

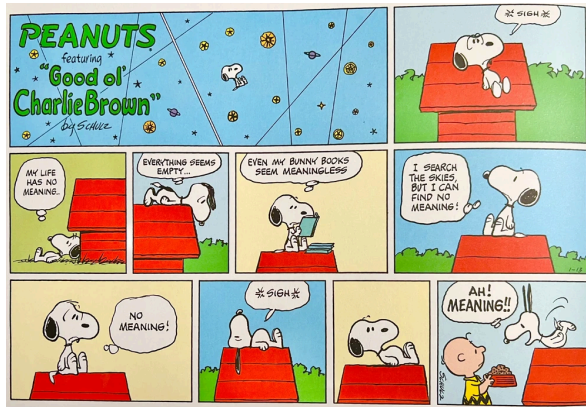
# PHIL 170: Philosophy and Popular Culture

**Meeting Times and Location:** M/W 4:00-5:15 in Goodman (formerly Maple) Hall 219

**Instructor:** Dr. Drew Stewart (they/them/theirs or he/him/his)

**Email:** [andrew.stewart@csun.edu](mailto:andrew.stewart@csun.edu) . I will aim to reply to emails with the **name of the course** and your section time or section number in the subject line within two business days.

**Drop-In (Office) Hours:** M/W 11-1:30 in Sierra Tower 533. During these times you may show up, without an appointment, to discuss anything related to the course. Please email me if you would like to meet outside this time or without others present. I'm also happy to meet on Zoom.



*Peanuts* by Charles M. Schulz,  
January 13, 1974

Image source:  
[https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/January\\_1974\\_comic\\_strips?file=January\\_13th\\_1974.jpg](https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/January_1974_comic_strips?file=January_13th_1974.jpg)

**Catalog Description:** Introduction to the philosophical analysis of popular culture, including the examination of philosophical themes in TV shows, music, games, film, or other popular media. Topics might include the moral, aesthetic, and political value of mass culture, or the philosophy of video games, comic books, food, fashion, or street art. (Available for General Education, C1 Arts or C2 Humanities.)

**Further Details:** Welcome to Philosophy and Popular Culture! In this version of the course, we will critically engage with popular culture, especially film, to introduce and explore fundamental philosophical questions. We will discuss eight main questions, more or less in this order:

What is **knowledge**?

How are our **minds and bodies** related?

What does **morality** require?

How does **oppression** operate?

What is **love**?

How should we cope with **loss**?

What makes a work of **art** valuable?

How can we live **meaningful lives**?

Alongside readings on these topics by philosophers, we will watch several full movies and a wide range of clips from movies and TV. We will also watch some short-form videos and study a few songs. You will have opportunities to bring the popular culture you like into our discussions.

This course will be a fun way to learn about philosophy and practice critical thinking, reading, and discussion skills. It will also help you develop your own taste in movies and your ability to analyze them from a philosophical perspective. I hope that each of you will depart from the course with at least one new idea that can help you make an important life decision someday.

**Learning Objectives:** This is an Arts and Humanities GE course. For more about GE requirements, please see <https://catalog.csun.edu/general-education/> . The goal of Arts and Humanities: “Students will understand and engage with the diversity of human knowledge, discourse and achievements of their own and other cultures as they are expressed in the visual and performing arts, literatures, religions, histories, philosophies, and/or thought traditions.”

*Humanities Learning Objective 1:* Explain and reflect critically upon the human search for meaning and values within and across the human experience, as expressed in the arts, literatures, religions, philosophies, and/or thought traditions.

*Humanities Learning Objective 2:* Analyze, interpret and reflect critically upon creative expression, discourse, or thought traditions from diverse perspectives.

*Humanities Learning Objective 3:* Demonstrate the ability to engage and reflect upon their intellectual and creative development within the humanities.

*Arts Learning Objective 2:* Produce individual or collaborative artistic work.

*Arts Learning Objective 5:* Analyze, interpret, and reflect critically upon the visual/performing arts or creative writing from a variety of diverse perspectives.

**Technological Requirements:** Word processing, PDF viewing, email, Canvas, device for watching and recording video.

**Required Materials:** Please bring pen/pencil and paper to every class session. Zero textbook costs. All course readings will be available via Canvas. All of the required out-of-class film viewings are linked on Canvas to a resource called Swank Digital Campus.

