

**Seminar in Composition Film: Cinema and Sacrifice**  
**University of Pittsburgh**  
**Fall 2010**

**SYLLABUS**

**Instructor:** Dan Chyutin (English Department/Film Studies Program)  
**Office:** 517U  
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**About “Seminar in Composition Film”**

Seminar in Composition (SC) is a course taken by all undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh. Although a “writing-designated course,” SC should not be perceived as being an instructional class on the rules of good grammar. While not forsaking grammatical and syntactical concerns, the focus of SC is nevertheless on improving a student’s skills in **critical thinking** through discussion, reading (broadly understood), and—most importantly—writing. As a participant of this class, you will be expected to 1) engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry; 2) address challenging questions about the consequences of your own writing; 3) compose thoughtfully crafted essays that position your ideas among other views; and 4) write with precision, nuance, and awareness of textual conventions. It is important for you to be aware that SC is a discussion-based course, in which every student is expected to participate and contribute. It is also a work-intensive course which requires the student to face challenging texts and difficult assignments, and produce, on a weekly basis, numerous pieces of writing which reflect the complexity of the topics discussed in class. Finally, SC is, first and foremost, a course about your writing and thinking: while we will be talking about films and published essays in class, our central concern will always be the writings produced by you and your peers. As a result, you should be prepared to having at least one of your writings be distributed and reviewed in a group and/or class forum.

Finally, a note on the “film” designation: SC Film is a section of SC which seeks to promote a student’s critical faculties through a rigorous engagement with visual texts. Although it is a course focused on cinema, SC Film is, above all, a composition class. Thus, it will not be counted towards a film studies major, if you choose to pursue one. Nor will it be used to explore concerns that are medium-specific. Rather, like the written texts used in this class, filmic texts will serve us as platforms through which to explore general themes of critical importance to our everyday reality.

## About the Theme: Cinema and Sacrifice

The term “sacrifice” is widely used in contemporary society, to the extent that one assumes that it relates to both a natural and neutral entity. Yet, the underlying premise of this class is that sacrifice is neither, but in fact a value-laden symbolic construction made to cater to particular social ends. The films chosen for this class all position “sacrifice” at their center; using them as our guide, and inspired by a variety of written texts from different disciplines, we will attempt to map out the contours of this elusive term, as it is shaped by the concerns of different socio-cultural contexts. In discussing the various forms of sacrifice, and how they are imagined and imaged in cinema, we will focus on the following framing questions:

- **Ingredients of Sacrifice:** how does sacrifice operate technically? Who sacrifices and who/what gets sacrificed? What is the form of damage inflicted on the sacrificed? What is the physical context in which the sacrifice takes place?
- **The Symbolic Meaning of Sacrifice:** how does sacrifice function symbolically? What are the symbolic roles of the participants, act, and outcome as they relate to preexisting myths and social conventions? What are the ideals/myths with which the performer of sacrifice hopes to connect through this act?
- **Sacrifice in the Public Discourse:** how is sacrifice commemorated, ritualized, and marketed within society? In what discursive contexts does the term appear? Who utilizes it, and to what particular social, economical, and/or cultural ends?

## Films

The following films will be discussed in class:

*The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004)

*Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937)

*Death of a Salesman* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1985)

*Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006)

*Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2005)

*The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008)

**Viewing:** the aforementioned films will not be screened in class. It is your responsibility to view them before class. DVD copies will be placed on reserve at the Stark Media Center, Hillman Library. They are also widely available for rent or purchase (if you choose).

**‘R’ Rating:** some of the aforementioned films are rated R, containing what may be considered objectionable violence and language. If you foresee an objection to viewing any of the scheduled films, I encourage you to enroll in another section of Seminar in Composition.

## Readings

The following texts—all present in PDF format on Courseweb—will be discussed in class:

