it. You should think of everything you submit here as public, destined for my eyes and those of your classmates. Write with the expectation that you'll be responded to.

Screen Media

Foxy Brown (1974) d. Jack Hill
The LEGO Movie (2014) d. Phil Lord, Christopher Miller
RiP: A Remix Manifesto (2008) d. Brett Gaylor
Masters of Sex (2013-) d. Michelle Ashford
Faking It (2014-) d. Carter Covington

The 'R' Rating

Some of the assigned media is rated 'R' or un-rated: there is violence, language, and sexuality that could be considered objectionable. If you see yourself objecting to viewing such content I encourage you to enroll in another section of Seminar in Composition.

Required Texts

Readings are on CourseWeb. Please bring them to class for discussion.

Course Requirements

You're responsible for watching films and shows outside of class by Tuesday on the week they're assigned. All are available online (linked in CourseWeb) or on reserve at

Stark Media Services (G-20 Hillman Library, near the Cup and Chaucer). Watching means paying attention to particular moments that strike you and coming to class ready to talk about them.

In addition to in-class exercises, there are two types of writing assignment:

- **Response papers** (at least 300 words) are short, informal, and exploratory, written in reaction to films or in preparation for more involved assignments. I don't expect fleshed-out arguments or complete thoughts; I do expect complete sentences (unless you can give me a compelling reason half-sentences better accomplish your goals).
- **Essays** (1250-1500 words) should feel thoughtfully crafted. While you'll have opportunities to revise them, each essay should show sustained commitment to a style or argument. This class will ask you to take risks in your writing, so it's ok if whatever you try doesn't completely work out. The choices you make should be considered, though, purposeful rather than made at random.

Over the course of the semester you'll write four essays (one digital) and revise two. Unless I tell you otherwise, writing assignments are due by **5PM Monday** on the week they're assigned. You'll need a **flash drive** for the digital essay.

Course Goals

Seminar in Composition is the course that most undergraduates take to fulfill the first of three writing-intensive requirements in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. While the readings and assignments in different sections of the course may vary, this section, like all the others, consists of a sequence of assignments that will require you to:

1. Engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry.

In this course, you'll be asked to use writing to generate ideas as well as explain them. You'll form questions, explore problems, and examine your own experiences, thoughts, and observations. Investigating a multifaceted subject, you'll be expected to make productive use of uncertainty as you participate in sustained scrutiny of the issues at hand.

2. Compose thoughtfully crafted essays that position your ideas among other views.

In response to reading and discussing challenging texts, you'll write essays in which you develop informed positions that engage with the positions of others. You'll analyze as well as summarize the texts you read, and you'll compose essays that pay close attention both to the ideas voiced by other writers and to specific choices they make with language and form.

3. Write with precision, nuance, and awareness of textual conventions.

You'll work on crafting clear, precise prose that uses a variety of sentence and paragraph structures. You'll be required to learn the conventions for quoting and

paraphrasing responsibly and adeptly, and you'll be assisted with editing and proofreading strategies that reflect attention to the relation between style and meaning. You'll also have opportunities to consider when and how to challenge conventions as well as follow them.

4. Revise your writing by rethinking the assumptions, aims, and effects of prior drafts.

This course approaches the essay as a flexible genre that takes on different forms in different contexts—not as a thesis-driven argument that adheres to a rigid structure. Much class time will be devoted to considering the purpose, logic, and design of your own writing, and you'll be given opportunities to revise your work in light of comments and class discussion, with the aim of making more attentive decisions as you write.

You must earn a “C-minus” in order to pass SC.

Grades

SC works on a Portfolio system: you're graded on the body of writing you produce rather than individual assignments, though I will give detailed feedback on all of your essays. At mid-term you'll turn in a provisional Portfolio and get a provisional grade; similarly, a Final Portfolio (which includes all essays with my comments – *don't lose them*) earns you a final grade at the end of the semester. The mid-term grade will not be averaged into the final grade.

Here's how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade:

A = superior attainment
B = meritorious attainment
C = adequate attainment
D = minimal attainment
F = failure

I may raise your final grade by one-third (e.g., B to B+) in order to reflect exemplary participation in class discussion.

