**Philosophical Films (Expository Writing 20, Section 235)**

**Spring 2021**

**Ben Roth, broth@fas.harvard.edu**

**Course Description:**

Are those ignorant of history doomed to repeat it? Or does respect for the past and tradition risk entrenching ways of thinking and living we should instead leave behind? America is in the midst of a heightened reckoning with its history: reexamining its monuments, how it names things, what it teaches, to whom it owes moral debts. At the beginning of the course, we will watch two award-winning documentaries that, in the personal and political realms, take up issues of memory and whose voices should be heard. In [*Stories We Tell*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_8BnZ471GY), Sarah Polley investigates rumors about her family’s past and learns that her father might not be who she thought he was. In [*The Act of Killing*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GiqYLrJBG0), Joshua Oppenheimer (Harvard College ’97) and his anonymous co-director interview perpetrators of government-supported mass killings in Indonesia in the 1960s, who openly admit to their brutal actions and recreate them with strange stylization. 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. In the second unit, we will read philosophical selections from Nietzsche about the value of different orientations toward history and truth, the importance of forgetting, and his myth of “eternal recurrence,” which asks how you would respond if told that every detail of your life will repeat endlessly. Students will then put one of Nietzsche’s provocative claims in conversation with a mainstream film—[*Memento*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDWylEQSwFo), [*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBEke6JixyE), [*Bamboozled*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMZ6zp-3oGY), or [*Antebellum*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtEaNK2PtPM)—each of which offers a speculative story about memory loss or the return of repressed history. 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 *Get Out*, *Snowpiercer*, *Blade Runner*, *No Country for Old Men*,Claire Denis, Akira Kurosawa, David Lynch, or Terrence Malick, among many other possibilities.

Most of us are familiar with two styles of documentary film: one in which a narrator talks over carefully selected images, communicating a clear message, another in which interviews and archival footage are presented as objectively as possible, without comment, leaving us to reconstruct the larger meaning. The two films we will start the course with play with these conventions: *Stories We Tell* questions its own authority and blurs the line between historical and recreated footage, and *The Act of Killing* doesn’t just interview its subjects, but invites them to recreate their memories, which they do in the style of musicals and gangster films. These formal innovations will give students a lot to interpret in addition to content of the stories themselves.

In choosing mainstream films in the middle of the course, I look for ones that, while still very engaging, are dense and ambiguous, such that they can be interpreted in contrary ways. *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* consider the loss of individuals’ memories—in one case due to an accident, in the other by choice—whereas *Bamboozled* and *Antebellum* concern the return and repetition of shameful forms of mistreatment of African-Americans. The selections we will read from Nietzsche’s “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life” and “On Truth and Lie in a Non-Moral Sense” provocatively question whether historical knowledge, and truth generally, are life-affirming and so whether we should value them, and his gnomic myth of “eternal recurrence” asks whether we view the events that made us who we are with regret or joy. These selections can be connected in different ways, pointed or more oblique, with the films, which students will do in order to interpret one of them in more depth, to compare two of them with a specific focus, or to test the validity of Nietzsche’s claims.

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 (as a student did recently in interpreting *Joker* in light of [David Graeber’s argument that superhero films are inherently fascistic](https://thenewinquiry.com/super-position/)). Students often research connections to philosophers here: different anime films and existentialism, for example, or *A Ghost Story* with Thomas Nagel and Susan Wolf on meaningful lives, or *Daughters of the Dust* and [intersectionality theory](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/#IntApp).

My own [research](https://scholar.harvard.edu/benroth/research) in on thinkers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, and connections between philosophy and art, especially literature. I also publish [book reviews and criticism](https://scholar.harvard.edu/benroth/otherwriting) meant for a more general audience, and occasional works of short fiction. Some of my favorite novels and films are recommended [here](https://scholar.harvard.edu/benroth/suggestions).