Student Evaluations

Average ratings are in response to the question, “Considering both the limitations and possibilities of the course and subject matter, how would you evaluate the overall teaching effectiveness of the instructor?” Ratings are assigned on a seven-point scale, with 1 being “not at all effective” and 7 being “extremely effective.”

Students are also asked to evaluate the instructor in narrative comments. I selected representative comments for each course. Digital files of the whole set of course evaluations are available upon request.

Fall 2013: Film 108: The Musical Revisited

Students Enrolled: 11
Students Responding: 10
Average Rating: 6.5

“He is a very well prepared professor with the materials he covers in each and every class (lecture & lab both). Choice of film selections for each film viewing was very thoughtful and careful considering the articles that we were given to read. We covered basic, fundamental and even deeper arguments of the film critics, and the films we watched were also easily accessible. Discussion was fun [in] that everyone had a chance to share their question[s] and thoughts and professor did a brilliant job letting us focus on main things.”

“The class was extremely organized and each reading was discussed in depth through discussion which made them easy to grasp. It was very clear what was expected of me for the midterm, final, & final essay. Instructor did a great job not only explaining material, but facilitating discussion that was upbeat & interesting. Would definitely recommend this course/instructor.”

“Professor Alford is a brilliant and natural instructor. He displays passion for his craft and love for academia. He is firm but fair in his dealings with the students. He goes out of his way to make himself available for guidance. This 108 course was everything I expected from a UC Berkeley course. It was challenging and cerebral.”
“I thought it was effective and informational [in] that with the films we didn’t just analyze them stylistically, but applied them to more complex issues and arguments through the readings. It was unique from many of the film classes I have taken here, and on a genre that I probably would’ve never had the opportunity to study to such a deep extent.”

“Robert was awesome. Well informed on the material, as well as relatable material on the subject. Helpful in explaining the concepts and theories and made the class very enjoyable. He should definitely continue what he’s doing.”

“This class was a dream. The subject matter was fun and engaging and we’re blessed to have such an amazing instructor who was equally fun and engaging. He was down to earth when discussing class policy and infectiously giddy about all the material. I would love to take another class with Robert Alford. These are the types of classes I want to take in the film department: interesting, well-covered topics taught by instructors who truly find joy in the work—both as an intellectual scholar and as a happy viewer.”

**Summer 2014: Film 25A: The History of Silent Film**

Students Enrolled: 31  
Students Responding: 30  
Average Rating: 5.967

“I really enjoyed this class, especially for a summer course. Robert created an environment that was educational and fun. He set the tone from the very first day of class. Easily approachable and cares about his students’ concerns and progress. Thank you!”

“Considering it was a six week course that surveyed the silent film era, I think that the professor did an excellent job in providing material to better understanding of the history of silent film.”

“Alford was very effective in teaching the class and providing the information in order to do well. He made the class very entertaining and was very helpful and approachable. Basically, he was awesome!”

“Robert taught with a very open ended teaching style that encouraged class discussion. This class [was] both insightful and entertaining. He was also very helpful outside of class.”

“Alford has a way of quickly presenting the thesis of all assigned readings during instruction. The class had interesting interpretations of the material, but Alford adroitly presented the content so the class [could] prepare for the connections to be made on quizzes and examinations. This helped discussion and writing. He’s amazing.”

“I really enjoyed this class. Namely due to Prof. Alford’s teaching style. Most lectures were heavily discussion oriented and I really do well in classes conducted like this. Would recommend to a friend.”
“Robert was a very effective instructor for someone who was teaching the course for the first time. His expertise & knowledge were more than sufficient. He explained everything clearly including readings, questions and assignments. As someone who is not a film major, I had no trouble in this course and most of that is because of Robert. He was not only an excellent instructor but also a very humble, funny and easily approachable person.”

“Really great reading material, in-class review really helpful, but maybe too much summary? Would have loved to hear more of instructor’s thoughts, arguments, and theories. I really enjoyed how Robert made all content historically relevant and fascinating through both close reading & macro discussions. Quizzes could maybe have more questions to raise denominator given such a large wealth of facts/material to study.”

“Even though we did not have very much time for this amount of material, Professor Alford taught the course information very precisely and with the right amount of detail in order for each student to take in the knowledge needed to be successful in this class.”

Recognition of Teaching

Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award, 2013-2014
Each year the university recognizes top instructors from each department who have consistently high teaching evaluations and a demonstrated commitment to undergraduate pedagogy.

