

## **Bah Humbug! - Analyzing Christmas Media Texts**

**Prof. Blair Davis**

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### **Course Description:**

This course will use Christmas movies and television programs as a way to teach introductory methods in the field of media studies. Films and shows about Christmas are typically re-watched many times over a person's lifetime, and even become an annual tradition in some cases. Films like *It's a Wonderful Life* and programs like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* are commonly among the most re-watched media texts for most people – we watch them more often over the course of a lifetime than most other movies and shows. In turn, it would seem natural that we should critically analyze these media texts that we regularly return to in the same ways that we seek to find the cultural, aesthetic and/or political meanings inherent in popular Hollywood blockbusters and prime-time television series. But should Christmas media texts only be consumed emotionally rather than intellectually? Does studying these beloved films and shows somehow rob them of their joy, or does this process have just as many intellectual rewards as when we analyze more traditional media texts? These are some of the questions that we will seek to answer through applying various methodological approaches from the field of media studies to a wide range of Christmas shows and movies.

Disclaimer #1 – *This course only focuses on Christmas media texts and not those which depict other Winter holidays and religions, largely for the reason that I haven't personally seen many Hanukkah or Kwanzaa films or programs, for instance, and I don't feel qualified to address them.*

Disclaimer #2 - *This course might possibly ruin forevermore many of your favorite Christmas shows or films for you as we analyze them critically and objectively. If the notion of studying "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" through a Marxist framework, for instance, sounds like it will rob you of every ounce of Christmas spirit, you might prefer to spend more time drinking eggnog, wrapping presents and going wassailing this holiday season instead of taking this course.*

### **Required Readings:**

Arthur Asa Berger – *Media Analysis Techniques*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Sage, 2014)

### **Assignments:**

Quizzes: 10% (5 quizzes x 2% each)

Journal Entries: 25% (5 x 5% each)

Response Posts: 10% (2 x 5% each)

Midterm Exam: 25% - Students will analyze a case study using one or more methodologies in support

Final Paper: 30% - Students will compare two case studies using various methodologies in support

### **Grade Scale**

93-100 A, 90-92 A-, 88-89 B+, 83-87 B, 80-82 B-, 78-79 C+, 73-77 C, 70-72 C-, 68-69, D+, 60-67 D, 0-59 F

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### **Course Schedule:**

#### **Unit 1 – Introduction: Bah Humbug! - Why Study Christmas Media Texts?**

Readings: Berger Ch. 5 & 6

Clips from: *Die Hard* (1988); *Gremlins* (1984)

Journal Entry #1 due

#### **Unit 2 – How the Grinch Stole Christmas and Semiotic Analysis**

Readings: Ch. 1

Screening: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1964); *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000);

Quiz #1 due

#### **Unit 3 – Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Marxist analysis**

Readings: Berger Ch.2

Screening: *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964)

Response Post #1 due

#### **Unit 4 –Elf and Psychoanalysis**

Readings: Berger Ch. 3

Clips from: *It's a Wonderful Life*; *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*

Screening: *Elf* (2003)

Quiz #2 due

Journal Entry #2 due

#### **Unit 5 – Midterm Exam**

#### **Unit 6 – White Christmas and Genre Studies**

Readings: Berger pp. 124-125; Thomas Schatz, “Film Genre and the Genre Film”

Clips from: *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

Screening: *White Christmas* (1955)

Quiz #3 due

#### **Unit 7 –A Christmas Carol and Cultural Studies**

Readings: Berger Ch. 4

Clips from: *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*

Screening: *A Christmas Carol* (1951)

Journal Entry #3 due

Quiz #4 due

#### **Unit 8 – A Charlie Brown Christmas and Religious Studies**

Readings: Russell Belk, “Materialism with the modern U.S. Christmas.”

Clips from: *It's a Wonderful Life*; *Jingle All the Way*

Screening: *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965)

Response Post #2 due

### **Unit 9 – Santa Claus Conquers the Martians and Trash Cinema**

Readings: Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style”

Clips From: *Santa Claus* (1959); *Silent Night, Deadly Night*; *Black Christmas*

Screening: *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (1964)

Quiz #5 due

Journal Entry #4 due

### **Unit 10 – Conclusions (Bah Humbug?)**

Readings: None

Final Paper due

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## **COURSE ACTIVITIES AND FORMAT**

### **PREPARATION & READING STRATEGIES**

Please complete all readings assigned for a given week so that you will have a context for understanding the course material. I recommend taking notes while you read, such as key ideas and concepts, as well as making a list of questions regarding aspects of the material that are unclear to you or that you find interesting, challenging or enlightening.

### **ATTENDANCE**

Regular class participation in online discussions is required in the particular weeks in which they are assigned. Students will not be able to participate in any given discussion forum other than the week in which it is assigned. Once the deadline for posts has passed for a given week’s discussion you will not receive any marks if you have not already posted.

Makeup tests, assignments, quizzes, etc.: there will be NO makeup tests, exams or quizzes. If you miss a test, assignment deadline or quiz you will receive zero marks. Exceptions may be made at the instructor's discretion for legitimate and unforeseen *documented* medical reasons or extenuating circumstances such as a death in the family. In such a case, it is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor immediately and make arrangements to provide any required documentation (I.e. a doctor's note, death certificate, etc.). Exceptions cannot be made if the student does not submit such documentation within a reasonable time frame.

