

PHIL 290
Philosophy and Film:
Heroic Narratives in Action Film

SPRING 2015
Time: Tues: 6:30-9:20pm
Location: DSB C116

Instructor: Dr. Nina Belmonte
Office: Clearihue B318
Office Hours: Mon. 1:30-2:30
Wed. 1:30-2:30
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Course Objectives: The “Action Film” is the single highest grossing, most exported and insidiously influential genre to come out of Hollywood in the last 50 years. In this course, we will examine the heroic narratives these films put forth and how their simple formulas combine with very sophisticated aesthetics to “sell” us a certain set of ethical values. We will begin with a look at the myth of the ‘hero’ as a ritual of sacrifice and redemption. Then, along with some readings in film studies and narrative theory, we will explore the history of the action genre, its formulas, tropes and customs, and its reflections and reactions to the socio-political climate of the times. Throughout, we will pay close attention to the portrayal of key values such as strength, courage, goodness and effective agency.

Texts:

In the Bookstore:

Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder*.

(Westport, CN/London: Praeger Press, 2004)

Harvey O’Brien, *Action Movies: Cinema of Striking Back*.

(New York: Wallflower, 2012)

Made available in Reserve and on Moodle course site:

Plato, *The Republic* (selections)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections)

Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* (online)

Yvonne Tasker, ed. *Action and Adventure Cinema*,
(New York: Routledge, 2004)

Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, (Edinburgh;
Edinburgh University Press, 2011)

James Kendrick, *Film Violence*, (New York: Wallflower, 2009)

Thomas Leitch, “Aristotle vs. the Action Film,” *New Hollywood
Violence*, Steven Jay Schneider, ed. (Manchester:
Manchester University Press, 2004)

Rikke Schubart, “Passion and Acceleration,” *Violence and
American Cinema*, Slocum, ed. (New York: Routledge,
2001)

Assignments:

Two Short Papers (20% each):	40%
In-Class Writing (10% each):	20%
Final Term Paper:	30%
Class Attendance:	<u>10%</u>
	100%

Percentages will convert to a letter grade according to the standard University scheme:

A+ = 90-100	B+ = 77-79	C+ = 65-69	D = 50-59
A = 85-89	B = 73-76	C = 60-64	F = 0-49
A- = 80-84	B- = 70-72		

Description of Assignments:

Two short exegetical papers (5-7 pgs; 1200-1700 Words): Explaining/Exploring your choice of topic from a list provided by me. These will be evaluated on your understanding of the material, and the clarity and presentation of your argument

Class Attendance/In Class Writings: I expect you to read and to attend class. I hope that you will think and participate. Since I am giving you credit for watching movies, I will be taking attendance. On two out of six of the days when we watch an entire film there will be brief in-class writing assignments. These will not be announced and it will not be possible to make them up. Each will count as 10% of your grade. You will also be asked to view movies as part of the week's homework.

Final Paper: There will be a substantial (7-10 pgs./1700-2500 words) paper due at the end of the semester, analyzing a film of your choice in light of the readings and discussions of the course. I will provide a list of possible films, but you are free to choose one of your own, as long as *you speak with me in advance*. This paper should include narrative, ethical and stylistic/aesthetic analyses and should cite at least two secondary sources not included in course readings.

Late Assignments

Papers *handed in by the next day's office hour* will be accepted without penalty. After that, papers will lose a grade for each day they are late (ex: A becomes A-). Late papers may be returned with a grade only (no comments). *No papers will be accepted more than 7 days after the deadline*. Exceptions will be made only in cases of illness and personal crisis, a request for which must be received by me in writing *before the deadline*. Papers turned in on time may be rewritten; rewrites must be handed in by 7 days after the original due date.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will not be tolerated. Please see page 22 of the University Calendar for a description of plagiarism. Please be particularly aware of the temptations of plagiarism offered by the internet. Lifting and pasting passages verbatim is plagiarism. Remember: I have Google too.

