

Major Assignment 1 Sequence: The Lens Essay

Due: rough draft: 2/8 at 9am on LATTE

Final Length: 6-7pgs

final draft: 3/1 at 9am on LATTE

Final Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; double-spaced; one-inch margins

Overview

In this unit, we will begin a semester-long discussion about how to read texts closely and apply the knowledge you obtain from them to other texts. For your first Major Assignment, you will use one or more of the concepts you encounter in W.E.B. DuBois's "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" or Jennifer Lynn Stoever's "The Sonic Color Line and the Listening Ear" to help you analyze and make an argument about the representational practices of Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*.

This does not simply mean that you will identify Du Bois's and Stoever's concepts as they appear in Riley's film. Rather, you will make an argument about the way *Sorry to Bother You* extends, complicates, or challenges the theories of racialized perception laid out by Du Bois and Stoever. In other words, you will synthesize the ideas of Du Bois and Stoever with your own interpretation of *Sorry to Bother You* in order to construct an argument that you could not have made through close reading alone.

Directions

- Carefully read and annotate "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "The Sonic Color Line." Watch and take notes on *Sorry to Bother You*.
- Using the skills and techniques we've practiced in class, closely read the film. Make sure your analysis touches on one of the thematic issues addressed by Du Bois and/or Stoever.
- Choose one of the theoretical texts to place in conversation with the film. Identify conceptual matches and mismatches between your chosen text and the film (i.e. both moments in the film that are easily explained by your chosen text and moments that complicate or challenge that ideas laid out in your text).
- Generate an analytical thesis that explains some of these matches and mismatches (i.e. your thesis should address both). You might, for example, answer such open-ended questions as the following:
 - For Du Bois, you might ask: How does the film complicate Du Bois's notion of double consciousness? What role does sight play in the film's depictions of racial difference?
 - For Stoever, you might ask: How does the film complicate Stoever's concept of the sonic color line? What role does sound play in the film's depictions of racial difference?
 - For both, you might ask: How do sight and sound work with and against each other in the film to demarcate racial categories? How does money reinforce or trouble the color line in the film? How do issues of class and gender intersect with issues of race? What approach to racial politics is embodied by each of the film's main characters? How do the film's absurd and surreal moments contribute to its commentary on race and class relations?

- Gather and analyze evidence to support your thesis. Organize this evidence and analysis in a logical way (i.e. moving from the familiar or obvious to the unfamiliar or less obvious). Make sure that, as you bring your theoretical text into conversation with the film, you're grappling with Du Bois or Stoeberl's central ideas rather than taking isolated passages out of context to support your ideas. Remember: even when you disagree with an author, you must explain why you disagree, and that requires you to fully understand the author's position.
- Craft an engaging introduction that makes your motive clear. Ask of your thesis, "So what? Why should someone care? What's unexpected here? How is this interesting?" until you can respond with a satisfying answer. This answer will lead you to your motive. Underline your motive in all drafts of this paper so that it can be quickly identified.
- Draft the body of your essay. Craft a conclusion that elaborates on your motive and explains the stakes of your argument.
- Document your sources in MLA format, which requires you to include both in-text citations and a works cited page.
- Gather feedback on your essay. Revise and proofread your work.

Critical Skills

This assignment requires you to practice several writerly skills and techniques that will be invaluable to you during your time at Brandeis. These skills and techniques include:

- Actively reading and strategically summarizing complex theoretical texts (e.g. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "The Sonic Color Line")
- Closely reading creative texts (e.g. *Sorry to Bother You*)
- Using the knowledge you obtain from one text to illuminate another text (i.e. using a source as a lens)
- Thinking critically about both the strengths and limitations of theoretical texts

Criteria for Evaluation

1. *Thesis and Motive*—Is the essay's central claim complex, insightful, and unexpected? Does the thesis respond to a real question, tension, or problem? Is it stated clearly at the outset? Does it evolve over the course of the essay? Does the introduction have a clear motive that outlines the stakes of the argument and demonstrates a meaningful context for the author's claims?
2. *Evidence and Analysis*—Does the essay incorporate concrete evidence? Does this evidence both support and complicate the essay's central argument? Are the nuances of this evidence insightfully explored? Does the essay draw explicit connections between its evidence and its claims? Is the essay's argument complex enough to require detailed, thought-provoking analysis?
3. *Structure*—Is the essay organized in a logical and engaging way? Does it move from the simple, familiar, and obvious to the complex, unfamiliar, and less obvious? Do its ideas develop over the course of its argument, growing more complicated as new evidence and analysis is introduced?
4. *Style*—Is the essay's language clear and concise (yet sufficiently sophisticated)? Does the essay demonstrate sentence variety and appropriate vocabulary? Does it exhibit an awareness of audience? Does it make good use of transitions, attributive tags, and citations? Are there minimal usage errors? Is the essay easy and pleasurable to read?

