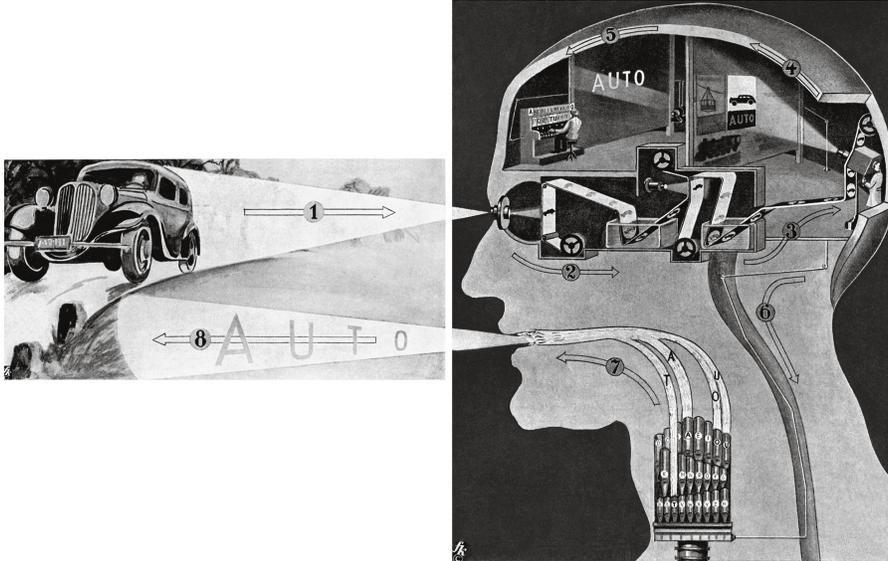


# What was Film?

Spring 2017

*Film is.*

—Gustav Deutsch



## Course Number:

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## Meetings:

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## Screenings:

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## Instructor:

Erik Born  
erikborn@gmail.com

## Office Hours:

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## Course Overview

Taking its cue from the “digital turn” in film production, distribution, and reception, this course rephrases a traditional question asked in film theory about the nature of the medium (What *is* film?) in terms of a historical question (What *was* film?). What, in other words, did moviegoers see in the early cinema? What did film mean when it was still something to be cut, wound up, and carried around, when it was still a thing with a literally explosive potential? Reframing the object of study in this manner will help situate familiar narrative cinema within more unfamiliar scientific, aesthetic, and experimental contexts.

Early film fans, practitioners, and theorists saw great potential in the new medium, thought to be capable of conveying a new experience of movement and time, creating a new art of light and shadow, or functioning as a new kind of scientific instrument. The aim of this course is to explore these potentials of cinema by putting readings of early film theory in dialogue with early silent films that address similar concerns about the nature of the medium.

The course will consist of weekly readings (📖), weekly screenings (🎬), and several writing assignments (✍️).

## Course Texts

All readings and discussions will be in English, though you are welcome to consult short passages from foreign language editions. All of our readings, denoted by 📖 in the weekly schedule, will come from the following sourcebook, which is on order at the bookstore and on reserve at the library.

- *Required Text:* Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, eds. *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0520219083.

For an excellent introduction to film theory, I recommend the following book:

- *Recommended Text:* Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 978-1138824300.

Additional readings for oral presentations (🗣️) will be on Blackboard.

# Weekly Schedule

## Week 1 Film is...

- 1/26 Introduction to Course  
🎬 *Film is...* (Deutsch, 1998–present)

## Week 2 The Cinema of Attractions

- ✍️ Keywords for Film & Media Studies  
🎬 Shorts: Muybridge, Edison, Lumière, Kobelkoff, Porter, Griffith
- 1/31 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, User's Guide, Introduction, #1, #63, #64, #66, #76, #157, #263
- 2/1 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #3, #5, #11, #15, #16

## Week 3 Special Effects and Cinematic Magic

- 🎬 Shorts: Méliès, Chomón, Velle, Smith
- 2/7 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #2, #7, #10, #52, #62, #193
- 2/9 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #221, #262, #264, #265, #275

## Week 4 The Cinema Dreams its Rivals

- 🎬 *The Mystery of the Rocks of Kador* (Perret, 1912)  
✍️ Close Reading: 1 Text
- 2/14 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #8, #13, #57, #73, #176, #187, #198, #233
- 2/16 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #70, #86, #174, #186, #267

## Week 5 Silent Film Sound

🎬 No Screening: Winter Recess

2/21 No Class: Winter Recess

2/23 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #28, #39, #60, #139, #218, #232, #247, #248, #268

## Week 6 Movement, Dance, and the Body

✍️ Comparative Analysis: 3 Texts

🎬 *The Holy Mountain* (Fanck, 1926)

2/28 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #29, #38, #42, #47, #48, #49, #55

3/2 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #50, #56, #58, #181, #222

## Week 7 The Comedy of Modern Life

🎬 *Mickey Mouse Plane Crazy* (Disney, 1929); *The Rink* (Chaplin, 1916); *The Playhouse* (Keaton, 1921)

3/7 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #145, #180, #182, #183, #184, #185, #277

3/9 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #126, #131, #132, #133, #136

## Week 8 Animation and Advertising

✍️ Take-Home Mid-Term

🎬 Shorts: Münch, McCay, Ruttmann & Pinschewer, Reiniger

3/14 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #211, #235, #240, #243, #244, #245, #249

3/16 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #72, #100, #120, #237, #246

## Week 9 A New Art of Light

🎬 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene, 1920)

3/21 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #189, #190, #191, #192, #194, #195, #196, #197, #200

3/23 📖 *The Promise of Cinema*, #83, #89, #129, #219, #220

## Week 10 Filming History and the Cinematic Archive

✍️ Close Reading: Film Sequence

🎬 *Häxan: The Witches* (Christensen, 1922)

3/28 📖 *The Promise of Cinema*, #31, #34, #37, #40, #41, #44, #46

3/30 📖 *The Promise of Cinema*, #35, #36, #43, #228, #278

## Spring Break

No Screening: Spring Break

4/4 No Class: Spring Break

4/6 No Class: Spring Break

## Week 11 Science and Education

🎬 *Our Heavenly Bodies* (Kornblum, 1925)

4/11 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #14, #33, #54, #199, #234, #236

4/13 📖 *Promise of Cinema*, #30, #92, #150, #226, #238, #243

## Week 12 Documentary Film

 Close Reading: 1 Film

 *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttman, 1927)

4/18  *Promise of Cinema*, #18, #19, #20, #24, #207, #208

4/20  *Promise of Cinema*, #27, #45, #209, #216

## Week 13 The Avant-Garde

 Shorts: Ruttman, Richter, Eggeling, Léger, Ray, Duchamp

4/25  *Promise of Cinema*, #201, #202, #203, #204, #205, #206

4/27  *Promise of Cinema*, #210, #212, #213, #214, #217, #271

## Week 14 The Revolutionary Potential of Film

 Final Paper Workshop

 *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929)

5/2  *Promise of Cinema*, #107, #158, #159, #160, #161, #164, #215

5/4  *Promise of Cinema*, #270, #272, #273, #274, #276

## Week 15 Digital Turn: Early Cinema, Late Cinema

 *Dreams Rewired* (Luksch, 2015)

5/9 Concluding Discussion  
Student Presentations of Creative Work

*"Film is a cultural factor  
of the first rank"*



from *Punch*  
1 Sept. 1926.

*"The secret of film's popularity  
is the infinite possibilities for  
varying its motifs"*