Pedagogy Instructor
Beginning in Fall of 2011, the GSI Teaching and Resources Center has hired me to train first time Graduate Student Instructors in preparation for their first day of teaching. Due to my high evaluations from these four-hour seminars, I have been re-hired by the GSI Teaching and Resources Center and have now led the workshop a total of six times.
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

“Movies are the lingua franca of the twentieth century.”

-Gore Vidal in *Point to Point Navigation*

The preceding quotation gets to the heart of what drew me to Film Studies as both a scholar and a teacher: the inextricability of film from modern and contemporary life, and the way it shapes how we communicate with each other. As a popular phenomenon, film can speak to the desires of the average person just as it can provide him or her with new ways to understand the world and his or her place in it. To teach the cinema should not only introduce students to vital ways to understand art, culture and politics, but it should also equip them with the necessary tools to think critically about history and question its flow into the present. Related to this, I teach film as one type of commercialized leisure related to others (such as the museum, amusement parks, television and popular song) to demonstrate its relation to a wide range of social contexts. I regard my role as a teacher of film and media with pleasure and gravity, as it is my duty to teach students new ways to enjoy and question the cinema, and also understand its relation to new audiovisual forms. Consequently, the classes I teach stress participation and the development of critical thinking skills, as I wish to prepare students to reflect on the audiovisual media they encounter in their own lives. I believe that this active questioning in and beyond the classroom leads students to be more fulfilled, both personally and as contributing members of society.

I find that the study of history is profoundly important to think critically about the world today, and in turn I prioritize historical research in my classes. This skill set is especially important now, as changes in secondary education have left students unprepared to think critically about primary and secondary sources at the college level. In foregrounding historical research my goal is to make students aware of the many parallels between the past and the present, and also to make them question the paths that fields of study have taken. For example, when I recently taught the History of Silent Film I required students to research the promotion and reception of a silent film through publications that are available via the Media History Digital Library. While some students chose popular films from the late 1910s and the 1920s (including the Douglas Fairbanks Technicolor film *The Black Pirate*), most chose more famous films such as *Metropolis* that they already knew. The exercise was extremely productive in that it made students aware of the continuities between the promotion of movies in the silent period and today. Students who chose films that remain more famous also became cognizant of the subjective nature of canon formation, and the limited relation it sometimes has to the impact of films at the time of release.

Within my classes I prioritize close reading and discussion in the effort to develop active and critical learning skills. While I deliver contextual information through lecture and I emphasize key points in each class, I also encourage students to speak as much as possible and work through ideas on their own. To this end, I typically require students to lead discussion on weekly readings once over the course of the semester. I believe that engaging students in critical interpretation develops their own thinking skills in the classroom and beyond, and fosters a greater appreciation of the texts they read and the films they watch. On a particularly memorable occasion, a student who led discussion on Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” pointed to later
directions in feminist discourse that concerned the status of the female voice, and parallels in the
depiction of women in several popular films today. Related to this, I also assign texts from
beyond film studies that expand the critical approaches of students. For instance, in my class
“The Musical Revisited,” I assigned a section on “Making Do” from Michel de Certeau’s *The
Practice of Everyday Life* to contextualize a reading about queer labor at MGM. While the pairing
initially puzzled many students, they grew to understand how popular texts such as films provide
several ways for people at odds with power to manage the stress of daily life. At the end of the
semester many students told me that this reading had been the most useful to them, both in
consideration of their own consumption and also in papers they had written for other classes.

While the study of film and its production are often taught separately, I find it instructive to
combine them. The pairing of critical study and production can often illustrate ideas that may
remain difficult to understand through reading or discussion. In an introduction to film class
targeted to non-majors, for example, students completed a brief editing exercise for which they
changed the soundtrack to a famous audiovisual sequence to illustrate points raised by Michel
Chion in *Audio-Vision*. Playing back altered clips from films that ranged from *Toy Story*, to
*Clueless*, to *Avatar* made students aware of the many ways sound can shape vision. I also
recognize that many students desire to pursue a career in media production, and for the final
assignment in many of my classes students can either write a paper or produce a short film
accompanied by a written rationale. This provides an opportunity for students who are oriented
toward production to think through the themes of the class in a new way, and it also allows them
to build a portfolio for life beyond their undergraduate education.