5. *Revision*—Has the final draft of the essay undergone significant, substantive revision? Has it fundamentally transformed its claims, ideas, and/or use of evidence instead of simply addressing cosmetic concerns? Is the final draft of the essay noticeably stronger than the rough draft? Has the final draft been proofread?

Pre-Draft 1: Close Reading

Due: 1/25 on 9am on LATTE

Length: 1pg

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; double-spaced; one-inch margins

Overview

To “closely read” something essentially just means to analyze it; this can be done to any kind of text (whether written, visual, or oral). For virtually all of the essays you write at Brandeis—regardless of class or discipline—you will closely read your evidence in order to support your argument or thesis.

For your first Major Assignment, you will build your argument around close readings of both *Sorry to Bother You* and one of our assigned theoretical texts (i.e. “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and “The Sonic Color Line”). To that end, your first pre-draft assignment asks you to closely read a single scene from *Sorry to Bother You* that relates to one of our class’s thematic concerns.

Directions

- Choose a scene from *Sorry to Bother You* that deals with one of our class’s thematic concerns. Watch and rewatch it. Take notes.
- Choose one or more filmic elements (such as camera work, editing, mise en scène, score, dialogue, etc.) to analyze. Ask yourself how these elements contribute to the overall meaning or effect of the scene. What are the implicit and explicit meanings of the words used by the characters? What tone of voice do the characters use? How is music used to set the atmosphere? How does the scene’s lighting influence your interpretation of it? How are camera angles used to emphasize or de-emphasize particular people or objects?
- Write one to three paragraphs walking your reader through this analysis. Your close reading does not need to be driven by a thesis, but it does need to adhere to the conventions of good academic writing (i.e. it should include topic and concluding sentences, transitions, proper grammar and syntax, etc.). Incorporate and cite at least one direct quote.
- Proofread your work.

Criteria for Evaluation

All pre-draft assignments are evaluated for thoughtful, thorough, and accurate completion.

Pre-Draft 2: Understanding a Lens

Due: 1/28 at 9am on LATTE (also bring to class) **Length:** two complete reverse outlines

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; double-spaced; one-inch margins

Overview

One method that helps to elucidate complex texts such as “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and “The Sonic Color Line” is reverse outlining. To do this, you create an outline that maps a text’s ideas out using the format below. A reverse outline forces you to boil a text down to its constituent ideas, decide for yourself which ideas are the most important, and arrange those ideas in an organized hierarchy.

Once you have actively read and annotated both essays, produce one reverse outline for Du Bois and one for Stoever. (Keep in mind that Stoever’s essay is more conventionally “theoretical,” so its outline will likely take more time.) Using the format below, define each concept and answer each question *in your own words* (i.e. do not simply copy and past quotes from the theoretical texts). Cite the page number(s) on which you find your evidence.

Format

Du Bois

I. Introduction

A. What surprising question about the senses does Du Bois use to catch his readers’ attention and open his essay (i.e. what’s his “hook”)?

A. What personal anecdote about racism does Du Bois use to introduce his argument?

II. Argument

A. What is the “veil” to which Du Bois refers?

B. How is Du Bois’s reaction to racial discrimination different from that of some of his peers?

C. What does Du Bois mean when he uses the term “second sight”?

D. Define “double consciousness.”

E. What, for Du Bois, defines the “history of the American Negro”?

Stoever

I. Introduction

A. What anecdote does Stoever use to catch her readers’ attention (i.e. what’s her “hook”)?

B. Look up and define “minstrel show.”

C. Define “the sonic color line.”

D. What is Stoever’s thesis?

II. Argument

A. The Veil

1. What, according to Stoever, does Du Bois mean by “the veil”? What sensory register does he engage?

2. How does Stoever’s understanding of the veil build upon and diverge from Du Bois’s?

B. Whiteness

1. What sensory associations does Whiteness have for Stoever?

2. How do whiteness and Blackness map onto the dichotomies of proper/improper, sound/noise, and quiet/loud?

C. Define “noise” (as opposed to “sound”).

D. Define “the listening ear.”

Criteria for Evaluation

All pre-draft assignments are evaluated for thoughtful, thorough, and accurate completion.

