PLAI 500 / PHIL 575
Memory, Philosophy and Film: Reading Bergson, Reading Cinema

Alia Al-Saji (Philosophy) & Yuriko Furuhata (East Asian Studies)
Winter 2011
Class: Wednesday 14:35-17:25 (Leacock 927)
Required Screenings: Thursday 17:30-20:00 (Leacock 927)

Professor Alia Al-Saji
Office: 932 Leacock, ext. 1207
Email: alia.al-saji@mcgill.ca
Office hours: Wednesday 17:30-19:00 or by appointment

Professor Yuriko Furuhata
Office: 3434 McTavish, Room #405
Email: yuriko.furuhata@mcgill.ca
Office hours: Tuesday 13:00-14:00, Wednesday 17:30-18:00 or by appointment

**Course Description:** Memory, Philosophy and Film: Reading Bergson, Reading Cinema

Henri Bergson’s (1859-1941) philosophy can be read as a sustained effort to think memory for itself, a philosophy in and of time. *Matter and Memory* (1896) is exemplary in this regard, for it is a book that situates perception, embodiment, materiality and subjectivity in relation to a theory of memory. As a philosophy of time that became popular in France at the beginning of the 20th century, the emergence of Bergsonism coincided with a new way of perceiving, living or representing time, called the cinema. The relation of Bergson’s philosophy and cinema is a complex one, however. Taken as the paradigmatic form of objectifying perception and illusion by Bergson himself, cinema has conversely been seen as “Bergsonian” by later philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze. Bergson’s philosophy has therefore been read as a groundwork for film theory and for understanding the unique relation of cinema to memory and time. Where Bergson’s philosophy is a philosophical working-through of memory, film seems to present us with a cinematic memory, temporality made visible.

This interdisciplinary course seeks to think the relation of cinema and memory by means of a study of Bergson and film theory. The encounter between Bergson and film constitutes a productive location for merging disciplinary traditions. The first half of the course will focus on reading Bergson on memory. The second half of the course will examine more closely the question of how cinema and memory intertwine. Though Bergson gives one explicit answer to this question (cinematographic perception as the forgetting of duration), his philosophy of memory opens multiple possibilities for rethinking cinema’s relation to temporality and its function as mnemonic technology. Deleuze develops one such route (cinema as indirect or direct image of time). But different answers are provided by contemporary film theory, taking up but also moving beyond Bergsonism. The film theoretical discourse on indexicality, for instance, offers a different understanding of cinema’s relation to time. Film presents a technologically and visually mediated mode of time, challenging us to think through the complex relations among memory, archive, index and vision.

This course will thus involve: (1) a close reading of Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*; (2) an investigation of the ways in which Bergson’s philosophy has been appropriated and re-read as/in terms of film theory; (3) a consideration of the broader implications that a theoretical
understanding of time has for film theory (e.g. time-image, indexicality, archive); (4) a reflection on the intersections of the cinematic practice and theory. These themes will be played out not only in the texts we read, but also in the films we view throughout the course.

It is required that students enrolling in this course possess a good background in philosophy and/or film theory.

Prerequisites: One 400-level course in Continental Philosophy (PHIL 474/475 or other), OR one 400-level course in Film Theory, OR permission of the instructors.

Required Texts:

Available at PARAGRAPHE Bookstore (2220 McGill College Ave.):
5/ Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Available from COPIE 2000 (1115 Sherbrooke St. West):
6/ Course pack (selected essays).

If you are able to read French, the French texts are as follows:
Roland Barthes, La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie (Éditions Gallimard, 1980)
Gilles Deleuze, Cinéma 1, L’image-mouvement (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983)
Gilles Deleuze, Cinéma 2, L’image-temps (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985)

Secondary Sources on Bergson & Deleuze [Optional reading]
Assignments and Grades

1/ QUESTION / PRESENTATION 20%

Each student is required to present one question in class during the term. The question must be submitted electronically to both instructors by 5 PM on the Tuesday prior to its presentation in class. You are expected to give a short presentation (10 minutes), elaborating your question in class, and to facilitate the discussion stemming from it. (See details below.)

2/ TERM PAPER 50%

The term paper should be approximately 12-15 pages in length (for undergraduates), 17-20 pages in length (for graduate students). The topic of this paper is to be designed by you, in consultation with the instructors. (It is recommended that you begin work on this paper early, since you may need to consult some secondary sources for the purpose.) Due date to be announced.

3/ TERM PAPER PROPOSAL 10%

You should submit a paper proposal in which you describe your topic, justify its relevance, and list the sources you will be using in developing it. Proposals should be approximately 300 words. DUE APRIL 1st, 5 PM, by email to both instructors.

