Fall 2019 Women’s and Gender Studies / Philosophy / Film Studies Course:

WGST 320 / PHIL 298 Special Topics:
Queer Looks — Lesbian, Gay, & Transgender Portrayals in Film

Instructor: Richard Nunan (Philosophy)  
MW 3:25-4:40 (regular class time)  
Th 3:05-5:15 (film screening time)

Course may be counted towards:  
Women’s & Gender Studies major or minor  
Philosophy major or minor  
Film Studies minor

“These were fleeting images, but they were unforgettable. And they left a lasting legacy. Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people, and gay people, what to think about themselves. No one escaped its influence.”

—Armistead Maupin, *The Celluloid Closet*

Films both reflect and create cultural perceptions, about human sexuality no less than other matters. This course will examine some aspects of the history of that cinematic treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people in films, starting in the silent era & working up to the 21st century. In addition to viewing films and reading film criticism, we will also discuss a variety of historical, sociological, and philosophical writings pertaining to cultural study of gender queer portrayals in film.

Some sample films from past incarnations of this course…

*A Florida Enchantment* (Sidney Drew 1914)
Is this a transgendered lesbian film from the silent era?  
A fascinating early commentary on gender identity: remarkable combination of prescient observation about cultural construction of gender roles, weirdly jumbled together with unreflective racism and sexism.

*Madchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan 1931)
Sagan’s tragic but beautifully directed tale of an unfulfilled lesbian romance between a high school girl (Hertha Thiele, on right) & her teacher. From the last sexually open days of the Weimar Republic, before the Nazis clamped down on all sorts of “degenerate” cultural experimentation & the art which reflected it. (This film also functions as an interesting transitional work between the silent & sound eras Dialogue emerges as an important facet of the film’s narrative unfolding, but the visual image still plays a far more dominant role.)
The Children’s Hour (William Wyler 1961)
Audrey Hepburn & Shirley MacLaine in film adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s first play, about two school teachers accused of a lesbian love affair by a disgruntled student. Intended as a breakthrough treatment of homosexuality, marking the end of Hollywood’s Code era, this film is often criticized as having been too timid for its era. But was it really timid, or simply too subtle?

Boys in the Band (William Friedkin 1970; Mart Crowley)
Film adaptation of Mart Crowley’s successful tragic-comic stage play depicting the variety of responses to semi-closeted gay life at a late-Sixties Upper East Side (NYC) birthday party--from the Catholic religious guilt and self-loathing of the central character, to a “virtually normal” non-stereotyped gay couple. Throw in a self-avowed but dubiously straight homophobic ex-college roommate dropping in unexpectedly from out of town, and an overtly effeminate nelly queen, for a wonderful mix of characters and dialogue. (Recently in 2018 revival on Broadway!)

The Crying Game (Neil Jordan 1992)
A moving & uplifting drama, set in Northern Ireland & London; locations effectively set stage for two rather separate halves of the film. Features Stephen Rea as a would-be IRA terrorist with a sense of humanity much larger than his terrorist identity, Forrest Whitaker in the role of a captured British soldier, and Jaye Davidson as Dil, Whitaker’s cinematically surprising girlfriend. [See also Neil Jordan’s Cillian Murphy character, Kitten Braden, in Breakfast on Pluto (2005).]

Ex Machina (Alex Garland 2015)
“Like Quentin Tarantino with violence, Garland has it both ways: He offers a mocking meditation on the male obsession with man-pleasing female sex robots while showing off an array of man-pleasing female sex robots.” (Maureen Dowd) A fascinating film intended to focus primarily on AI issues, but also loaded with (sometimes unintentional?) speculation about our attitudes concerning gender.

Her Story (Sydney Freeland 2016: Jen Richards/Laura Zak)
One of several New Media YouTube series we’ll reference toward the end of the course (other examples: Carmilla, 2014-2016; It’s Complicated, 2016). These independent low budget digital series mark a striking shift away from films compelled (or so they think) by their level of front loaded economic investment to secure broad audiences by catering to prevailing cultural attitudes. This New Media counter-narrative is particularly evident in crowd-funded Emmy-nominated Her Story, about negotiating life as a trans individual in an obliviously hostile cis-gendered culture.