Although my work centers on queer experience, I understand queerness as one of many
important forms of social difference that include gender, race and class. In turn, I always build
sections into any class I teach that address a diversity of perspectives to encourage student
retrospection on their own dispositions. For instance, even though the History of Silent Film
class I recently taught was during an abbreviated summer session, I nonetheless included a
section on social difference. Over the course of this section we watched and read about serial
films such as *The Hazards of Helen* that addressed female viewers, considered the cultural
conditions that enabled Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa’s Western stardom, explored how the
films of Oscar Micheaux spoke to African American experience in the late teens and early
twenties, and also examined the ability of Rudolph Valentino’s star persona to appeal both to
new trends in female consumption as well as growing gay male subcultures in cities across the
United States. Social difference has provided a heuristic frame for an entire course, as with the
reading and composition class I co-taught called “Stardom, Spectatorship, Difference.” This class
emphasized the differences and similarities between female, black, and queer audience reception,
and offered students the opportunity to relate historical precedents to their own experiences.

While my convictions about active engagement, historical research, critical thinking, and
diversity are firmly grounded, I also recognize that student background and new technological
developments may require innovation in the classroom. As a teacher I welcome opportunities
offered by the Digital Humanities to try new approaches that can improve student
comprehension and engagement, and I look forward to finding new ways to teach students about
audiovisual media and its centrality to historical and contemporary life.
The musical has long been considered one of the most conservative Hollywood genres, one that serves furthermore to reaffirm dominant attitudes toward and gender, sexuality, race, and capitalism. These assertions often draw from close readings of the films themselves, and typically limit the temporal boundaries of the genre proper to the mid 1930s through the mid 50s. This course approaches the musical genre from an enlarged perspective that considers the development of movie musical conventions alongside the invention and circulation of popular song via other patterns of distribution and social practices (sheet music, radio, performance, etc.), and over a more expanded time period. The historical subjects and contexts that will be examined include the development of music listening habits via the radio, the role of popular music in early television broadcasts, shifts in cinematic spectacle in the 50s and 60s, and the emergence of music videos and remakes of them on YouTube. We will also consider a range of critical perspectives on musicals and popular song that emphasize social difference, predominantly gender and sexuality.

**Texts**

*There is a course reader that is available at *Zee Zee Copy*, located at 2431-C Durant Ave, between Telegraph and Dana St. In the event that they don’t have one already made, be prepared to wait a couple days before a copy is ready for you.

*Hollywood Musicals, *The Film Reader* is available at the bookstore or online.

All readings listed on the syllabus should be done in preparation for the day they are listed.

**Assignments**

Midterm: 30% of grade, in class on Monday, October 14

Final Exam: 30% of grade, Monday, December 16, 8-11 AM
8-10 Page Essay: Essays will be on the topic of your choice, as long as they engage appropriate themes and readings from the class. More extensive guidelines will be provided after the midterm on Monday, October 21. The essay will count for 20% of your grade and will be due on Friday, December 6 (the final day of classes) so as to keep it from occupying your attention during RRR week and into the exam period.

Participation: Participation is measured by your timely and regular attendance in class and at screenings, and your willing contribution to class discussion. Participation will count for 20% of your grade. Preliminary participation grades will be circulated mid-semester.

Course Policies

Note:
If you need disability-related accommodations in this class, you must register with the Disabled Students Program (http://dsp.berkeley.edu/); they will evaluate your case and provide you with an accommodation letter if appropriate. Please speak privately with me if you have been provided with an accommodation, or have another commitment that excuses you from missing sections of class.

How to Do Well in This Class
To do well in this class it is incredibly important that you are actively engaged when you are in class. This means taking notes during lecture (including dates, directors, etc., which will be tested on exams), and participating actively in discussion when appropriate. If you are confused by something, please ask a question! If you don’t understand something, others in the class likely don’t either. Follow directions for assignments and exams closely, and make sure that what you turn in matches what is expected. Be familiar with proper film analysis. As this is an upper division course, it is assumed that you are already familiar with the mechanics of film analysis (including formal and thematic modes of analysis, as well as contextual, historical analytical approaches), so they will not be covered or taught extensively in this class. Furthermore, remember that a proper academic position on a film is not a value judgment, but rather an informed position on it derived from substantive observations about it. If necessary, watch films over again to aid your analysis, especially when preparing your essays.