The minimum penalty is a failing grade on the assignment produced by plagiarism. Serious or repeated plagiarism can result in failure of a course and even suspension.

Diversity

UVic is committed to promoting, providing and protecting a supportive and safe learning and working environment for all its members.

Schedule of Classes

(Subject to Change: See Moodle site for most recent version.)

Week One: *Enter the Hero*

Topic: Why Heroes?
Read: (In Class) Plato, *Republic*, BK II-III (selections);
View: **TBA***

Week Two: *"Motion Picture"*

Topic: Origins and History of the Action Film
'Reading' a Film
Read: Plato, *Republic*, Bk. VII (The Cave);
Griffith/Eisenstein, *Closely Watched Trains*, Chpts. 1&2 (Moodle)
View: Westerns ("The Searchers", "High Noon");
Film Noir (The Big Heat)

Week Three: *Birth of a Genre*

Topic: Rise of the 'Action Film'
Read: Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder*, Introduction, Prelude, Ch. 1;
O'Brien, *Action Movies*, Chapter I, pp 18-31.
View: **"Dirty Harry" (Don Siegel, 1971)**
At Home: "Deathwish" (Winner, 1974); "Nighthawks" (Malmuth, 1981)

Week Four: *Rites and Rituals*

Topic: Heroic Narratives/Hollywood Formulas
Read: Raglan, "Myth and Ritual" (Moodle);
Leitch, "Aristotle vs. the Action Film"
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections/Moodle)
View: At Home: War Film; Superman

Week Five: *Hard Body Politics*

Topic: Manly Virtues/Manly Politics
Read: Lichtenfeld, Chapter II; O'Brien, Ch. II;
Yvonne Tasser, *Spectacular Bodies*, Ch. 5-7. (on line)
View: **"Rambo: First Blood II" (Cosmatos, 1985)**
First Paper Due

Week Six - Reading Break

* Bolded films are to be shown in class in entirety. Normal text are suggested films to be viewed at home.

Week Seven: *Bigger/Better/Faster*

- Topic: Hero as 'Action in Action'/Action Without Agency
Read: O'Brien, Intro and Ch. 1, pp 32-40; Lichtenfeld, Ch. 5; Anderson, "Action in Motion" (Moodle)
View: At Home: Bullit; Terminator; Robocop

Week Eight: *Beauty as the Beast*

- Topic: Babes, Buddies and Bad 'Guys'
Read: O'Brien, Ch. 3 62-69; Tasser, *Spectacular Bodies*, Intro and Ch. 1; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" (moodle)
View: **Aliens (Cameron, 1986)**
At Home: Kill Bill; Grindhouse; Terminator II

Week Nine: *Everyman-The New Template*

- Topic: Everyman-hero; Contained Destruction
Read: Rikke Schubart, "Passion and Acceleration"
View: Die Hard (McTiernan, 1988); Die Hard on a ...

Week Ten: *Saviors and CGI*

- Topic: Apocalypse/Redemption Narratives, Affect of CGI on the heroic narrative.
Read: Lichtenfeld, Ch. 4; Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, Introduction Wood, "Collapse of Reality and Illusion in the Matrix" (in Purse)
View: **The Matrix (Wachowskis, 1999)**

**** Second Paper Due****

Week Eleven: *Assassins*

- Topic: Assassin-Heroes, Terrorism, Torture
Read: Zizek, *Violence* (selections, Moodle); Kendrick, "Violence and Genre," *Film Violence* (Moodle)
View: Hanna; Bourne Identity

Week Twelve: *Super Heroes*

- Topics: Greater/Less than Human
Read: TBA
View: **The Dark Knight (Nolan, 2008)**

Week Thirteen- *Reflection/Return*

- Topic: Self-Reflection and Parody
Read: Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of the Good"
View: **Gran Torino (Eastwood, 2008)**