**Attendance:** Attendance at each class session is required, with some exceptions.

If you are ill, please get some rest and do not come to class.

If you have any concerns about attendance, including for religious holidays, CSUN-sponsored activities, family obligations, etc., please let me know ASAP.

Excused absences will be considered on a case-by-case basis. They excuse you from that day's in-class activities and quiz if there is one.

**Important note about a possible work stoppage during the semester.** The California Faculty Association (the union that represents all CSU faculty, including lecturer faculty, tenure-line faculty, coaches, counselors, and librarians) is in the midst of a difficult contract dispute with the CSU system-wide administration. In response to the CSU management's stance, it is possible that the faculty union will call a strike or other work stoppage this term. I promise to inform the class as soon as possible of any disruption to our class meeting schedule. For further information about the issues involved in the strike, please see the resources at: [www.calfac.org](http://www.calfac.org) and [www.cfabargaining.org](http://www.cfabargaining.org).

**Disability and Accessibility:** I am committed to providing students with equal access to this course. **If you are struggling because of a medical condition, a life circumstance, or reasons it is hard to put into words, I encourage you to reach out to me.**

At CSUN, Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) has an official accommodation process that is helpful for students with disabilities: <https://www.csun.edu/dres/student-disability-services/accommodation-procedures>.

For information and resources from Student Services and Support, please see <https://www.csun.edu/student-life/student-services-support>.

I will honor all official accommodations. I encourage you to contact me at any point through the process, and you are welcome to disclose whatever you are comfortable disclosing.

**Classroom Technology Policy.** The **use of laptops, cell phones, tablets, etc. is not permitted in this class** unless (1) it is a specific occasion that the instructor tells you about or (2) you have permission due to documented accommodations from Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES). If you need to deal with an important call or text, please step out of the classroom. Using devices in any way that detracts from your and others' engagement in the course will result in lost points on in-class portions of your grade.

**Audio, image, and/or video recording of class sessions is not permitted** unless (1) it is a specific occasion that the instructor tells you about or (2) you have permission due to documented accommodations from Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES).

**Grades:** Course grades will be determined using the following scale:

|    |          |    |                 |
|----|----------|----|-----------------|
| A  | 95-100   | C  | 73-76.99        |
| A- | 90-94.99 | C- | 70-72.99        |
| B+ | 87-89.99 | D+ | 67-69.99        |
| B  | 83-86.99 | D  | 63-66.99        |
| B- | 80-82.99 | D- | 60-62.99        |
| C+ | 77-79.99 | F  | 59.99 and below |

| Assignments                                                     | % of Final Grade |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Introductory Video                                              | 5%               |
| Movie Takes (6, one skip, 2% each)                              | 10%              |
| Reading Annotation Assignments (8, one skip, $\approx$ 2% each) | 15%              |
| In-Class Short Reflections (most class periods)                 | 5%               |
| In-Class Quizzes (14, four skips, 1% each)                      | 10%              |
| In-Class Activities and Discussion                              | 15%              |
| Creative Project Final                                          | 15%              |
| Creative Project Proposal                                       | 5%               |
| In-Person Final Exam                                            | 20%              |

**Introductory Video (5%):** This assignment is due on 9/2 at 3 PM. Like all of our out-of-class assignments, please submit your work on Canvas. Please make a 4-5 minute video. First, introduce yourself. Then, I would like you to pick one of your favorite movies, TV shows, singers, influencers, etc. (anything from popular culture). Describe in your own style—as if we are having a conversation—why you like it/them *and* your opinion about what it/they has/have to say concerning one of the eight questions listed on page 1 of the syllabus. There is no need for anything fancy. If you have any topics that you are excited to talk about in class, I encourage you to mention them. \*If you have questions or concerns about the course, you may mention them in the video. However, you will need to email me in order to guarantee a direct response to your questions or concerns.\*

**Movie Takes (10%):** These regularly scheduled video submission assignments are about the films you are required to watch out of class. Each should be 3-5 minutes long (3-5 minutes of you speaking), ideally filmed right after you watch the film, in which you share any and all of your thoughts on the film *and* your opinion about what it has to say concerning one of the eight questions listed on page 1 of the syllabus. There is no need for anything fancy. Please speak in your own style, as if we are having a conversation. The movies (*Ghost in the Shell*, *Get Out*, *Into the Spider-Verse*, *Barbie*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *Pan's Labyrinth*) are linked on Canvas and viewable on Swank Digital Campus. You may *skip* one Movie Take. Anything you submit will be graded.