Attendance
You are allowed 2 unexcused absences over the course of the semester. Thereafter, each absence will count as 5% off of your final grade. It will be very difficult to miss several classes and receive a good grade in this class. Excused absences must be supported by appropriate official documents. Tardiness will be noted, and 3 tardies will count as one absence.

Academic Honesty
Plagiarism in written assignments seriously compromises the integrity of the classroom environment and educational experience of students; it will not be tolerated.
If a student commits plagiarism, he or she will automatically fail the assignment. A second offense will result in failure of the course and the action will be reported to the Center for Student Conduct.

Students are responsible for becoming familiar with and adhering to the guidelines of UC Berkeley's Code of Student Conduct (http://students.berkeley.edu/uga/conduct.asp.) If you are unsure whether your use of secondary sources constitutes plagiarism, ask!

Make sure to cite all sources for your ideas, **even when you are rephrasing or summarizing materials rather than quoting them directly.** Individual direct quotations should be kept to no more than 50 words. Collaboration on written assignments or submission of work for multiple classes is prohibited.

**Electronics Policy**

Laptops are allowed **only** for the purpose of taking notes during lecture. **They are not allowed during screening.** No other electronic devices are allowed during class time. If at any point I perceive that the presence of laptops is interfering with discussion or lecture, I reserve the right to prohibit their use.

**Media Resources Center**

The MRC is located on the bottom floor of Moffitt Library, and it houses the University's collection of audio-visual materials inclusive of the feature-length films we will be watching in class. These materials do not circulate, so when you are reviewing films for your papers please make time to view these materials there. Hours, their catalog, and further information can be found here: http://lib.berkeley.edu/mrc

**bSpace**

bSpace will be used primarily as a tool for communication and as a resource for course documents and assignments. Only in special cases will readings be posted on bSpace.

**Contacting Me**

The best way to get in touch with me is by e-mail. If you have a question that requires a short response it can be covered there, but if it requires substantive communication it should be addressed in office hours. Please allow 24 hours for a response to e-mails.

**Course Schedule**

**Note:**

Readings must be completed **before** the class date listed on the syllabus. Page numbers listed on syllabus correspond to the original page numbers, not those of the course reader. Please bring the source in which readings were assigned to each class meeting.
* designates that the article is in the reader

Week 1
Mon, September 2: Holiday
Wed, September 4: Introduction

Week 2
Henri Lefebvre, selections from *The Production of Space*, pp. 62, 205–207, 225.*

Screen:*Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, Fox, 2001), 127 min.


Week 3
Mon, September 16: Read Rick Altman, “The Structure of the American Film Musical” from *The American Film Musical*, pp. 28–58.*

Screen *Easter Parade* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1948), 107 min.


In class screening: Busby Berkeley Musical Numbers

Week 4

Screen *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, MGM, 1952), 103 min.

In class screening: “Bojangles of Harlem” from Swing Time

Week 5
Mon, September 30: Read Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
Kaja Silverman, selections from The Acoustic Mirror, pp. 42-49.*

Screen Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Howard Hawks, Fox, 1953), 91 min.


Week 6
Mon, October 7: Read Matthew Tinkcom, “Working like a Homosexual: Minnelli in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Freed Unit,” from Working Like a Homosexual, pp. 35-71.*

Screen The Pirate (Vincente Minnelli, MGM, 1948), 102 min.


Week 7
Mon, October 14: *******Midterm: Bring Bluebooks to Class******

Screen The Gang’s All Here (Busby Berkeley, Fox, 1943), 103 min.


Week 8
Mon, October 21: Assign Essay (8-10 pages)

Week 9

Screen Thank Your Lucky Stars (David Butler, Warner Bros., 1943), 127 min.


Week 10

Screen The Girl Can’t Help It (Frank Tashlin, Fox, 1956), 99 min.


Week 11
Mon, November 11: Holiday


In class screening: “Too Many Stars,” Episode 6 of Season 3 of The Dick Van Dyke Show

Week 12
Screen  *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, Robert Wise Productions and Fox, 1965), 174 min—split between class and screening period.


**Week 13**
Mon, November 25: TBA—Popular Vote

Wed, November 27: TBA

**Week 14**

Screen  Music Videos and Scopitones

Wed, December 4: Final Day of Class, Wrap-Up

Fri, December 6: Essay due by 5 PM

Mon, December 16: *****Final Exam: 8-11 AM, Bring Bluebooks*****