## **ASSIGNMENT DEADLINES**

Assignments must be handed in on time, before the deadline for which they are due.

**\*\*Assignments handed in after the deadline will not be accepted. You will received a zero.\*\***

Please allow yourself sufficient time to complete the last-minute details: late assignments due to computer/internet problems and transportation troubles will unfortunately not be exempt from receiving a zero. Be sure to allow yourself enough time for the server to upload your files – do not submit at the last minute. Please manage your time accordingly and do not leave things to the last minute so that you have enough time to troubleshoot any problems that may arise. You must double check receipt of any files uploaded to D2L to ensure that the system has received them. If you do not confirm receipt of your file having been uploaded I am unable to provide exemptions.

If you experience technical problems using D2L, please contact the DePaul Department of Information Services Help Desk (<http://offices.depaul.edu/is/Pages/default.aspx>). You must get a case number regarding your incident for any possible accommodation from the instructor to be considered due to technical issues.

Exceptions may be made at the instructor's discretion for legitimate and unforeseen *documented* medical reasons or extenuating circumstances such as a death in the family. In such a case, it is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor immediately and make arrangements to provide any required documentation (I.e. a doctor's note, death certificate, etc.). Exceptions cannot be made if the student does not submit such documentation within a reasonable time frame.

## **QUIZ DEADLINES**

You will have three attempts to pass each quiz. Quizzes will remain unlocked until the end of each week, at which time the quiz will become locked. Please allow yourself enough time to take/retake each quiz before you can no longer access it.

## **ACCOMODATION FOR DISABILITIES**

Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussion will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most reasonable accommodation based on your needs, be sure to contact the following office for support and additional services and follow their procedures for alerting the instructor:

Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD), #370, Student Center, LPC, [773.325.1677](tel:773.325.1677)

## **RESPECTFUL BEHAVIOR**

Please respect the contributions of others in our online classroom by not using insulting/inflammatory or discriminatory rhetoric. Class space (both in person and online) is intended to be a safe space for personal reflection and growth, so it is essential that the opinions of others be treated respectfully even if you do not agree with them. Students must therefore engage in respectful and professional online conduct (which also includes the use of proper grammar when replying online - I.e. please avoid excessive use of abbreviations, emoticons, etc. – full sentences should be used.)

## **DEPAUL UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY**

DePaul University is a learning community that fosters the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas within a context that emphasizes a sense of responsibility for oneself, for others and for society at large. Violations of academic integrity, in any of their forms, are, therefore, detrimental to the values of DePaul, to the students' own development as responsible members of society, and to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Violations include but are not limited to the following categories: cheating; plagiarism; fabrication; falsification or sabotage of research data; destruction or misuse of the university's academic resources; alteration or falsification of academic records; and academic misconduct. Conduct that is punishable under the Academic Integrity Policy could result in additional disciplinary actions by other university officials and possible civil or criminal prosecution. Please refer to your Student Handbook or visit <http://studentaffairs.depaul.edu/homehandbook.html> for further details.

The DePaul Student Handbook defines plagiarism as follows: "Plagiarism includes but is not limited to the following: (a) The direct copying of any source, such as written and verbal material, computer files, audio disks, video programs or musical scores, whether published or unpublished, in whole or in part, without proper acknowledgement that it is someone else's. (b) Copying of any source in whole or in part with only minor changes in wording or syntax even with acknowledgement. (c) Submitting as one's own work a report, examination paper, computer file, lab report or other assignment which has been prepared by someone else. This includes research papers purchased from any other person or agency. (d) The paraphrasing of another's work or ideas without proper acknowledgement." Plagiarism will result in severe penalty, including failure of the assignment and/or failure of the course at the instructor's discretion. If you are unsure of how to cite a source, please ask in advance! Academic Integrity violations will be promptly reported to the Academic Integrity Board.

## **POLICY ON INCOMPLETE (IN) GRADES**

Undergraduate and graduate students have two quarters to complete an incomplete. At the end of the second quarter (excluding summer) following the term in which the incomplete grade was assigned, remaining incompletes will automatically convert to "F" grades. In the case of the Law School incompletes must be completed by the end of the semester following the one in which the incomplete was assigned. Ordinarily no incomplete grade may be completed after the grace period has expired. Instructors may not change incomplete grades after the end of the grace period without the permission of a college-based Exceptions Committee. This policy applies to undergraduate, graduate and professional programs. NOTE: In the case of a student who has applied for graduation and who has been approved for an Incomplete in his or her final term, the incomplete must be resolved within the four-week grace period before final degree certification.

## **ASSISTANCE WITH WRITING**

For help with organizing your ideas, grammar, citing sources, and avoiding plagiarism, I encourage you to consult DePaul's Center for Writing-Based Learning. The center offers both on-campus and online tutoring. See <http://condor.depaul.edu/~writing/>.

## **EMAIL**

I will ordinarily respond to email messages within twelve hours, Monday to Friday. Please note that I will not always be able to respond to email messages on the weekend, as this time is reserved for my family. There are no guarantees that last minute emails before assignment deadlines will be answered in time.

## **OFFICE HOURS**

Office hours are by scheduled appointment, either by phone or by Skype. Please email me to arrange a mutually convenient time. Please be responsible with your time and schedule your appointments with me as far in advance as possible so as to ensure that you have left adequate time before assignment deadlines. Meetings must be scheduled at least a day in advance – last minute meetings are not guaranteed.