**Reading Annotation Assignments (15%):** Annotating—marking up a text with highlights, underlining, comments, etc.—helps you “talk” to the text. These regularly scheduled assignments are paired with required philosophy readings, but only on weeks when there is no movie to watch outside of class. You must submit these using Canvas’s annotation tool. You may *skip* one Reading Annotation Assignment. Anything you submit will be graded.

Each Reading Annotation Assignment is graded out of 10. If my answers to all of these questions are “yes,” you’re very likely to get 9/10 or 10/10.

1. Do the markings added to the text through Canvas **make sense**?
2. Do the markings realistically **follow your “journey”** through the text?
3. Would the annotations **help a stranger figure out what you were thinking and feeling** as you read?
4. Are **“easier” methods such as underlining, highlighting, stars, etc. used selectively** to identify important claims?
5. Is there **at least one “thoughtful comment” per full page** of the reading? A thoughtful comment could be, for example, an interesting open-ended question, example, comparison or contrast, critique, real-world connection, or relevant personal anecdote.
6. Could at least some of the thoughtful comments **get a good conversation going if you said them out loud**?

**In-Class Short Reflections (5%):** I will regularly ask you, often at the start of class, to write on a specific topic for a few minutes to prepare for discussion. You are required to bring pen/pencil and paper for this purpose. If you do this whenever you’re present, you’ll get full credit in this category. **Please write legibly, since I may collect and grade these reflections without notice.**

**In-Class Quizzes (10%):** There will be 14 very short quizzes about required out-of-class reading, viewing, and listening assignments. They will be unannounced, but there will be roughly one per week. The quizzes must be completed via pen/pencil and paper at the beginning of class without the use of any notes or electronic devices. Each quiz will take 5-10 minutes. **There are no make-up quizzes for those who are late to class.**

You may use up to four skips on the quizzes, with no grade penalty, to account for absences. In addition, after doing a quiz you may decide not to turn it in, which will count towards your four passes. Turning a quiz in means it will be graded.

**In-Class Activities and Discussion (15%):** For actively contributing to in-class assignments and discussion, you will gain one check mark each week. Here are some ways to actively contribute:

- (1) asking or answering questions relevant to the material being discussed;
- (2) making comments relevant to the material being discussed;
- (3) collaborating on group activities in class;
- (4) coming to drop-in hours and speaking to me;
- (5) emailing me with questions or comments about the course material.

Grading aside, participation will help you, me, and everyone else learn and benefit from this experience. I hope to make class discussions interesting and fun, so that you *want* to participate. As a student I often struggled with speaking up in class. If speaking up in class is something that concerns you for any reason, I encourage you to contact me.

In this course we will investigate some of the most fundamental and difficult questions out there. All of us, myself included, will have moments of confusion and frustration. There is no shame in being wrong, or not knowing exactly what to say. It is important through everything that we all

try our best, treat each other with respect and compassion, and pay attention to what others are saying. These are preconditions for In-Class Activities and Discussion credit.

**Creative Project Final (15%):** This creative project will be the capstone of your work in the course and can take a variety of forms. It should not be an essay. It could be a piece of creative writing, a video or podcast, an art piece, etc. More information about this project will be provided later. It will be due near the end of the semester.

**Creative Project Proposal (5%):** You are required to describe your project to me ahead of time and receive approval before you proceed. More information about what is required for the proposal will be provided later. The proposal will be due in the middle of the semester.

**In-Person Final Exam (20%):** There will be an in-person final exam during the scheduled time on 12/14 from 5:30-7:30 in our regular classroom. If you are engaged in this course all the way through by consistently doing the readings, participating in discussions, and completing the assignments, you are likely to do well on the final exam.

**Late Policy:** Assignments receive a one letter grade deduction per day late. 5 minutes to 23 hours and 59 minutes late counts as 1 day, 24 hours to 47 hours and 59 minutes late counts as 2 days, etc. If you are worried about a deadline, I encourage you to reach out to me as soon as possible. I am open to extensions, but you need to reach out to me ASAP. I may require you to send me whatever you have done so far in a timely manner.

For reasons of fairness, it is your responsibility to make sure that your assignments are successfully submitted to Canvas on time. It is worth it to double check.

