

Spectacle, Crisis, and Experiment in Weimar Cinema

Fall 2026 | M/W/F | 12:00–12:50pm

Instructor: Elise Volkmann (elise_volkmann@berkeley.edu)

Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

What did cinema look like when its possibilities were still being invented? During the Weimar Republic, filmmakers transformed painted sets into psychological landscapes, sent cameras careening through hotel lobbies and city streets, built entire metropolitan spaces inside film studios, and experimented with new relationships among editing, movement, performance, and sound. This course examines a period in which the forms we now associate with cinema were being actively tested and contested.

Through key films of the era, we will consider how filmmakers used the possibilities of the medium to make sense of a rapidly changing modern world. The films will lead us through some of the central preoccupations of Weimar culture and, at the same time, we will pay close attention to the formal techniques through which cinema engaged these subjects. How can a set create an atmosphere? What happens when a camera begins to move? How do editing and rhythm organize our experience of the modern city? How did filmmakers experiment with the new possibilities of recorded sound? Using primarily contemporary sources by filmmakers, critics, performers, and cultural commentators, we will approach these formal and cultural questions as active debates of the period rather than as settled histories.

Throughout the semester, we will treat writing as another way of learning to see and hear. Weekly film discussions and writing workshops will move from noticing and describing formal details toward interpreting patterns, developing arguments, engaging other writers, and conducting independent research. The goal is to understand Weimar cinema both as a remarkable body of films and as a laboratory for thinking about what cinema could do.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Identify and analyze major elements of film form, including mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, performance, and sound.
- Situate Weimar films within contemporary debates about modernity, work, technology, gender, mass culture, class, and politics.
- Interpret films through close analysis of specific shots, sequences, and sounds.
- Engage critically with historical and scholarly sources in developing original arguments.
- Develop, support, and revise clear analytical arguments.

Texts and Media

All readings and films will be made available through bCourses.

- *Writing Analytically* (Rosenwasser & Stephen) – **WA**
- *They Say / I Say* (Graff & Birkenstein) – **TSIS**
- *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933* (Kaes, Baer, Cowan) – **POC**
- *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Kaes, Jay, Dimendberg) – **WRS**

Assignments & Writing Requirements

1. Diagnostic Essay (approx. 2 pages, 5%)

- A short, low-stake essay submitted at the beginning of the course. The diagnostic is designed to establish a baseline for your analytical writing and will be revisited at the end of the semester.

2. Discussion Posts (150- 300 words, 10%)

- Posts should develop an observation, question, or interpretive problem that emerges from the assigned film and/or readings. They will help shape our film discussions and may provide material for subsequent writing workshops.
- Posts are due Sundays at 11:59pm.

3. The “R” Essays (approx. 3 pages each, 15%)

- Over the course of the semester, you will complete three short exercises: Retelling, Review, and Reading. Each isolates a different practice involved in writing about film.
- **Retelling:** Choose a film from the course and retell one specific sequence in your own words. Your account should make visible aspects of the sequence that a plot summary would neglect or omit.
- **Review:** Choose a film from the course and write a short critical review that makes and supports an evaluation of the film. Establish the criteria behind your evaluation and support your judgments with specific evidence from the film.
- **Reading:** Choose a film from the course and develop a focused reading, or interpretation, of the film. Begin with something specific that you notice and use close analysis to develop a persuasive interpretation of the film.
- *You may choose when to complete each essay*, allowing you to select films and topics particularly suited to the assignment and your interests.

4. Midterm Paper (5-7 pages, 15%)

- Close analysis of a film or sequence from the first half of the course. You will develop an original argument grounded in detailed formal evidence and engage at least one course reading. Your paper must also engage meaningfully with at least one course reading.

5. Final Paper Proposal & Thesis (1-2 pages, 5%)

- Identifies the film(s) or other course materials the project will address, the research question or formal problem it will investigate, and a preliminary thesis. The proposal should explain what the student hopes to learn through further analysis and research.

6. Annotated Bibliography (5%)

- Identify five relevant peer-reviewed secondary sources. For each source, briefly summarize its central argument and explain how it might contribute to the final project.

