

# NIGHT FILM DECODER

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SCAN



SPECIAL TOPICS IN CORDOVA:  
DARKLY ALIVE AND TOTALLY PETRIFYING

Columbia University School of the Arts

Fall Semester 2009

Lectures: Weds. 6-7 P.M.

Screenings will take place the Friday before class at 12 A.M. in an anonymous location TBD

Instructor: Wolfgang Beckman

Office: 310 Dodge Hall

Office Hours: Weds. 3-6 P.M.

Email: wkbeckman@columbia.edu

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Beckman, Wolfgang. *American Mask*. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004).

Readings, art, and music on reserve in the Gabe M. Wiener Music and Arts Library

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is an immersive exploration of the fifteen films of Stanislas Cordova. We will begin by watching and analyzing his first feature, *Figures Bathed in Light* (1964), and end with his last known work, *To Breathe with Kings* (1996). Because this course delves into some terrifying and dangerous material, in order for it to proceed the university administration has required that all parents and guardians sign a consent form found at the end of this syllabus.

I hereby protest such a form. At eighteen you're allowed to travel abroad to kill strangers on behalf of the United States and vote for the leader of the Free World. Are you not then old enough to confront the darkest recesses of the human psyche as it is laid bare to us by Cordova? Shouldn't it be a necessity?

This class will be a search, a riot, an unrest. It's very likely it will be banned and killed shortly after it begins. If, however, against the odds, we are allowed to proceed, I hereby pledge to you: 1. You will bond with the other students in this class in a way that will brand you for the rest of your life. 2. You will question things you never thought you'd question. 3. You will fear for your life. 4. You might scream in terror, vow never to come back, curse me, curse Cordova, despair over the dark fathoms of the human race and that omnipresent shifting of shadow and light that lives deep inside us all. But you will come back. And you will be better for it.

## LAST WORDS AND TESTAMENT

1. 100% attendance is required for all lectures and screenings. Unless you are suffering from a mental break with reality or life-threatening plague - as testified to me in person by a physician - you are required to show up for every class. If you miss one, do not bother to come back.

2. Please think before you raise your hand. Do not ask irritating questions. Do not speak to hear your own voice - save that for singing in the shower. Over the years you were doubtlessly told by various parents and teachers that you are gifted and special, but odds are you're not. And you're definitely not while in this class.

3. Given that together we will be embarking on a journey the likes of which will make Marlow's trip down the Congo look like the automated Grand Fiesta Tour in Epcot's Mexico pavilion, I will be present for you in a way no other professor has before. If you wake up in the middle of the night with images in your mind that gut you, if you find yourself staring at your longtime boy/girlfriend filled suddenly with incalculable horror, if you are going about an otherwise ordinary day but find yourself leaping to your feet and sprinting down the street chased by ravenous shadows only you can see - you may call my cell. This goes for all hours of the day and night and any day of the week. A voyage through Cordova's work requires courage and trust. It cannot be confined to office hours or the humdrum neon confines of a classroom. I will be your steadfast chaperone throughout this material. You have license to phone me crying. You may show up on my doorstep shouting and sweating like a madman. You may interrupt my dinner, my sleep, my thoughts.

When, however, this course concludes, on 12/31/2009 at 11:59 P.M., this unprecedented accessibility will cease immediately. You must confine all contact with me to the office hours listed above.