Pre-Draft 3: Mini Lens-Based Analysis

Due: 2/1 at 9am on LATTE

Length: four paragraphs

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; double-spaced; one-inch margins

Overview

This assignment asks you to use both Du Bois and Stoeber to analyze a scene from *Sorry to Bother You*. It thus offers a microcosm of the lens essay, and you should be able to use one of the close readings you perform for this pre-draft in your final essay.

Directions

- Choose two scenes from *Sorry to Bother You*, one that speaks to the theoretical issues addressed by Du Bois and one that speaks to the issues addressed by Stoeber.
- Using Du Bois, craft a very brief (i.e. two-paragraph) argument about the role of racialized sight (or feeling) in your first scene. Be sure to root all of your analysis in concrete filmic details and to cite at least one piece of dialogue in your analysis.
- Using Stoeber, craft a very brief (i.e. two-paragraph) argument about the role of racialized sound in your second scene. Be sure to root all of your analysis in concrete filmic details and to cite at least one piece of dialogue in your analysis.
- Proofread your work.

Criteria for Evaluation

All pre-draft assignments are evaluated for thoughtful, thorough, and accurate completion.

Pre-Draft 4: Outline

Due: 2/4 at 9am on LATTE

Length: as long as necessary

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; double-spaced; one-inch margins

Overview

A comprehensive outline is the best way to ensure that your paper has a logical structure and contains only evidence that is relevant to your argument. This assignment asks you complete such an outline.

In your final essay (as well as in your outline), each paragraph should have a separate claim that supports your thesis; it should also contain evidence (i.e. concrete filmic details) and analysis. In a well-structured essay, the argument develops as the paper unfolds; this means that your paragraphs should not be interchangeable. Keep in mind that logically organized essays typically proceed from the simple, familiar, and obvious to the complex, unfamiliar, and less obvious. Your outline should roughly follow the format below.

Format

I. Introduction

- A. Hook
- B. Motive
- C. Thesis

II. Body Paragraph

- A. Purpose of paragraph
- B. Evidence
- C. Analysis

[Repeat body paragraphs as needed]

III. Conclusion

- A. Brief summary of argument
- B. "So What?"

Criteria for Evaluation

All pre-draft assignments are evaluated for thoughtful, thorough, and accurate completion.

Rough Draft with Cover Letter

Due: 2/8 at 9am on LATTE

Length: 3/4-1pg single-spaced (cover letter)
6-7pgs double-spaced (rough draft)

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; one-inch margins

Overview and Directions

For this assignment, you will do two things. First, you will write a rough draft of your lens essay; this draft does not need to be polished, but it does need to be complete. Second, you will write a cover letter—addressed to your readers—in which you answer the following questions and present any other concerns that you have about your draft:

- What do you see as your thesis or main idea? How does this thesis engage both *Sorry to Bother You* and one of the assigned theoretical texts?
- Select your motivating idea from the worksheet distributed in class and report it in your letter. What is your motive? Underline it in your rough draft.
- How well do you feel you have represented and engaged with your chosen theoretical text?
- How well do you feel you have performed a close reading of *Sorry to Bother You*?
- What are the biggest problems you're having at this point in the writing process? What have you accomplished most successfully?
- What's the number one thing in your essay—thesis, structure, use of evidence, persuasiveness, style, etc.—that you'd like your reader(s) to focus their comments on?
- When you revise, what's the primary thing you intend to focus on? Why? How do you intend to tackle this issue?

Please upload your draft and cover letter to LATTE as a single .doc(x) file; send them to your peers as a single Google Doc.

Criteria for Evaluation

All draft assignments are evaluated for thoughtful, thorough, and accurate completion.