4/ ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION 20%

Attendance Policy

Attendance is mandatory (including all the film screenings). An excused absence requires contacting us in advance, presenting a valid reason and/or a doctor’s note. You are allowed one unexcused absence in the course of the term.

Participation

You should complete all assigned readings before coming to class and be prepared to participate thoughtfully and actively in class discussion. This means reading closely the texts assigned for each week and reflecting on the film screenings. It also means engaging seriously with the presentations and questions of your fellow students.

Oral participation should be thoughtful, respectful of others, and constructively critical, as well as on-going.

Guidelines for Questions

Each of you will be expected to present one question as a short class presentation (10 minutes) during the term. Questions must be submitted electronically (by email to BOTH instructors) by 5 PM on the TUESDAY prior to their discussion in class. Each student will present their question in class and is expected to use the question to facilitate discussion.

The question can take up one specific problem, concept, theme, or example in that week’s reading. The aim is not to give an exhaustive interpretation of the reading; rather it is to interrogate as precisely and attentively as possible one issue in that week’s reading that you think is significant.
Questions must be clearly formulated and elaborated in light of the texts we are reading. They should aim to motivate discussion. **Questions should be approximately 250-350 words.** Some hints:

1. Ask *one* question (this can have related sub-questions, but you should avoid multiple unrelated questions).
2. Explain your question *clearly*. Remember that the question aims to motivate discussion, so others should be able to understand it. Try not to assume background that others in the class will not share.
3. Make sure this is a *real* question, i.e., that there is something at stake in what you are asking. *Avoid simple textual clarification questions.* Your question should try to locate an important issue in the reading that calls for discussion.
4. The question need not have only one answer. Indeed, it is better if the question does not have a simple answer but rather calls for multiple interpretations and positions.

*McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).*

*In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.*

*In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.*
Schedule

WEEK 1
Jan. 5 (W)  Introduction

Jan. 6 (R)  Screening: *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941, 119 min)

WEEK 2

Jan. 13 (R)  Screening: *2046* (Wong Kar-wai, 2004, 129 min)

WEEK 3
Jan. 19 (W)  Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, continue chapter one (pp. 48–76) [Matière et mémoire, pp. 47-80]

Jan. 20 (R)  Screening: *L'eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962, 125 min)

WEEK 4
Jan. 26 (W)  Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, chapter two (pp. 77-131) [Matière et mémoire, pp. 81-146]

Jan. 27 (R)  Screening: *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972, 165 min)

WEEK 5
Feb. 2 (W)  Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, chapter three (pp. 133–177) [Matière et mémoire, pp. 147-198]

Feb. 3 (R)  Screening: *Waltz with Bashir* (Ali Folman, 2008, 90 min)

WEEK 6

Feb. 10 (R)  Screening: *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961, 94 min)

WEEK 7

Feb. 17 (R)  Screening: *The Man With the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929, 68 min) *News From Home* (Chantel Akerman, 1976, 85 min) – Clips

WEEK 8

March 3 (R)  
**Screening:** *Ritual in the Transfigured Time* (Maya Deren, 1946, 15 min)  
*Alone, Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (Martin Arnold, 1998, 15 min)  
*Entranced Earth* (Glauber Rocha, 1967, 106 min)

**WEEK 9:**  
Wednesday, March 9th class will be rescheduled for **Monday, March 7th, 6:00 PM**

March 7 (M)  

**Recommended:**  

March 10 (R)  
**Screening:** *Je t’aime, je t’aime* (Alain Resnais, 1968, 94 min)

**WEEK 10**

March 16 (W)  

March 17 (R)  
**Screening:** *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962, 28 min)  
*Ici et ailleurs* (Jean-Luc Godard/Anne-Marie Miéville, 1976, 53 min)

**WEEK 11**

March 23 (W)  

March 24 (R)  
**Screening:** *Nostalgia* (Hollis Frampton, 1971, 36 min)  
*Decasia* (Bill Morrison, 2002, 67 min)

**WEEK 12**

March 30 (W)  

**Recommended**  
March 31 (R)  **Screening: After Life** (Kore’eda Hirokazu, 1998, 118 min)

**WEEK 13**  
**April 6 (W)**  
- Mary Ann Doane, “Temporality, Storage, Legibility” *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, pp. 33-68.

**Recommended**  
- Thomas Elsaesser, “Freud as media theorist: mystic writing-pads and the matter of memory,” *Screen* 50.1 (Spring 2009).