- Bartholomae, David, and Anthony Petrosky. “Introduction: Ways of Reading.” *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Bedford Books, 2008. 1-23. **(You will read an excerpt: p. 1-16.)**
- Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. “Beyond the Educational Frontier: The Great American Dream Freeze.” *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1976. 3-17.
- Buffton, Deborah D. “Memorialization and the Selling of War.” *Peace Review: A Journal for Social Justice* 17 (2005): 25-31.
- Dingley, James, and Michael Kirk-Smith. “Symbolism and Sacrifice in Terrorism.” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 13.1 (Spring 2002): 102-128.
- Girard, René. “Sacrifice.” *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. 1-40. **(You will read an excerpt: p. 1-28.)**
- Hays, Sharon. “Why Can’t a Mother be more Like a Business Woman?” *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996. 1-18.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. “What is the American Dream?” *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. 15-38.
- Hubert, Henri, and Marcel Mauss. “Selection from *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*.” *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*. Ed. Jeffery Carter. London: Continuum, 2003. 90-99.
- Irwin, William. “Gibson’s Sublime *Passion*: In Defense of the Violence.” *Mel Gibson’s Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, the Controversy*. Ed. Jorge J. E. Garcia. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2004. 51-61.
- Nadelson, Theodore. *Trained to Kill: Soldiers at War*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. **(You will read an excerpt: p. ix-xii, 1-53.)**
- Reichenbach, Bruce R. “Dances of Death: Self Sacrifice and Atonement.” *Mel Gibson’s Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, the Controversy*. Ed. Jorge J. E. Garcia. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2004. 190-203.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Anger and Tenderness.” *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976. 21-40.
- Sennett, Richard, and Jonathan Cobb. “Sacrifice and Betrayal.” *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972. 119-150.
- Strenski, Ivan. “Sacrifice, Gift and the Social Logic of Muslim ‘Human Bombers.’” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15.3 (Autumn 2003): 1-34.
- Waldman, Ayelet. “Truly, Madly, Guiltily.” *The New York Times* 27 Mar. 2005: F1+. *The New York Times Database*. 20 August 2010.

< [www.nytimes.com/2005/03/27/fashion/27love.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/27/fashion/27love.html)>.

Williams, Linda. "Something Else Besides Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama." *Issues in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990. 137-162.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance." *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* London: Verso, 2002. 5-32. (**You will read an excerpt: p. 5-20.**)

In addition, I highly recommend you acquire the following grammar guide:

Silverman, Jay, Elaine Hughes, and Diana Roberts Wienbroer. *Rules of Thumb* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009.

## Writing

SC is a writing-oriented class, and your grade is largely based on the quality of the different pieces of writing you produce. You should set aside sufficient time so to allow you to meaningfully reflect on the seminar's films and readings and produce thoughtful, proofread texts.

### Essays

You'll write several essays, with opportunities to revise your work at midterm and at the end of the semester. Essays will give you the opportunity to develop your thoughts and arguments at greater length, as well as experiment with different rhetorical models outside of the standard five-paragraph format (Intro/Body/Conclusion). The essay should be **a minimum of 1200 words** (roughly four pages), but you're encouraged to write more, providing this benefits your argument. Below are the rules for writing essays in SC:

- Your essay should be double-spaced in a 12-point font, with the standard margins (1.25 on the right and left; 1.0 on the top and bottom).
- Write your name and the words "SC Film, Fall 2010" in the upper right-hand corner of the first page.
- Your essay should be *titled*, and the title should be *original* in that it reflects your particular position vis-à-vis the topic at hand. The essay title should be placed below your name and course title. No title sheet is necessary. The title should *not* be underlined or placed in quotation marks. Skip two lines after the title to begin your essay.
- Your essay should include page numbers in the upper right-hand corner.
- Your essay should be *carefully proofread* for errors in wording, punctuation, and spelling. *If your teacher encounters more than two errors per page, you'll be required to provide a corrected copy.* Errors of this kind will also negatively affect your grade.
- In order to avoid plagiarism, *you must cite your sources, even when you are only paraphrasing.*

- You will need to submit a paper copy of the essay in class. In addition, you will be required to submit an electronic copy of this essay (before or immediately after class) to the following address: [class.composition@gmail.com](mailto:class.composition@gmail.com). For all intents and purposes, only the paper copy will function as proof of your submission of this assignment.

### **Evaluation of Essays**

The evaluation of written texts is an important part of this seminar. You will be asked to add to each of your essays a short evaluation of your writing. In addition, you will be required to evaluate your peers' essays and your own work as part of class workshops and discussions.

### **Discussion Board**

This course includes an online Discussion Board (DB), accessed through Courseweb. In DB, you will be required to respond to a question regarding the verbal and visual texts to be discussed in class. In your comment, you should also respond to at least one of the ideas presented in the comments before you. (Obviously you are exempt from this requirement if you're the first to post a response). Unless otherwise stated, your DB comments should be *a minimum of 300 words*. They should be posted *by 6pm the night before the class* in which they'll be discussed. At the beginning of term, the class will be divided into two DB groups (A & B), so that only half of the class will respond to any given assignment. In any case, all class participants are required to read all the DB responses before coming to class.