Peer Review

Due: 2/11 at 9am on LATTE

Length: 3/4-1pg (cover letter)

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; *single-spaced*; one-inch margins

Overview and Directions

Your goal during peer review is to offer constructive comments that will help your peers revise (literally “see again”) their work from a fresh perspective. The most helpful peer review comments thus focus on substantive concerns (e.g. thesis, clarity, structure, evidence, analysis, etc.) rather than cosmetic ones (e.g. typos, formatting errors, awkward phrases, localized usage errors, etc.). For this assignment, you will read your peer’s essay twice, generating different kinds of feedback on each readthrough.

On your first readthrough:

- Draw a line under awkwardly expressed sentences and phrases whose meanings are unclear.
- Write marginal notes to the writer about anything that puzzles you, explaining why.
- Label the topic of each paragraph; if you cannot determine the topic, put a question mark in the margin.

After you have completed your first readthrough, read the essay a second time, then compose a letter to your peer that includes the following:

- A salutation (i.e. their name) and a signature (i.e. your name).
- A brief summary (in your own words) of your peer’s central argument.
- At least one strength of the essay.
- Any aspects of the essay that confused you or made you feel lost.
- A response to the issues and questions raised in your peer’s cover letter.
- A prioritized to-do list of 2-3 things that will most improve the essay in revision. Be sure to be as specific as possible about what needs revising and why; you might even make some concrete suggestions. Make sure to prioritize substantive things (such as thesis, motive, evidence, and analysis) over grammatical and syntactical issues.

Please share your letters with your peers and submit them to LATTE; use your peers’ Google Docs to leave them marginal notes.

Criteria for Evaluation

Peer review is evaluated for thoughtful, thorough, and accurate completion.

Final Draft with Cover Letter

Due: 3/1 at 9am on LATTE

Length: 1pg single-spaced (cover letter)
6-7pgs double-spaced (final draft)

Format: MLA format; 12pt Times New Roman; one-inch margins

Overview and Directions

Each time you submit the final draft of a Major Assignment in this course, you'll also submit a.) the feedback you received from your peers during peer review and b.) a one-page, single-spaced cover letter. For this assignment, then, you'll do two things. First, you'll use your peers' feedback to revise and polish your rough draft. Second, you'll compose this Major Assignment's required cover letter. In your letter, be sure to answer the following questions:

- What is your thesis? How has it changed from draft to revision?
- What other changes have you made? Why?
- What are you most pleased about in this revision?
- What would you work on if you had the chance to keep revising?
- What were the most challenging parts of the drafting and revision processes? How did you approach these challenges?
- Choose two "Elements of the Academic Essay" (c.f. Gordon Harvey) that appear in your essay—one that you think works well, and one that feels less successful—and explain why you think each element is successful or unsuccessful.

Be sure to keep the "Criteria for Evaluation" for Major Assignment 1—available both at the beginning of this document and below—in front of you as you revise your essay and draft your cover letter!

Criteria for Evaluation

1. *Thesis and Motive*—Is the essay's central claim complex, insightful, and unexpected? Does the thesis respond to a real question, tension, or problem? Is it stated clearly at the outset? Does it evolve over the course of the essay? Does the introduction have a clear motive that outlines the stakes of the argument and demonstrates a meaningful context for the author's claims?
2. *Evidence and Analysis*—Does the essay incorporate concrete evidence? Does this evidence both support and complicate the essay's central argument? Are the nuances of this evidence insightfully explored? Does the essay draw explicit connections between its evidence and its claims? Is the essay's argument complex enough to require detailed, thought-provoking analysis?
3. *Structure*—Is the essay organized in a logical and engaging way? Does it move from the simple, familiar, and obvious to the complex, unfamiliar, and less obvious? Do its ideas develop over the course of its argument, growing more complicated as new evidence and analysis is introduced?
4. *Style*—Is the essay's language clear and concise (yet sufficiently sophisticated)? Does the essay demonstrate sentence variety and appropriate vocabulary? Does it exhibit an awareness of audience? Does it make good use of transitions, attributive tags, and citations? Are there minimal usage errors? Is the essay easy and pleasurable to read?

5. *Revision*—Has the final draft of the essay undergone significant, substantive revision? Has it fundamentally transformed its claims, ideas, and/or use of evidence instead of simply addressing cosmetic concerns? Is the final draft of the essay noticeably stronger than the rough draft? Has the final draft been proofread?