7. Final Paper (8-10 pages, 25%)

- Develop an original research paper on a topic of your choice related to the course. The paper should integrate relevant course concepts, readings, and films and develop a clear argument supported by close analysis and research.
- Failure to submit the final paper will result in a failing grade for the course!

8. Film Presentation/Discussion Leadership (10%)

- You will be assigned one course film for which they will serve as a discussion leader. Presenters are responsible for preparing relevant historical or production context, selecting one or two sequences for close analysis, and developing questions that connect the film to the week’s readings and larger course themes.

9. Attendance & Participation (10%)

- Active participation in discussions, close-analysis exercises, peer review, and writing workshops is required. You are expected to come to class having read/watched all of the assigned materials.
- More than 3 unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course. Please communicate absences in advance.

Writing and Revision

Drafting, rewriting, and revising are essential parts of the writing process. What you submit to the instructor should never be the first version of an essay.

Throughout the semester, Friday workshops will break film writing into smaller analytical practices: observing, describing, selecting evidence, analyzing a shot, analyzing a sequence, developing a thesis, integrating readings, structuring paragraphs, comparing films, and revising. These workshops treat writing as a method of thinking rather than only a means of reporting conclusions. The goal is to make visible the process through which an observation becomes an interpretation, an interpretation becomes an argument, and an argument develops through evidence, research, and revision.

Written documents should be typed, double-spaced, in a readable 12-point font with 1-inch margins. Documents should include a title, page numbers, and your name on the first page. File names should follow this format:

YourLastName_AssignmentName_Fall2026
Volkman_Review_Fall2026

Participation, Community, & Attendance

You are expected to come to class having read and watched all assigned materials. For reading discussions, bring at least one passage or line that confused, interested, or provoked you. For film discussions, come prepared with at least one specific moment—note the timestamp—that you would like to discuss with the full group.

Active participation may take several forms, including contributing to discussion, asking questions, participating in close-analysis exercises, completing in-class writing, offering constructive peer feedback, and contributing to small-group work.

Attendance is mandatory. With the exception of medical or personal circumstances communicated to the instructor, absences beyond the course allowance will affect the final grade.

Late Policy

Work submitted after the deadline will be penalized 5 points for each day that it is late. Please submit all assignments even when late in order to receive partial credit.

*****NOTE: Failure to submit the final essay will result in a failing grade for the course!*****

Disability Accommodations

Please notify me if you require disability-related accommodations. Students requiring formal accommodations should also work with the appropriate campus accessibility office. In the event of a medical emergency, please inform me as soon as possible so we may find an appropriate solution. I am committed to making the course accessible and inclusive of different learning needs.

Academic Integrity and AI

The consequences of plagiarism, cheating, and academic dishonesty—including a formal discipline file, possible loss of future internship, scholarship, or employment opportunities, and denial of admission to graduate school—are simply not worth it.

Because this is a writing-intensive course, our emphasis is on developing your own capacity to observe, formulate claims, draft, and revise. All submitted work must represent your own thinking and writing.

Please review [Berkeley's Policy on Academic Misconduct/Code of Student Conduct](#) for more information. **“Plagiarism, to put it broadly, is the presentation of another’s words and/or ideas as one’s own, including material taken from the internet and including AI- generated text.”**

Technology

If you use a laptop or tablet to access course readings or take notes, you agree to close unrelated websites, applications, messaging services, and social media during class. Phones should be silenced and put away unless we are explicitly using them for a class activity.