### **In-Class Writing**

Occasionally, you'll be asked to perform an in-class writing assignment. If you miss class, you should arrange to make up the in-class writing assignment as soon as possible.

### **Proofreading**

You are responsible to edit and proofread your pieces of writing. A submitted document that includes an inordinate number of grammatical and syntactical errors will be returned for corrections.

## **Policies**

### **Attendance**

Since this seminar focuses primarily on the work of you and your classmates, whose writing and responses to the reading are central to class discussion, attendance is mandatory. You are allowed *three* absences during the term for whatever reason, though it is strongly recommended that you strive for perfect attendance. *If you do miss a class, you must arrange for your assignment that day to be submitted on time, either via email or by placing it in my mailbox in CL-501. Four absences without a documented excuse (such as a doctor's note) will result in a full one-grade penalty to your final grade; more than four absences can be grounds for failure.*

Students in this situation may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances.

### **Tardiness**

Since coming in late for class often disrupts discussion, it should be avoided at all cost. You are allowed no more than two instances of tardiness during the semester. If you come in late on more than two occasions, your grade will suffer accordingly.

### **Class Participation and Etiquette**

You will be expected to arrive in class ready to take part in the conversation about the materials under study. While in class you are not allowed to use laptops or cell phones. You are expected to be respectful of your peers and instructor and not partake in any activity unrelated to discussion while the class is in session.

### **Writing Assignments**

All writing assignments must be completed in order to pass this course. The assignments should also be submitted on time. For each late assignment (without a documented excuse), your final grade for the semester will drop by one third (C+ turns to C, for example). If you are late on more than two assignments, you will receive an “F” as your final grade.

### **Grading**

You must earn a “**C-minus**” in order to pass Seminar in Composition. Your work will be judged by higher standards than those imposed in high school, so it is not uncommon that a paper that would have received an “A” in high school would get a “C” in this class. (This does not mean, however, that “A” level grades may not be attained in SC.) Grades are defined by the University as follows: “A” = superior attainment; “B” = meritorious attainment; “C” = adequate attainment; “D” = minimal attainment; “F” = failure.

Your grade will be determined by *a review of your writing twice during the course of the semester*—once at midterm and once during final exam week. In other words, rather than grading each and every paper individually, I will write comments intended to help you revise your essays and improve your writing. In-class writing and Discussion Board comments will generally not receive individual response, but student responses to these assignments will often be photocopied and discussed.

At midterm (week 8), I will schedule a conference with you to discuss your progress and give you a provisional grade. You should also feel free to stop by during my office hours to discuss your work at any point during the semester. A final grade will be determined in response to your final folder, which is due on December 13<sup>th</sup>. Your folder will include all your work for the term and will be graded according to the following criteria:

- **Critical:** displaying complex, multivalent thinking which questions assumptions of the “natural” and entertains different, at times contradictory possibilities, ultimately forging positions that are coherent, tentative, and meaningful.
- **Rhetorical:** experimenting with different modes of writing in a manner that reveals awareness of the effects of rhetorical choices on the levels of argumentation and address. Crafting writing samples that are clear, precise, nuanced, and engaging.
- **Textual:** reading with careful attention to detail, and providing nuanced analysis which seeks out and thoughtfully engages the complexities and ambiguities of the text.
- **Contextual:** convincingly relating particular arguments to broader social-political-cultural contexts and concerns.
- **Developmental:** exercising a productive engagement with peer and instructor comments and revealing development as a writer and thinker over time.

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

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism by a student is:

- When a student presents as his/her own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or works of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgement of sources.
- When a student submits work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be his/her own.
- When a student knowingly permits his/her work to be submitted by another person without the instructor's authorization. ("Student Obligations and Adjudication," University Policy 02-03-03).

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity (<http://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policy/integrity.html>) will be required to participate in the procedural process as outlined in the English Department regulations (<http://www.english.pitt.edu/resources/plagiarism.html>). A minimum sanction of an “F” for the plagiarized paper will be imposed.

### **Course Website and Email Regulations**

Resources for this course can be found online at the University’s Blackboard website, <http://courseweb.pitt.edu>. If you have trouble with this or any other aspect of the course website, call the help desk at (412) 624-HELP.

Courseweb automatically uses your Pitt email account (username@pitt.edu). This e-mail address will be used by me for official communication. You are expected to read e-mails sent to this account on a regular basis (at least once a day). Failure to read and react to instructor/University communications in a timely manner does not absolve you from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Gmail, Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students who choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If an e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve you from responding to official communications sent to your University e-mail address. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to [www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html](http://www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html).)