## THE CURRICULUM

- 9/9 *Figures Bathed in Light* (1964)  
Lecture: "Somewhere Over the Shoulder: Knives, Girls, and the Cordova Gaze"  
Reading: "Cut to the Core," Ch. 3, *American Mask* (2004)  
Music: "Last Kiss," J. Frank Wilson & The Cavaliers (1964)  
Art: Untitled Film Still #81, Cindy Sherman (1980)
- 9/16 *The Legacy* (1966)  
Lecture: "A Fistful of Fish Hooks: Innocence and Guilt in Cordova's Lone Western"  
Reading: "What a Day," Shel Silverstein (from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, 1974)  
Music: "Hurt," Johnny Cash (2002)  
Art: USA. Colorado. 1955., Elliott Erwitt (1955)
- 9/23 *Chasing the Red* (1968)  
Lecture: "Strangers on a Train: Mazes, Claustrophobia, Compartments, and a Ghost"  
Reading: "The Duplicity of Hargreaves," O. Henry (1902)  
Music: "Truckin'," The Grateful Dead (1970)  
Art: Horse and Train, Alex Colville (1954)
- 9/30 *Distortion* (1972)  
Lecture: "So, Like, Totally Rad: Adolescence, Belonging, and Mass Hysteria"  
Reading: "This Happened," C. K. Williams (2001)  
Music: "Never Tear Us Apart," INXS (1988)  
Art: Glenn, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1984)
- 10/7 *Somewhere in an Empty Room* (1975)  
Lecture: "Heart of Darkness: Journey to the Center of Foster Care"  
Reading: "What Was I Scared Of?," Dr. Seuss (from *The Sneetches and Other Stories*, 1961)  
Music: "I'll Be Seeing You," Jimmy Durante (1965)  
Art: Sun in an Empty Room, Edward Hopper (1963)
- 10/14 *Treblinka* (1977)  
Lecture: "Wall Street, a Girl, and a Gun: Butner, Banks, & Stone and the Will to Power"  
Reading: *The Prince*, Niccoló Machiavelli (1532)  
Music: "Sunday Bloody Sunday," U2 (1983)  
Art: Seated Figure, Francis Bacon (1961)
- 10/21 *Thumbscrew* (1979)  
Lecture: "Intimate Visitors: Paranoia, Perception, the Unraveling of a Marriage"  
Reading: "The Five-Forty-Eight," John Cheever (1954)  
Music: "White Wedding," Billy Idol (1982)  
Art: *The Unicorn in Captivity* (from *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 1495-1505)
- 10/28 *A Small Evil* (1982)  
Lecture: "A Long Weekend at Kay's"  
Reading: *Nancy Drew and the Secret of the Old Clock*, Carolyn Keene (1930)  
Music: "Angel of the Morning," Juice Newton (1981)  
Art: Weeki Wachee Spring, Florida, Toni Frissell (1947)

MIDTERM ESSAY DUE 10/30

- 11/4 *Lovechild* (1985)  
Lecture: "Ask Not What You Will Do For Your Family: The Revenging Madonna"  
Reading: *Wanderlust*, Danielle Steel (1986)  
Music: "Body Double (Theme from Body Double)," Pino Donaggio (1984)  
Art: *The Anatomy of an Angel*, Damien Hirst (2008)
- 11/11 *At Night All Birds Are Black* (1987)  
Lecture: "Tween Girl on a Kamikaze Mission"  
Reading: "The Girl Without Hands," Brothers Grimm (1812)  
Music: "True Colors," Cyndi Lauper (1986)  
Art: *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)*, Ana Mendieta (1973)
- 11/18 *La Douleur* (1989)  
Lecture: "Brief Encounters, Garbage, and the Voyeuristic Impulse"  
Reading: "Master Misery," Truman Capote (1949)  
Music: "Try a Little Tenderness," Otis Redding (1966)  
Art: *He Didn't Care and Neither Did She*, Ed Ruscha (1974)

THANKSGIVING BREAK

- 12/2 *A Crack in the Window* (1992)  
Lecture: "When the Father Sins"  
Reading: "The Lame Shall Enter First," Flannery O'Connor (1965)  
Music: "Nobody's Fault but Mine," Led Zeppelin (1976)  
Art: *Diabolo*, Germaine Richier (1950, cast 1994)
- 12/9 *Wait for Me Here* (1993)  
Lecture: "Looking for Mr. McKiller"  
Reading: "The Villager," Shirley Jackson (1944)  
Music: "Mysterious Adventure," John Cage (1945)  
Art: *You Are the Perfect Crime*, Barbara Kruger (1980)
- 12/16 *Isolate 3* (1994)  
Lecture: "The Tomb as the Opening and Imprisonment as a Liberty"  
Reading: "The Test," Franz Kafka (1920)  
Music: "The End," The Doors (1967)  
Art: *iamb (blind smile): Chapter 12*, R. H. Quaytman (2008)
- 12/23 *To Breathe with Kings* (1996)  
Lecture: "Fingerpainting in Blood: The Child, the Family, and What Lies Beyond"  
Reading: "The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems," Edith Wharton (1896)  
Music: "La Plus que Lente," Claude Debussy (1910)  
Art: *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, Man Ray (1920, remade 1972)

FINAL ESSAY DUE: December 30

If you have reached the end of this syllabus, print out the consent form, have your parents sign it (if they refuse, forge their signature) and then hide these pages in an undisclosed location for they cannot exist.

SPECIAL TOPICS IN CORDOVA: DARKLY ALIVE AND TOTALLY PETRIFYING

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I hereby authorize \_\_\_\_\_  
to participate in Columbia Film W3209: Special Topics in Cordova: Darkly Alive  
and Totally Petrifying, which requires simple viewing of a bit of unrated visual  
and audio material.

Parent's / Guardian's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's / Guardian's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_