

## Lens Essay Assignment: Analysis of *Transit*

During this first unit, we will begin a semester-long discussion about how to read closely and apply that knowledge to other texts.

The “text” that will serve as the object of analysis for this assignment is a recent German drama film titled *Transit*. *Transit* is set in a fictitious version of present-day France that is occupied by fascist forces, and it focuses on the journey of a German political refugee named Georg in his efforts to flee. This journey begins when Georg assumes the identity of a deceased writer, hoping that the writer’s documents and unpublished manuscript might provide him passage across national borders.

For the lens texts, you will choose from *either* the introduction to Michael Buckland’s *Information and Society*, which theorizes the power of documents in terms of information science, *or* Ron Pelias’s autoethnography “The Academic Tourist,” which narrativizes his experiences as a writer and teacher according to a tourism metaphor.

**For this essay**, you will make an argument about how some core concept/aspect of the lens text challenges, or complicates your reading of *Transit* as a film. Or, you might make an argument about how the film complicates the concept from the lens text. In either case, your aim is to apply your understanding of the essay to *Transit* **to make an argument that you could not have made through close analysis of one of these texts alone**. This argument ideally opens up the film in new ways for your reader by exploring in what ways the lens you choose complicates the film, or perhaps to how the film’s dramatization of the issues they take up might help your reader see the lens anew. Some questions you may consider, depending on your choice of lens text:

Buckland:

- What documents does Georg hope to rely on for safe passage? How do these documents work to provide that?
- To what extent does the film depict what Buckland identifies as the functions that documents serve? How, and to what effect?
- To what extent does the film depict documents’ ephemerality? How, and to what effect?
- What authorities is Georg up against? Who provides Georg documentation, and who has the power to lend those documents meaning?
- To what extent does the film grapple with our reliance on others to function and make meaning?
- Can Weidel’s manuscript be thought of as a document, in addition to a draft or piece of literature? If we frame it this way, how does that change our reading of the film?
- In what kinds of evidence does Marie base her trust, in thinking her husband to be alive?

Pelias:

- In what ways might we say Georg, in Pelias's words, never gets "beyond the surface of things?"
- To what extent does Pelias's confessional narrative about not knowing what he is 'supposed to' know help us attend to Georg's deception in taking on someone else's identity?
- Why is it significant that the identity Georg assumes is that of a writer? Pelias, quoting James Clifford, calls writing "a site of shifting locations." What is the role of writing in the film? How might the film help us see that quote differently?
- What other identities or roles does Georg inhabit over the course of the film? Which does he claim, and which are thrust upon him?
- Who are the "tour guides" in this film?
- In what ways does *Transit* grapple with how well we know what we think we do?
- Do the endings of the narrative and the film share any formal qualities?

### **Assignment Context and Requirements:**

This assignment presents you with potentially new challenges:

1. You will be transferring your close reading skills from one text to another.
2. The writings of Buckland and Pelias are at once accessible and complex, and they hail and draw from very different academic traditions with which you may not be familiar. You will encounter texts that may challenge you during your career at Brandeis. You will also be encountering work from many different disciplines, later in this course and in your continuing academic careers, and it will be helpful to know how to piece together these traditions from others' representations of them. Part of your task for this paper is to let your readers know what Buckland or Pelias is trying to say and do, and why.

You will be offering an interpretation of *Transit* **informed by either an information science perspective or an autoethnographic perspective** that will help you investigate what the text has to say, how it constructs its meanings, and what the implications of those meanings are. As a result, you will be able to reflect back on these ideas and amplify your understanding of what these approaches to analysis can yield.

Some Guidelines:

- Please **open with an engaging introduction**. It should:
  - **make your motive clear**. Recall Gordon Harvey's description of motive as "the intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone besides your instructor might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued—why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold other theses that you think are wrong." Ask of your thesis, "So what? Why would someone care? What's unexpected here? How is this interesting?" until you can respond with a satisfying answer. The answer will lead you to your motive. Since this is a close

reading paper at its heart, your primary motive will likely be reconciling something of interest you notice in the primary text, but there may be others.