### **Additional Assistance**

#### **The Writing Center**

Located in M2 Thaw Hall, 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, your teacher may require that you go 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/](http://www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/)

#### **Composition Tutorial**

You may consider enrolling in a one-credit course called Composition Tutorial, which gives you the opportunity to meet once a week with a Writing Center consultant to examine your writing more closely and address problems with structure, grammar, and punctuation. If you are enrolled in Composition Tutorial, you’ll need to attend all sessions and bring with you the material from this seminar (syllabus, assignments, drafts of papers, teacher’s comments, etc.).

#### **Other Services**

Pitt offers a number of services to help students who are struggling either academically or personally. If you are a student with a disability, you may wish to contact Disability Resources and Services in 216 William Pitt Union or at 412-648-7890. Pitt also offers free counseling at the Counseling Center, located in 334 William Pitt Union (412-648-7930), for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties.

## Class Schedule

Be sure to watch the films, read the texts, and prepare the assignments before the classes they are listed to.

### Course Introduction

Mon 8/30: introduction to the course syllabus.

Wed 9/1: introduction to critical writing, reading, and thinking. Read: Bartholomae & Petrosky (p. 1-12), glossary of film terms. Assignment: DB 1 (Gp. A).

Mon 9/6: no class (Labor Day)

### Theme Introduction

Wed 9/8: sacrifice—basic concepts. Read: Hubert & Mauss. Assignment: DB 2 (Gp. B).

### Religious Sacrifice and Ritualistic Violence

Mon 9/13: self sacrifice and the sublime in *The Passion of the Christ*. View: *The Passion of the Christ*. Read: Reichenbach, Irwin, punctuation-quotation rules. Assignment: DB 3 (Gp. A).

Wed 9/15: ritualistic violence as a social institution. Read: Girard (p. 1-27). Assignment: DB 4 (Gp. B).

Mon 9/20: complex sentences and essay 1 peer review. Assignment: essay 1.

### Maternal Sacrifice

Wed 9/22: maternal sacrifice—*Stella Dallas* as a conservative text. View: *Stella Dallas*. Read: Rich. Assignment: DB 5 (Gp. A).

Mon 9/27: the contradictions of femininity—*Stella Dallas* as a progressive text. Read: Williams. Assignment: DB 6 (Gp. B).

Wed 9/29: maternal sacrifice today. Read: Hays, Waldman.

Mon 10/4: discussion of rhetorical models and essay 2 peer review. Assignment: essay 2.

Wed 10/6: revision workshop. Read: Bartholomae & Petrosky (p. 12-16).

Tue 10/12: assignment: midterm folder (including essay 3). Midterm conferences will follow.

Wed 10/13: Conferences.

### The American Dream and the Sacrifices of Social Mobility

Mon 10/18: *Death of a Salesman* and the shattering of the American Dream. View: *Death of a Salesman*. Read: Hochschild, Sennett & Cobb. Assignment: DB 7 (Gp. A).

Wed 10/20: *Death of a Salesman* and the sacrifices of social mobility. Assignment: DB 8 (Gp. B).

Mon 10/25: the American Dream today. Read: Bowles & Gintis. Assignment: collecting representations.

Wed 10/27: essay 3 workshop.

Mon 11/1: quotations workshop and essay 4 peer review. Assignment: essay 4.

### **War and the Symbolic Function of Battlefield Sacrifice**

Wed 11/3: *Flags of Our Fathers*—battle reality and myth. View: *Flags of Our Fathers*. Read: Nadelson. Assignment: DB 9 (Gp. A).

Mon 11/8: *Flags of Our Fathers* and war memorialization. Read: Buffton. Assignment: DB 10 (Gp. B).

Wed 11/10: war films as war memorials.

Mon 11/15: essay 4 workshop.

Wed 11/17: discussion of rhetorical models and essay 5 peer review. Assignment: essay 5.

### **Martyrdom as Spectacle: The Case of Human Bombers**

Mon 11/22: the social logic of human bombers. View: *Paradise Now*. Read: Strenski, Dingley & Kirk-Smith. Assignment: DB 11 (Gp. A).

Wed 11/24: no class (Thanksgiving).

Mon 11/29: martyrdom as spectacle. Read: Žižek. Assignment: DB 12 (Gp. B).

Wed 12/1: *Paradise Now*—a progressive vision of martyrdom?

### **Conclusion**

Mon 12/6: essay 5 workshop—composition review.

Wed 12/8: sacrifice—thematic conclusion.

Mon 12/13: assignment: final folder (including essay 6) due by 5:00 pm.