



**ENG 720.001 (50491)—Special Topics in Film Studies
“The Cinematic Worlds of The Coen Brothers”**

**Summer II 2015
TR—1:00-5:00 pm
Room: HL 203**

Instructor: (Christopher Gonzalez, PhD – Assistant Professor)
Office Location: Hall of Languages (HL) 225
Office Hours: TR 11:00 am-1:00 pm and by appointment
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NOTE: I reserve the right to revise the contents of this syllabus as I deem necessary.

COURSE INFORMATION

Materials – Textbooks, Readings, Supplementary Readings:

Required Reading List:

All required reading will be provided via PDF files.

Suggested Reading List:

The Philosophy of The Coen Brothers, edited by Mark Conard (University Press of Kentucky) ISBN-0813134455.

Film: A Very Short Introduction by Michael Wood (Oxford University Press) ISBN- 0192803530.

Film Studies: An Introduction by Ed Sikov (Columbia University Press) ISBN- 0231142935.

Films

Blood Simple (1984)

Raising Arizona (1987)

Miller’s Crossing (1990)

Fargo (1996)

The Big Lebowski (1998)

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000)

No Country for Old Men (2007)

A Serious Man (2009)

Inside Llewyn Davis (2013)

Note: Students must have access to the films beyond class meetings if they are absent. These films may be available for rental at local video stores, Netflix, Amazon, and so on. All films discussed will be screened during class, but students are encouraged to screen other Coen brothers films on their own time.

(ENG 720 catalogue description): ENG 720 Sptc: in Film Studies

Hours: 3

Special Topics in Film Studies - Three semester hours Extended investigation of major subjects and issues in cinema and other media; topics vary but may include studies of author/directors, historical movements, critical approaches, and themes. May be repeated as topics vary to a maximum of 6 hours.

Course Description

Few directors working in the last few decades can be said to have such range of vision as Joel and Ethan Coen. From their opening effort, the blunt-force crime drama *Blood Simple*, to the metaphysical comedy *Raising Arizona*, the Coen brothers signaled an intriguing turn in American Cinema. Here was a filmmaking tandem that created or adapted material with equal poise, unafraid to venture outside of the established comfort zones formed by early successes. Their films help push the boundaries of genre expectations and film adaptations. Though they create such distinctly different films, they each are clearly imbued with the filmic DNA of the Coen brothers. What does their approach to filmmaking tell us about film in general? How do their casting choices influence their films? How have these filmmakers shaped cinema as well as the popular imagination? This course seeks to answer these intriguing questions and more by studying a majority of the films of the Coen brothers. The selected films and readings for the course range across a host of creative tendencies and theoretical perspectives, respectively. Students with specific thematic or scholarly interests are encouraged to integrate them into the coursework whenever possible.

Students enrolled in ENG 720 are encouraged to integrate their specific thematic or scholarly interests into the coursework whenever possible. Students should plan to engage in and at times lead productive discussions based on the theoretical and commonplace readings; develop ideas via questions posed in response to the readings; hone the skills presenting before an academic audience, continue to develop writing via a short, analytical essay suitable for presentation at an academic conference, and demonstrate proficiency of the course material via a final exam.

Course Objectives:

- Students will further develop their ability to present scholarly research before an academic audience.
- Students will demonstrate their engagement with the scholarly community.
- Students will hone their ability to write a conference paper for presentation.

Student Learning Outcomes:

- Students will further develop their ability to present scholarly research as measured by a presentation.
- Students will hone their ability to write a conference paper by submitting a paper for grading.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Instructional / Methods / Activities Assessments

This course consists of a series of activities and assessments to assist you in achieving the outcomes and objectives of this course and instructional units/modules. By the end of this course the class will read and discuss several scholarly texts and feature-length films.

During the semester you will complete several major assignments designed to build on each other intellectually and conceptually. These assignments are:

Daily Discussion and Participation **10%**

Active class participation is vital in graduate classes, but it is at times difficult to measure. You should be prepared to discuss several aspects of the readings and films during each class meeting. During a four-hour class meeting, you will have plenty of opportunity to participate. Each class meeting ought to be viewed as a collaboration of an investigative team that is charged with examining a problem. Everyone's sustained attention, preparation, and participation is key to this approach. Expect to be called on to discuss some facet of the day's readings and viewings, and to elaborate on these points via discussion. Because there are only 10 class meetings, every class is worth 10 points.

Quizzes (x 3) **15%**

In order to ensure that you engage with the course materials at an acceptable level, you will take three quizzes that will test your knowledge of key concepts and theoretical points that arise in readings, viewings, and discussion. Each quiz is worth 5% of your total course grade.

Oral Presentation **20%**

For this assignment you will prepare a presentation based on a film from the course viewings. You are encouraged to use a multimedia format to present your ideas (PowerPoint, Prezi, handout, etc.). The goal here is to introduce the rest of the class with the contents of the supplemental reading and demonstrate how it operates with our theoretical texts.