- **have an arguable, specific thesis** about how viewing your primary text through your lens text changes your close reading of some specific aspect of the text.
  - Rather than naming/listing features (e.g., “plot structure,” “repetition,” “word choice”), this thesis should incorporate the specific instance of the feature in the text. Rather than stopping at identifying the feature, it should talk about how it works and to what effect.
  - *Note: while templates can be helpful to collect and develop your thoughts while drafting, it’s a bit sophomoric here to say “viewing x through the lens of y reveals z” in the final version.*
- Please **create a dialogue between the lens and primary texts**. Identifying resonances between the two texts is the first stage of forming your ideas, but don’t settle for a baseline reading of the points of connection between them. This is also not a comparison/contrast essay. Instead, identify how (and how well) the framework of the lens reconciles with the form and function of the primary text (how it works and to what effect). This may involve identifying where your object of analysis and the lens don’t match up—where there is friction. While we often think of friction as impeding motion, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing reminds us that friction is also what allows for heat, and for motion. Friction can be generative. This is your opportunity to evaluate and critique the lens—you need not agree with it wholeheartedly, just remember to explain why you disagree and to examine the merits and faults of the framework. Your ideas, if you can support them with evidence and argument, are no less legit.
- Please **grapple with the theory’s central ideas in your lens, rather than cherry-picking isolated passages out of context to support your ideas**. Whenever you are called on to bring a critical text into an assignment, your essay will not only be judged on the merit of your original ideas but also on how accurately you represent and make use of the critical text. Even when you disagree with the author, or the concepts or metaphors involved don’t quite match up, you must explain that; doing so requires you to fully understand the author’s position. When you refer to either framework, be sure you engage their main ideas and not a side detail. We might start our analysis with a side detail or a particular bit of phrasing, but it’s important that it is contextualized within the broader work and its purpose/project.
- Please **use specific passages or moments to support or complicate your argument**. This essay applies one text to another for analysis, rather than a book report or summary of either text. So, **keep your argument grounded in the primary text** rather than, say, general statements about documents, boundaries, roles, narratives, etc. Since this is a textual analysis essay, please **interpret rather than describe** textual evidence that you bring in. This will usually involve talking about the significance of the evidence toward your argument after re-stating it in your own words.

- **Please cite textual evidence in MLA** format. This citation method requires that you cite your sources parenthetically in the text of your essay (as opposed to using footnotes or endnotes). We will review how this looks in practice.

**Essay length:** 6-7 pages

Your paper will be evaluated according to the UWS essay grading rubric.

**Formatting:**

- Please use 1-inch margins and 12-point Times New Roman font.
- Please have a descriptive title, be double-spaced and have page numbers.
- Please follow MLA formatting guidelines.

## Pre-Draft 1.1: Close reading a scene from *Transit*

Close reading is a careful analysis and can be done to any kind of text whether it is written, oral or visual. For analysis essays you write at Brandeis—regardless of the class or discipline—you will perform close reading of your evidence to support your argument, or thesis.

This lens essay will incorporate close reading of both the lens text and the primary text that's the object of analysis. The first step in a close reading is to be sure that you have a clear understanding of the text that you are evaluating. To that end, your first assignment will be to analyze **a single scene** from *Transit* that is relevant to how the film treats borders, boundaries, citizenship, or documents and documentation. Analyze the scene with respect to the following:

- Dialogue: what is the implicit and explicit meaning of the words used by the characters? What is the tone of voice?
- How is music, or lack of it, used to set the atmosphere? What about other aspects of the film's soundscape?
- How does the lighting influence your interpretation?
- How are camera angles used to emphasize or de-emphasize people or objects?

Your analysis should be one double-spaced page in length and should quote directly from the paragraph in your analysis (please cite page numbers).