Course Calendar

Week	Date	Readings / Films
Week 1	Wed Aug 26	In-class: Lumière, <i>Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat</i> (1896); Méliès, <i>The Vanishing Woman</i> (1896)
	Fri Aug 28	Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions”
	Sun Aug 30	Diagnostic Essay Due @ 11:59pm
Week 2	Mon Aug 31	Read: <i>POC</i> 189, 190, 191, 192, 195
	Wed Sep 2	Watch: Robert Wiene, <i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> (1920)
	Fri Sep 4	Siegfried Kracauer, <i>From Caligari to Hitler</i> , “Caligari” excerpt
Week 3	Mon Sep 7	NO CLASS
	Wed Sep 9	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 1, Five Analytical Moves: Move 1 & Move 2
	Fri Sep 11	Read: <i>POC</i> 200, 220, 223
Week 4	Mon Sep 14	Watch: F. W. Murnau, <i>Nosferatu</i> (1922)
	Wed Sep 16	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 1, Five Analytical Moves: Move 3
	Fri Sep 18	Read: <i>POC</i> 229, 230; <i>WRS</i> 65, 66, 67
Week 5	Mon Sep 21	Watch: F. W. Murnau, <i>The Last Laugh</i> (1924)
	Wed Sep 23	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 1, “Distinguishing Analysis and Summary”
	Fri Sep 25	Read: <i>POC</i> 41; <i>WRS</i> 150, 152, 155, 263
	Sat Sep 26	Suggested Deadline for Retelling Essay
Week 6	Mon Sep 28	Watch: Fritz Lang, <i>Metropolis</i> (1927)
	Wed Sep 30	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 4, “Linking Evidence and Claims”
	Fri Oct 2	Read: <i>POC</i> 201, 207, 208; Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”
Week 7	Oct 5–9	NO CLASS — Midterm Writing Week

Week	Date	Readings / Films
	Sat Oct 10	Midterm Essay Due @ 11:59pm
Week 8	Mon Oct 12	Watch: Walter Ruttmann, <i>Berlin: Symphony of a Great City</i> (1927)
	Wed Oct 14	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 4, “More than Just ‘the Facts’: What Counts as Evidence?”
	Fri Oct 16	Read: <i>POC</i> 51, 52, 222; <i>WRS</i> 78
Week 9	Mon Oct 19	Watch: G. W. Pabst, <i>Pandora’s Box</i> (1929)
	Wed Oct 21	Writing Workshop: Midterm Postmortem
	Fri Oct 23	Read: <i>POC</i> 129, 224, 225; <i>WRS</i> 266
	Sat Oct 24	Suggested Deadline for Review Essay
Week 10	Mon Oct 26	Watch: Joe May, <i>Asphalt</i> (1929)
	Wed Oct 28	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 5, “Making Interpretations Plausible,” “Context and the Making of Meaning,” & “Implications vs. Hidden Meanings”
	Fri Oct 30	Read: <i>POC</i> 239, 261; <i>WRS</i> 269
Week 11	Mon Nov 2	Watch: Fritz Lang, <i>M</i> (1931)
	Wed Nov 4	Writing Workshop: <i>TSIS</i> , Chap. 4, “Yes / No / Okay, But”
	Fri Nov 6	Read: <i>POC</i> 60, 153, 250, 252, 254; <i>WRS</i> 267
Week 12	Mon Nov 9	Watch: Josef von Sternberg, <i>The Blue Angel</i> (1930)
	Wed Nov 11	NO CLASS — Veterans Day
	Thurs Nov 12	Suggested Deadline for Reading Essay
	Fri Nov 13	Writing Workshop: <i>WA</i> , Chap. 6, “What a Thesis Is and Does” & “How to Word Thesis Statements”
	Sat Nov 14	Final Paper Proposal & Thesis Due @ 11:59pm
Week 13	Mon Nov 16	Read: <i>POC</i> 171, 172; <i>WRS</i> 221, 222

Week	Date	Readings / Films
	Wed Nov 18	Watch: <u>Sláтан Dudow, Kuhle Wampe, or Who Owns the World? (1932)</u>
	Fri Nov 20	Writing Workshop: <i>TSIS</i> , Chap. 3, “As He Himself Puts It”
	Sat Nov 21	Annotated Bibliography Due @ 11:59pm
Week 14	Mon Nov 23	Writing Workshop: Final Paper
	Wed Nov 25	NO CLASS — Thanksgiving
	Fri Nov 27	NO CLASS — Thanksgiving
Week 15	Mon Nov 30	Course Synthesis
	Wed Dec 2	Writing Workshop: <i>TSIS</i> , Chap. 7, “So What? Who Cares?”
	Fri Dec 4	Final Paper Draft Due at Start of Class Final Paper Workshop / Course Reflection
RRR Week	Dec 7–11	NO CLASS
	Sat Dec 11	Final Paper Due @ 11:59pm