**Anthropology and Film**

ANTH/CINE 327, Section 1  
Room: BUS 122  
Hours: Tuesday 3:35 to 6:20  
3 units  

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 9 to 11 and by appointment  
Course links at: http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~biella/

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**Course Reader**

ANTH/CINE 327 Course Reader: available from Photo Day, 3418 Geary (at Stanyon) 415-387-4779

**Course Description**

Film and Anthropology introduces students to three approaches that anthropology has taken to films – the analysis of narratives – the analysis of audiences – and strategies for designing films that contribute to social change. Each week, films will be shown to enhance or illustrate the reading. In the first section, the course introduces the problem of multiple readings of narratives and then seeks to explain it through divergent theoretical approaches. An essay by Bordwell introduces out the problem, emphasizing the layers of authorial messages in structuring interpretation. The class then explores Freud’s free-associative method for explaining hidden, idiosyncratic interpretations of dreams; Propp, Wollen and Field offer formalist approach to fairy-tale / Hollywood fiction narratives which model the structure but not the reading of narratives. Barthes’ post-structural, semiological approach brings back elements of Freud’s technique blended with a class-analysis of implicit meanings, but is less concerned with order and structure.

The second section of the course looks at audiences. A reading by Martinez presents a study in which student responses to anthropological films ere quantitatively measured. Media analysts Perse and Schrader provide an overview of media effects and audience research in the US and European contexts. Hands-on looks at marketing from different sides of the isles are provided by Hiam and Klein. The section concludes with the culture theorist Jhally whose class-based analysis places special emphasis on the negative effect of advertising on social well-being.

The last section of the course explores culture-specific HIV-AIDS educational media with special focus on Southern Africa. Several media anthropologists worked on this project, and three essays, including one by myself will be read. My essay looks at the importance of fieldwork in media targeting and design; The essay by Levine explores the educational “afterlife of a film,” whereas that by Engelhart studies changes in audience reception when a film screening is introduced and followed-up by an expert facilitator.

The course then builds toward an understanding of how narratives engage viewers, how viewers have themselves been understood, and how health messages can be designed to successfully reach viewers.

**Two essays are required in the class. The first, worth 50%, is due April 7th.** Its purpose is to explore how people with different socio-cultural backgrounds respond differently to the same film. Your essay should be based largely on assigned readings by Freud, Martinez, Bordwell and Barthes, and on the class discussions.

For the assignment, find someone whose cultural background is very different from your
own. No housemates – no girl/boyfriends - no relatives or person from this class. You must select someone with significant differences from yourself in at least three of the following categories: age, ethnicity, “race,” occupation, gender, health or education. This person has to be willing to dedicate at least 10 hours to the project.

The first part of the assignment is to view a film/DVD of your choice together – it may be a documentary, ethnographic film or fictional. For ethnographic films, the Library’s Media collection is quite large (see links on my homepage). While watching, both of you should monitor carefully your emotional and intellectual reactions to the film. Take careful notes on the film, even stopping it in process if necessary. The most important part of this note-taking task is to concentrate on particular images, sequences and ideas that strike you personally and powerfully, either as appealing or repugnant, intelligent or puzzling, fascinating or boring. You are, in effect, doing fieldwork on your own emotional reactions. Both viewers should then take at least an hour after the film is over – without conversing – to clarify and write down their reactions. Do not shorten or compromise this part of the assignment. If you do not work carefully and alone at this point, you may later be unable to reconstruct your first reactions. If you discuss the film, you may forget or change your personal reactions.

The next part of the assignment is to compare your reactions with those of your partner-informant. This requires a lengthy discussion / interview. The goal is to identify the personal, historical and cultural factors in your lives which you both help to explain the differences or interesting similarities in your reactions to the film. Write up preliminary conclusions and give the project a rest for a week.

Next look at the film a second time, alone. Pay special attention to those moments or sections which brought about the most interesting differences (or unexpected similarities) in your reactions. Again, take careful notes on your discoveries. You must then speak a second time with your partner to clarify any ideas and questions that this new phase of your research raises.

The essay that you present will summarize your conclusions from this visual fieldwork. It is very important to refer to works read and discussed in class: use them to guide your own personal analysis. Use citations (Chicago Manual of Style format). I am easily distracted by grammatical and silly errors, even to the point of losing the thread of the argument. Persistent grammatical errors will be marked down. For this reason, I strongly urge you to ask a friend – or someone in the Reading Center – to proof read a draft of your essay before you turn it in. This is what professional academics do with their own papers before publication.

The paper’s content will be evaluated on the basis of the sensitivity and penetration of its analysis. I will look, first, for thoughtful use of material read in class, and second, your self-searching reactions to the film, your ability to understand those of your partner, and the cogency of the argument you make to explain your different reactions in terms of the different life experiences and cultures.

**The second essay, also worth 50%, is due in class, May 12th.** In this project, you will design an HIV/AIDS educational video. The “message” portion of your work must be based on all of the essays assigned between April 7 and May 5, with special emphasis on the Biella, Hennessy and Orth essay of April 28, and on class discussions for those days. The narrative portion should be based on theories of narrative, particularly Propp (Feb. 17) and Field (Feb. 24). Select an audience in a community to which you have comfortable access. Conduct some basic health-related ethnographic fieldwork. Based on your understanding of what needs to be communicated in HIV/AIDS education, establish what factors would be most helpful, for that community, in an educational video. Consider what people need to hear, what they have
difficulty hearing, and how you might overcome the difficulty with a film script. The script may be of any genre, from animation or fiction to ethnographic. In the first four pages of your essay, present the results of your ethnographic research about the needs of the community, and justify the strategy you have picked based on the needs and the readings (you may also use any other materials). Then present a four-page description of your film. Use a narrative (film treatment) style in writing the description, not the two-column film script style.

| Jan 27 | Course introduction: multiple perspectives on viewing  
Handout: Transcript, Copacabana scene, Goodfellas  
Viewing: National Film Board of Canada, Four Families (1959, 10 min., AV82201);  
Martin Scorsese, Goodfellas (1990, 4 min., AV65284) |
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| February 3 | Course reader: Sigmund Freud, “Irma’s Injection” from The Interpretation of Dreams (1900)  
Viewing: Advertising and “news” from the professor’s collection |
| February 10 | Course reader: Roland Barthes, Selections from Mythologies (1954)  
Marlon T. Riggs, Color Adjustment (1991, 88 min, AV84139) |
| February 17 | Course reader: Vladimir Propp, “Functions of the Dramatis Personae,” “A Specimen Fairytale” and “List of Abbreviations” (1966 [1922])  
Peter Biella, “A Proppian Analysis of North by Northwest” (1996)  
Viewing: Alfred Hitchcock, North by Northwest (1959, 136 min, AV65290) |
| March 3 | Course Reader: David Bordwell, Selections from Making Films Mean (1989)  
Viewing: Selections from ethnographic films in the SFSU AV Catalogue |
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Course Reader</th>
<th>Viewings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 24</td>
<td>No class – Spring Break</td>
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<td>March 31</td>
<td>No class – Cesar Chavez Day</td>
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