## Pre-Draft 1.2: Understanding the Lens for Buckland and Pelias

One method that may help us to grasp rich and challenging texts like Buckland's or Pelias's is called "reverse outlining." To do so, you create an outline that maps out the progression of a text's ideas. A reverse outline forces you to boil that text down to its constituent ideas and claims, decide for yourself which ones are the most important, and arrange them in an organized hierarchy. At some level, it is reductive, but as a technique for working out complex ideas, it can be very useful. It may follow the structure the author signals using formal elements like section headings, but it may not.

Once you have actively read and marked up each essay, produce one reverse outline for Buckland and another for Pelias. Below is a model of what this can look like. Please use it to structure your outline, defining the concepts and answer the questions *in your own words*. In addition, cite the page number(s) on which you find your evidence. Feel free to make changes to how I've placed things!

Buckland:

- I. Brief introduction
- II. Information
  - a. What are the different ways that "information" has been defined?
- III. My Passport
  - a. What are the features/components that Buckland identifies of a passport and how it's designed?
  - b. Social aspect and power
  - c. Cognitive aspect
  - d. Multi-media
- IV. Division of Labor and the Need to Know
  - a. Dependence on "secondhand knowledge"
- V. Agendas of Others
  - a. What are documents used for?
- VI. Information Society
  - a. What is an "information society?"
  - b. How do documents depend on mutual trust?
- VII. Structure of the Book (*you can ignore this part in your outline*)

Pelias:

- I. Description of teaching (second-person)
  - a. How do you characterize Pelias's account of teaching?
  - b. Who is the "you" that Pelias uses?
  - c. tour guide metaphor
- II. Description of faculty service
  - a. What decisions does the individual versus the collective make?
- III. Description of research activity
  - a. Meta-discursive reference to the essay

- b. In-line references to outside sources that the author knows
- c. Admissions of “partial grasp”
- d. Block quotes of passages
  - i. How are these quotes functioning?

IV. Unmooring ending

### Pre-Draft 1.3: Mini Lens Analysis

Lens analysis asks you to put two or more texts in conversation in order to produce a reading that you couldn't have made through close reading alone. After analyzing and considering Buckland's theory of documents and Pelias's metaphor of the tourist in relation to *Transit* in detail, choose *one* character and one scene from the film for Buckland and another character and scene for Pelias. Next:

- Using for the first scene, make a mini-argument (two paragraphs) using Buckland's work on how documents function to analyze the character's relationship to documents in the chosen scene. Be sure to cite at least one piece of dialogue from the scene in your analysis. This exercise offers a microcosm of the lens essay, and you should be able to use your reading for this pre-draft in the final essay.
- Using the second scene, make a mini-argument (two paragraphs) using Pelias's extended tourism metaphor to analyze the character's identity and decisions as depicted in your chosen scene. Be sure to cite at least one piece of dialogue from the scene in your analysis. This exercise offers a microcosm of the lens essay, and you should be able to use your reading for this pre-draft in the final essay.



## Pre-draft 1.4: Outline for Rough Draft

Writing an outline can help you to ensure that your paper has a logical structure and evidence that is relevant to your argument. Each paragraph in an argument-driven essay should have a separate claim or core idea that supports the thesis, expressed in a topic sentence, as well as evidence and analysis. These topic sentences ideally capture how the paper's argument develops as it unfolds. Accordingly, the order of paragraphs should not be interchangeable. The structure of your essay is otherwise up to you, but it's usually a good idea to contextualize your lens text early in the paper. An outline template is below:

### I. Introduction

- A. Motive
- B. Introduction of Texts
- C. Thesis

II. (Optional) Paragraph with more information about primary text (useful when the lens and primary text differ quite a lot in context and it would help to responsibly describe its contribution in language that anticipates the lens)

