

Film Studies Certificate Program

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH DR. ELIZABETH SCARBROUGH

APRIL 12, 2017 | FILMADMIN | LEAVE A COMMENT

Professor Elizabeth Scarbrough is a recent and welcome addition to the Florida International University's philosophy department. With an impressive academic background under her belt, a Masters and a PhD in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin and Washington, respectively, and a burning love for all things art, she's a warm, insightful teacher looking to bring new topics to students at FIU, starting with the study of philosophical questions regarding cinema.

- You've taught a diverse number of philosophy classes before, ranging from intro to philosophy, to sex and love, to law and morals, to aesthetics. What motivated you to teach a class about philosophy of film?

I'm a huge film enthusiast! That is probably my main motivation for teaching a class on philosophy of film. When I was an undergraduate at Oberlin College, I wanted to be a documentary film maker. In fact, my first career out of Oberlin was working in audio engineering (for television)! Ultimately I left that career to pursue graduate school and a second career as a professor. But I never lost my love for film and found ways to stay involved in the industry. Between 2006 and 2015 while at the University of Washington, I volunteered as a 35mm projectionist at the **Grand Illusion Cinema** (Seattle, WA) – a 70-seat jewel box theater that projects reel-to-reel archival prints. In 2015-2016, while teaching at Portland State University, I co-managed the **Clinton Street Theater** which has projected the **Rocky Horror Picture Show** on 35mm every week since 1978. So – basically I really love movies...

I also really love teaching. A class on the philosophy of film has an additional value in bringing together students from different disciplines and with a diversity of perspectives. My philosophy of film class has philosophy majors, film studies students, actors, and students with a general interest in film. Having a good mix of enthusiastic students tends to yield great conversations – which has certainly been the case with my current class at FIU.

- When putting the class together what was your main objective? What did you want most for your students to take from the lessons?

I aim to equip the student with the tools necessary to make informed and intelligent aesthetic judgments about film. Generally speaking I want students to think critically about why they like or dislike certain films. My hope is that students come out of the class being better prepared to defend (both verbally and in writing) their aesthetic judgments.

A secondary goal was to expose students to different types of film, which I aimed to do by assigning a diverse set of movies most people are unlikely to watch on their own. My syllabus includes documentary films, classic western cinema, and world cinema. I assigned movies from eight different countries: the United States, Japan, Italy, France, Korea, Iran, Germany, and Sweden. It's still a challenge to assign films directed by women, but this week we're watching *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (and Iranian movie directed by Ana Lily Amirpour).

- What do you think film students focused on filmmaking could learn from studying film from a philosophical perspective?

We ask important questions in philosophy of film that bear direct relevance to filmmaking. We study the nature of cinematic authorship (Can film editors or sound mixers be considered co-authors of a film?), how to define genres (What marks a documentary film from a film based largely on true events?), how we make sense of film narration (especially unreliable narrators), how we engage emotionally with film (e.g., empathy, sympathy, fear), how we identify with film characters (e.g., what techniques can filmmakers use to engender identification), why we enjoy being scared in horror movies, can we gain moral knowledge from fictional scenarios, and more. Separately, philosophy courses provide a general set of tools to approach any topic—e.g., the ability to speak and to write persuasively. Budding artists/filmmakers could benefit from a philosophy of film course since they will have to write about their work; they will have to try to explain why their project is unique and important, be it in grant proposals or project pitches. Philosophy can help you do this.

- In today's film industry, digital recording is king. As a film buff, and someone who's had hands on experience with celluloid, do you have a preference for either? Do you believe they can lead to a

difference in quality?

Oh...this is my favorite question! I'm sure you have an audiophile friend who goes on and on about the richness of vinyl over digital music; I'm that friend who goes on and on about the richness of film over digital projection. Yes, there is a qualitative difference between watching a print and a digital projection. There's a qualitative difference between watching an 8mm and a 70mm projection! They're all different experiences. And we're lucky to live in a city that still has some projectors kicking around: the **Secret Celluloid Society** projects late-night film favorites (O Cinema Miami Beach), **Colonel Klieglights International Picture Show** presents double features in film (Tower Theater), and the Coral Gables Art Cinema always lists the format of their screenings (DCP, 35mm, and now 70mm). I urge everyone to go out to a screening of a film (on film) and see if you can tell the difference! I really hope film will have the popular resurgence that vinyl has had. Like vinyl, film is temperamental, cumbersome, and easily damaged. And like vinyl, it's worth the trouble.

My fondness for 'real' film notwithstanding, my favorite place to watch a movie in the area is probably the **Miami Beach Cinematheque** (which does not project film). **MBC** has curated a comfortable, intimate environment in which to watch movies, and they tend to play ones that I really enjoy.

- **Do you think more film schools should make an effort to make philosophy of film part of their core curriculums?**

Of course, I'm biased, but I think all programs should include philosophy as part of a well-rounded liberal arts education. In any philosophy class you will learn how to read difficult texts, argue for your opinion, and engage in civil dialogue. In this sense, a philosophy class can help you no matter what you choose as your profession. But I do believe philosophy has special and important ties to filmmaking. Think about all the filmmakers who were trained in philosophy: Terrence Malick studied philosophy at Harvard and Oxford, Andrei Tarkovsky considered himself a philosopher (and wrote about philosophy and film), Luis Bunuel studied philosophy at the University of Madrid, Ethan Coen has a BA in philosophy from Princeton, Wes Craven has Master's degree in philosophy from Johns Hopkins...and don't get me started on those filmmakers whose movies are deeply philosophical (Bergman, Dreyer, etc.). Philosophy helps us investigate basic assumptions about our lives, ask questions about the nature of existence, and examine ethical dilemmas – all great fodder for film!

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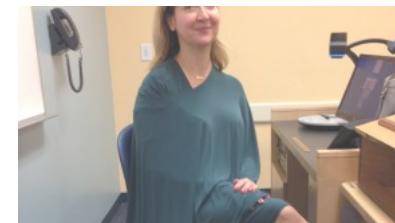
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