**Academic Integrity:** Do not present work that is not your own as if it is your own. A low score on Turnitin or related sites is not enough if there is other strong evidence that your work is derived from sources you do not cite. **Using AI resources such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and/or Grammarly to summarize readings; brainstorm and organize ideas; draft, generate, or revise written work; or for any other purpose that is not directly related to an official accommodation, is not permitted in this course.** If you have questions about my expectations or what counts as academic dishonesty, it is your responsibility to ask me before you submit your work. See the CSUN policies here: <https://catalog.csun.edu/policies/academic-integrity-policy/>.

### **Additional Class Rules:**

Please treat everyone in the course with respect and compassion.

Please raise your hand and wait to be called on before speaking in class.

Please engage in discussion in good faith: aim to learn, not just to win an argument.

Please cover your mouth and/or wear a mask when coughing or sneezing.

Please do not eat in class. If this policy is an issue for any reason, please contact me.

## Schedule of Reading/Viewing/Listening

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Week 1</b>                   | Course Introduction                                                                                                                             |
| 8/24 8/26                       | In-class viewing: TBD.                                                                                                                          |
|                                 | Out-of-class reading: please read the syllabus carefully and familiarize yourself with Canvas.                                                  |
| <b>UNIT 1: MINDS AND BODIES</b> |                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Week 2</b>                   | Doubt, Skepticism, and Knowledge                                                                                                                |
| 8/31 9/2                        | In-class viewing: clips from <i>The Matrix</i> (Swank Digital Campus) and <i>The Truman Show</i> (Swank Digital Campus).                        |
|                                 | In-class reading: excerpts from David <b>Chalmers</b> , “ <i>The Matrix</i> as Metaphysics,” excerpts (PDF pages 1-3 and 11-13).                |
|                                 | Introductory video due.                                                                                                                         |
| due 9/2 at 3 PM                 | Out-of-class reading: René <b>Descartes</b> , <i>Discourse on Method</i> , parts 1-4 (book pages 1-22).                                         |
|                                 | <b>Descartes</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.                                                                                             |
| <b>Week 3</b>                   | Consciousness and Personal Identity                                                                                                             |
| x 9/9                           | In-class viewing: TBD (maybe clips from a <i>Star Trek</i> series).                                                                             |
|                                 | Out-of-class viewing: <b><i>Ghost in the Shell</i></b> , original film (Swank Digital Campus) (1h 22m).                                         |
|                                 | Out-of-class reading: Peter <b>Suderman</b> , “The original Ghost in the Shell is iconic anime, and a rich philosophical text” (PDF pages 1-6). |
| due 9/9 at 3 PM                 | <b><i>Ghost in the Shell</i></b> Movie Take due.                                                                                                |
| <b>Week 4</b>                   | Emotions                                                                                                                                        |
| 9/14 9/16                       | In-class viewing: clips from <i>Inside Out</i> (Swank Digital Campus) and <i>Inside Out 2</i> (Swank Digital Campus).                           |
|                                 | Out-of-class reading: Martha C. <b>Nussbaum</b> , “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” (book pages 183-196).                         |
| due 9/16 at 3 PM                | <b>Nussbaum</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.                                                                                              |

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| <b>Week 5</b>       | Free Will, Freedom, and Oppression                                                                                                |
| 9/21 9/23           | In-class viewing: clips from <i>Minority Report</i> (YouTube).                                                                    |
|                     | Out-of-class viewing: <b>Get Out</b> (Swank Digital Campus) (1h 44m).                                                             |
| due 9/23<br>at 3 PM | Out-of-class reading: W.E.B. <b>Du Bois</b> , “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” from <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (book pages 9-16). |
|                     | <b>Get Out</b> Movie Take due.                                                                                                    |