- A. Topic Sentence: This should summarize the main idea of the paragraph
- B. Evidence: potential passages or moments to quote while selectively summarizing the author's core concepts relevant to your essay. Please include page numbers for each (guideline: start with 2-3 quotations).
- C. Analysis: briefly explain in your own words what you've quoted
- D. Relevance: a brief statement of how the evidence relates to your thesis

### III. "Lens paragraph"

- A. Topic Sentence: This should summarize the main idea of the paragraph: What is the author's framework?
- B. Evidence: potential passages or moments to quote while selectively summarizing the author's core concepts relevant to your essay. Please include page numbers for each (guideline: start with 2-3 quotations).
- C. Analysis: briefly explain in your own words what you've quoted
- D. Relevance: a brief statement of how the evidence relates to your thesis

### IV. Body Paragraph

- A. Topic Sentence: This should summarize the main idea of the paragraph
- B. Contextualization: When you cite your evidence, what is happening at that moment in the primary text?
- C. Evidence: potential passages or moments to quote. Please include page numbers
- D. Analysis: brief statement of how you will close read the evidence
- E. Relevance: a brief statement of how the evidence relates to your thesis

Etc... for ALL of the body paragraphs.

Final Roman numeral: Conclusion—what are the larger implications of your argument? How does the text comment on a broader theme than just your specific claims?

## Essay 1 Rough Draft Cover Letter

Please write a draft cover letter, addressed to your readers, in which you answer the following questions and present any other concerns that you have. This letter should be typed and should be about three-quarters to a full page long, single-spaced. Attach it to the front of your essay, including the one you upload to LATTE and the one shared with your peers and me on Google Drive.

1. What do you see as your thesis or main idea? How does this thesis engage both the lens and primary texts?
2. Select your motivating idea from the worksheet distributed in class and report it in your letter. What is your motive?
3. How well do you feel you have represented and engaged with your lens text?
4. How well do you feel you have performed a close reading of your primary text?
5. What are the biggest problems you're having at this point in the writing process? What have you accomplished most successfully?
6. What's the number one concern about your essay—thesis, structure, use of evidence, persuasiveness, style, and so on—that you'd like your reader(s) to focus their comments on for you?
7. When you revise, what's the one biggest thing you intend to focus on? How?

## Essay 1 Peer Review

Your goal during peer review is to offer the writer constructive comments that will help them revise—literally to “see again”—from a fresh perspective. This is an opportunity to help your partner become a better writer by pushing for true revision, rather than cosmetic tweaking. As you carefully read each essay you have been given, write marginal notes to the writer on anything that puzzles you or anything that you consider particularly strong, explaining why. We will talk more in class about what makes for effective feedback.

After you have marked it up, read the essay one more time and then write a letter that you upload to LATTE and append on the writers’ Google Doc. Please include the following:

- A greeting (i.e. their name) and a signature (your name)
- Something you especially liked about their essay, maybe even more than one thing.
- What you think their argument is (don’t simply copy-paste their thesis, write it in your own words!).
- Respond to their cover letter and any questions they had for their reviewers.
- Identify any aspects of the paper that confused you or where you got lost.
- A prioritized to-do list of 2-3 elements to focus on that will most improve the paper upon revision. Be sure to describe the issue and say why it needs revision and maybe even make a suggestion for revision.
  - a. Focus on the most important “higher order” elements like thesis/motive/evidence/analysis/structure rather than “lower order” elements like style/grammar, unless they *actively and consistently* interfere with the more important elements.

## **Essay 1 Revision and Cover Letter**

Each time you hand in a revision for this course, you'll attach a cover letter (1 page single-spaced) to the front of your essay. For this assignment, please answer the following questions and discuss any other concerns you have.

1. What is your thesis? How has it changed from draft to revision?
2. What other changes have you made? Why?
3. What are you most pleased about in this revision?
4. What would you work on, if you had the chance to keep revising?
5. What was the most challenging in your drafting and revision process? How did you approach those challenges?