Written Responses **15%**

You will write three, one-page responses to a theoretical point and apply it to one of our films. For example, you might take up a theoretical point raised by a particular reading and "test" it out on one of our films. These responses are due at the end of Weeks 1, 2, and 3. Responses should be single-spaced and should take up no more than one sheet of paper—even if you have to adjust the margins and font size. Each response is worth 5% of your total course grade.

Paper Abstract **5%**

You will write an abstract of your final paper for approval. Abstracts will be 300-400 words in length and will describe the theoretical issue to be examined, the film (or aspect of film) to be discussed, and a bibliography of pertinent works (between 6-8). Your paper must have a title, and it is best to have a conference in mind where you might submit this abstract for consideration.

Conference-style Paper **15%**

You will submit a well-organized, persuasively-argued, well-argued conference paper approximately 8 double-spaced pages in length. Your final paper must unite a theoretical position with one of our commonplace films. This paper may grow out of one of your weekly responses or even your presentation.

Final Exam **20%**

The final exam will cover the major components of the course and will test your knowledge of theoretical points as they pertain to the course films. The exam will be taken outside of class and will be comprised of several short-answer responses.

Daily Discussion and Participation	10%
Quizzes	15%
Oral Presentation	20%
Written Responses	15%
Paper Abstract	5%
Conference Paper	15%
Final Exam	20%

Total: 100%

Scale used to compute final letter grades:

Percentage

A: 100-90

B: 89-80

C: 79-70

D: 69-60

F: 59-0

Technology

This course is conducted face to face (f2f). However, some aspects of the course will be accessed online (e.g., quizzes and exams). Information regarding all technological aspects of the course will be distributed on the first class meeting.

There will be no extra credit assignments. As a rule, I do not accept late work.

COURSE AND UNIVERSITY PROCEDURES/POLICIES

Course Specific Procedures:

Academic Honesty Policy

Texas A&M University-Commerce and the Department of Literature and Languages do not tolerate **plagiarism** and other forms of **academic dishonesty**. Conduct that violates generally-accepted standards of academic honesty is defined as academic dishonesty. "Academic dishonesty" includes, but is not limited to, plagiarism (the appropriation or stealing of the ideas or words of another person and passing them off as one's own), cheating on exams or other course assignments, collusion (the unauthorized collaboration with others in preparing course assignments), and abuse (destruction, defacing, or removal) of resource material. Instructors uphold and support the highest academic standards, and students are expected to do likewise. Penalties for students guilty of academic dishonesty include disciplinary probation, suspension and expulsion (Texas A&M University-Commerce Code of Student Conduct 5.b[1, 2, 3]). Cheating, including plagiarizing papers in whole or part, will result in a grade of zero (0) on the assignment for the first offense and failure of the course for any subsequent offenses.

Attendance Policy

Attendance in this graduate class equates to participation in the discussions and is important to the success of this class and to your development as a writer/scholar. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that you notify me of potential conflicts with course expectations. The expectation is that you will do more than simply show up to class. Your active participation, in the form of discussion responses and questions, is vital for success in this course. Deadline extensions and other allowances can often be accommodated before they are required, but this requires advance notice. Related to this, SEE ASSIGNMENT POLICY

Assignment Policy

Student work must be completed and submitted on time. All assignments should be turned in during the class period when they are due. Students who know they will miss class when an assignment is due must contact the instructor as soon as possible in advance of class to arrange for submission of the assignment.

All papers should conform to the MLA style guidelines, with the exception of your weekly responses.

Late Work

I will not accept any assignment after its due date. Assignments submitted after the due date may receive a score of zero (0).

Drop a Course

A student may drop a course by logging into his/her myLEO account and clicking on the hyperlink labeled "Drop a class" from among the choices found under the myLeo section of the Web page.

Incompletes

Incompletes (grade of "X") are granted only under rare and extraordinary circumstances.

Administrative Withdrawal

I reserve the right to drop a student from the course administratively for excessive absences or violations of student conduct codes.

University Specific Procedures:*ADA Statement*

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact:

Office of Student Disability Resources and Services
Texas A&M University-Commerce
Gee Library 132
Phone (903) 886-5150 or (903) 886-5835
Fax (903) 468-8148
StudentDisabilityServices@tamu-commerce.edu
[Student Disability Resources & Services](#)

Student Conduct

All students enrolled at the University shall follow the tenets of common decency and acceptable behavior conducive to a positive learning environment. It is next to impossible to explore ideas in a classroom setting if students and instructors do not feel safe or otherwise supported. I will not tolerate discrimination in all its forms. Likewise, rudeness has no place in any classroom, and I will ensure that my classroom remains a rudeness-free environment. (See *Code of Student Conduct from Student Guide Handbook*).

Responsibility

You are responsible for understanding all of the material contained in this syllabus, as well as any announced changes to this syllabus. You are also responsible for understanding instructions and directives related to assignments, exams, and grades. This means visiting your professor during office hours if instructions and/or directives remain unclear. Unless you state otherwise, I will assume that you have understood what is expected of you in this class.

