

Philosophical Films (Expository Writing 20, Section 235)

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Course Description:

How should society be organized? What should individuals do when they disagree with the reigning order? Protest? Revolt? Withdraw? Our class will approach these perennial philosophical questions through a number of recent films. At the beginning of the semester, we will watch Bong Joon-ho's [Parasite](#), about the stratification of wealth and opportunity in contemporary South Korea; Michael Haneke's [Caché](#), in which a man's personal history—and France's colonial one—come back to haunt him; and [Queen and Slim](#) (directed by Melina Matsoukas, screenplay by Lena Waithe), about race and policing. As students develop their interpretations of one of these films in their first paper, we will also learn the basic vocabulary of cinematography and editing. Then, in the middle of the semester, we will turn to questions of adaptation, reading two classic works of philosophical literature and watching films that import their stories into radically different settings. Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, about how awareness of our mortality affects our values, is relocated from nineteenth-century Russia to post-World War Two Japan in Akira Kurosawa's [Ikiru](#). Aristophanes' ancient drama *Lysistrata*, in which the women of Greece go on a sex strike to end the Peloponnesian War, is transported by Spike Lee to Chicago's South Side in [Chi-Raq](#). Students will compare one of these films to its source material in their second papers. Finally, at the end of the semester, we will read some short theoretical selections about the relationship between philosophy and film, attuning students to larger issues as they write a research paper about a philosophical film or filmmaker of their choice, such as *Memento*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Stalker*, Claire Denis, Jordan Peele, David Lynch, or Terrence Malick, among many other possibilities.

In choosing the films for our first unit, I look for ones about different kinds of inequality in different settings, but most of all films that, while still very engaging, are dense and ambiguous, such that they can be interpreted in contrary ways. The tone and genre of *Parasite*, for example, morphs over its course, leaving it deeply unclear which characters we as viewers are supposed to empathize with. *Cache* raises enormous questions about what we as individuals are responsible for. And *Queen and Slim* might be thought to present violence as a tragedy—or to celebrate it. In the second unit, I look for literary works that have philosophical depth on their own, but are transformed and updated in radical ways in their film adaptations, so that there's a lot to bring out in a comparative paper. At the end of the course, I encourage students to choose a film that they are really interested in spending time with and researching, with the guidance that it's usually best to choose something at least a decade old, so that scholars have had time to write about it, and that academia is less interested in blockbuster franchises like *Star Wars*, Disney, and Marvel films—unless you can reveal with careful argument and interpretation how these films are actually conveying ideological messages deeper than, and even in contradiction with, their surface meaning. Students often research connections to philosophers here: *Fight Club* and Nietzsche, for example, or *Bamboozled* and Du Bois on double-consciousness, or *Daughters of the Dust* and [intersectionality theory](#).

My own [research](#) in on thinkers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, and connections between philosophy and art, especially literature. I also publish [book reviews and criticism](#) meant for a more general audience, and occasional works of short fiction. If you want to get a sense of my interests and what I value in education, I was recently a guest on a podcast called *The Utopian* [link should be available soon], hosted by two students at SUNY Stony Brook. Some of my favorite novels and films are recommended [here](#).