CourseWeb

Resources for this course can be found online at the University's Blackboard website, <http://courseweb.pitt.edu>, where you can log in using your university computer account username and password. CourseWeb automatically uses your Pitt email account. If you use another account as well (e.g., Yahoo, AOL, Gmail, etc.), be sure to check your Pitt account at least once a day, since I will occasionally send email announcements to the class via CourseWeb. Tutorials are available under “Help” in the menu. If you have trouble logging on, call the help desk at (412) 624-HELP.

Attendance

Because this is a seminar, discussion is central to the work of the course. Come to class on time, prepared to take part in conversation. While you should try to attend every class, **you are permitted two absences. A third is grounds for automatic failure.** That said, I understand that life doesn't always respect class schedules: come talk to me **before you miss class** if you expect to have a problem with this policy. You're responsible for finding out about and making up any work you miss.

You'll be considered late to class if you arrive more than **five minutes** after the start of the class period. **Three late arrivals count as one absence.**

Late/Missing Work

There will be some form of writing every week, and all writing assignments must be completed in order for you to pass the course. Writing must also be submitted on time. **If you submit an essay late, your final grade for the semester will drop by one third (C+ turns to C, for example).** You also won't get feedback on that assignment.

Plagiarism

It is important that you cite your sources, whether quoted or paraphrased, in any medium. When paraphrasing, you don't avoid plagiarism just by changing a few words or lines. We'll talk about responsible work with sources, and if you're unsure, ask. **All instances of plagiarism will result in no credit for the assignment and a report to the Dean.**

The Writing Center

Located in 317-B Student Center, 4024 O'Hara St., the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to correct your papers for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your essays. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, I may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/

Composition Tutorial (an optional one-credit course)

After you've written your placement essay, I may recommend you enroll in *Composition Tutorial*, a one-credit course in which you meet weekly with a Writing Center consultant to address problems with structure, grammar, and punctuation. Once enrolled in *Composition Tutorial*, you will need to attend all sessions; be sure to bring your syllabus, assignments, and writing either in-progress or with my comments.

Other Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me (your instructor) and the Office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, 412-228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the

term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Pitt offers free personal and academic counseling at the University Counseling Center (412-648-7930). Specialized counseling services are available to victims of sexual assault; you can contact the sexual assault services coordinator via the main UCC phone line during weekday business hours or at 412-648-7856 (after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). In a crisis situation, university police can also connect you with an on-call counselor affiliated with the UCC.

Tentative Schedule

[updates will be posted to CourseWeb]

Week 1

Introduction to Taste

8/26 [in-class: Placement Essay]

8/28 Read: Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

Weeks 2 & 3

Bad Representation: The Racial Politics of Blaxploitation

9/2 Watch: *Foxy Brown*

Read: Howard, "What's Going On?"

Write: Response 1

9/4 Read: *Foxy Brown* reviews

9/9 Write: Essay 1

Weeks 4 & 5

Selling Out: Product Placement, Branded Worlds

9/16 Watch: *The LEGO Movie*

Write: Response 2

9/18 Bring: a material, branded object

9/23 Write: Essay 2

Weeks 6 & 7

Revision

9/29 Write: Response 3

9/30 & 10/2 **individual conferences (no class)**

10/7 Write: Essay 3

Weeks 8-11

Other People's Stuff: The Digital and Creative Reuse

10/16 Watch: *RiP: A Remix Manifesto*

Write: Response 4

10/21 Read: Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Bring: clip you'd like to .gif

[in class: .gif workshop]

10/28 Write: Response 5

11/4 Make: Essay 4 (digital)

Weeks 12-14

Television: Taste and Technology

11/11 Watch: *Masters of Sex*

Read: Newman and Levine, "Legitimizing Television"

Write: Response 6

11/13 Watch: *Faking It*

11/18 Write: Essay 5

Week 15

Final Revision

12/2 Write: Response 7

Final Portfolio Due Tuesday, 12/9 by 5PM to my mailbox in CL 501