COURSE OUTLINE / CALENDAR

The following course schedule is subject to revisions and other modifications as the instructor deems necessary for the course. Any changes to the course schedule will be announced on the course website in advance of the week in which the change will occur.

Please have the reading selections read by the date indicated below. In other words, be prepared to discuss the readings on the date indicated.

Summer II 2015

Date	Agenda
Tuesday July 14	Introduction, syllabus overview, discussion and overview of the Coen Bros and film theory <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “‘A Real Imaginary Place’: Reality and Fantasy from <i>Blood Simple</i> to <i>The Man Who Wasn’t There</i>,” by Tiffany Joseph• “The Abduction of the Signifying Monkey Chant: Schizophrenic Transmogrifications of Balinese <i>Kecak</i> in Fellini’s <i>Satyricon</i> and the Coen Brothers’ <i>Blood Simple</i>,” by Michael B. Bakan Screening: <i>Blood Simple</i>
Thursday July 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Schizophrenia and Postmodernism: <i>Raising Arizona</i>, <i>Barton Fink</i>, and ‘The Coen Brothers,’” Andrew Moss• “Comic Rhetoric in <i>Raising Arizona</i>” by Jeff Evans• “The Idiotically Criminal Universe of the Brothers Coen,” by J. Madison Davis Screening: <i>Raising Arizona</i>
Tuesday July 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “<i>Miller’s Crossing</i>’s Tom Reagan: ‘Straight as a Corkscrew, Mr. Inside-Outsky,’” by William Nolan• “The Violence of Sensation: <i>Miller’s Crossing</i>, Affect, and Masocriticism,” by Marco Abel

	<p>Screening: <i>Miller's Crossing</i></p> <p>Quiz 1</p>
<p>Thursday July 23</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “From <i>The Hudsucker Proxy</i> to <i>Fargo</i>: ‘A Different Concept, A Different Kind of Film,” by Eddie Robson • “<i>Fargo</i>: (1996): A Woman Who Is Not Herself Mean—Snow-Swept Highways and Margie,” by Jans B. Wager “ • “The American Sublime in <i>Fargo</i>,” by Richard A. Gilmore • <p>Screening: <i>Fargo</i></p> <p>Abstract Due</p>
<p>Tuesday July 28</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Dream Abides: <i>The Big Lebowski</i>, Film Noir, and the American Dream” by ShaunAnne Tangney • ““This Aggression Will Not Stand”: Myth, War, and Ethics in <i>The Big Lebowski</i>” by Todd A. Comer • ““Jackie Treehorn Treats Objects Like Women!’: Two Types of Fetishism in <i>The Big Lebowski</i>” by Brian Wall • ““What Makes A Man, Mr. Lebowski?’: Masculinity Under (Friendly) Fire in Ethan and Joel Coen’s <i>The Big Lebowski</i>” by Jakub Kazecki • <p>Screening: <i>The Big Lebowski</i></p> <p>Quiz 2</p>
<p>Thursday July 30</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “O Brother, What Art Thou?: Postmodern Pranksterism, or Parody with a Purpose?” by Tracy Seeley • “O Brother, What Next?: Making Sense of the Folk Fad” by Benjamin Filene • “Homer Meets the Coen Brothers: Memory as Artistic Pastiche in <i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i>” by Margaret M. Toscano • “Oh, so many startlements...”: History, Race, and Myth in <i>O Brother, Where Are Thou?</i>” by Hugh Ruppensburg <p>Screening: <i>O Brother Where Art Thou?</i></p>
<p>Tuesday August 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Spiraling Downward: America in <i>Days of Heaven</i>, <i>In the Valley of Elah</i>, and <i>No Country for Old Men</i>” by Joan Mellen • “He’s A Psychopathic Killer But So What?’: Moral Storytelling in <i>No Country for Old Men</i>” by Lydia R. Cooper • “Homeric Heroes in Ethan and Joel Coen’s <i>The Hudsucker Proxy</i> (1994), <i>The Big Lebowski</i> (1998) and <i>No Country for Old Men</i> (2007)” by Vaughan S. Roberts • “A Country for Old Men: <i>Unforgiven</i>, <i>The Shootist</i>, and the Post-Heyday Western” by Jean-Christophe Cloutier <p>Screening: <i>No Country for Old Men</i></p> <p>Quiz 3</p>
<p>Thursday August 6</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “No Fun: Debunking the 1960s in <i>Mad Men</i> and <i>A Serious Man</i>” by J. M. Tyree • “‘Serious’ Talk by Jeffrey Shandler • “A Serious Man in Situ: “Fear and Loathing in St. Louis Park” by Riv- Ellen Prell • “From Boys to Men” Gender Politics and Jewish Identity in <i>A Serious Man</i>” by Ariella Lang <p>Screening: <i>A Serious Man</i></p>

	Conference Paper Due
Tuesday August 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Up Close and Distant: The Coen Brothers’ Sense of Place” by Jonathan Silverman• ““Isn’t It Ironic’: The Films of the Coen Brothers” by Stephen Rothman <p>Screening: <i>Inside Llewyn Davis</i></p>
Thursday August 13	Course wrap-up Final Exam