## UNIT 2: RIGHTS AND WRONGS

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Week 6</b>        | Moral Theories                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 9/28 9/30            | In-class viewing: clips from <i>The Good Place</i> episodes “The Trolley Problem” and “Don’t Let the Good Life Pass You By” (DVD).                                                  |
| due 9/30<br>at 3 PM  | Out-of-class reading: Peter <b>Singer</b> , “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (journal pages 229-243).                                                                              |
|                      | <b>Singer</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Week 7</b>        | Role Models and the Ethics of Fame                                                                                                                                                  |
| 10/5 10/7            | In-class viewing: clips from <i>KPop Demon Hunters</i> (YouTube) and <i>Perfect Blue</i> (YouTube).                                                                                 |
|                      | Out-of-class viewing: <b>Into the Spider-Verse</b> (Swank Digital Campus) (1h 56m).                                                                                                 |
| due 10/7<br>at 3 PM  | Out-of-class reading: Maria <b>Vaccarezza</b> , Michel <b>Croce</b> , and Matilde <b>Liberti</b> , “The moral of the stories: can influencers be moral exemplars?” (PDF pages 1-5). |
|                      | <b>Into the Spider-Verse</b> Movie Take due.                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Week 8</b>        | Justice, Injustice, and Anger                                                                                                                                                       |
| 10/12 10/14          | In-class viewing: clips from <i>Anger Management</i> (YouTube), <i>Avatar: The Last Airbender</i> (YouTube), and <i>Star Wars</i> films (YouTube).                                  |
| due 10/14<br>at 3 PM | Out-of-class reading: Myisha <b>Cherry</b> , <i>The Case for Rage</i> , chapter 1 excerpt and chapter 6 (PDF pages 1-33).                                                           |
|                      | <b>Cherry</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Week 9</b>        | Oppression and Social Progress                                                                                                                                                      |
| 10/19 10/21          | In-class viewing: TBD (maybe music videos).                                                                                                                                         |

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| due 10/21<br>at 3 PM | <p>Out-of-class viewing: <b>Barbie</b> (Swank Digital Campus) (1h 54m).</p> <p>Out-of-class reading: Serene <b>Khader</b>, “<i>Barbie</i> and the Subversion of White Feminist Fantasy that Wasn’t” (book pages 45-55).</p> <p><b>Barbie</b> Movie Take due.</p> |
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### UNIT 3: WHAT IS LOVE?

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|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Week 10</b>                             | Romantic Love and Love in General                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 10/26 10/28                                | <p>In-class viewing: clips from <i>Love is Blind</i> (YouTube) and other reality shows.</p> <p>In-class listening: song(s) about love.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| due 10/28<br>at 3 PM                       | <p>Out-of-class reading: Harry <b>Frankfurt</b>, <i>Reasons of Love</i>, chapter 2 (book pages 35-68).</p> <p><b>Frankfurt</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Week 11</b>                             | Heartbreak and Remembrance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 11/2 11/4                                  | <p>In-class viewing of clips from <i>Up</i> (Swank Digital Campus) and <i>Coco</i> (Swank Digital Campus).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| due 11/4<br>at 3 PM                        | <p>Out-of-class viewing: <b><i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i></b> (Swank Digital Campus) (1h 47m).</p> <p>Out-of-class reading: Jennifer <b>Ouellette</b>, “<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> and the philosophy of self, identity, and memory,” <i>Ars Technica</i> interview with Jenann <b>Ismael</b> (PDF pages 1-12).</p> <p><b><i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i></b> Movie Take due.</p> |
| <b>Week 12</b>                             | Familial Love and Tradition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 11/9 x                                     | <p>In-class viewing of clips from <i>Encanto</i> (Swank Digital Campus) and <i>Everything Everywhere All at Once</i> (Swank Digital Campus).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| due <b>11/13</b><br>b/c holiday<br>at 3 PM | <p>Out-of-class reading: Carlos Alberto <b>Sánchez</b>, <i>Blooming in the Ruins</i>, sections 3, 20, 23, 26, and 27 (book pages 27-39, 197-206, 225-230, and 253-268)</p> <p><b>Sánchez</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                             |

### UNIT 4: THE MEANING OF LIFE

|                |                                                                                                       |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Week 13</b> | Technology and the Future of Humanity                                                                 |
| 11/16 11/18    | <p>In-class viewing: clips from <i>Her</i> (Swank Digital Campus) and <i>Severance</i> (YouTube).</p> |

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| due 11/18<br>at 3 PM                    | <p>In-class viewing: class playlist of short-form videos.</p> <hr/> <p>Out-of-class reading: C. Thi <b>Nguyen</b>, <i>The Score</i>, chapters 1 and 3 (book pages 3-25 and 41-51).</p> <p><b>Nguyen</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Week 14</b>                          | The Value of Art and Imagination                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 11/23 11/25<br><br>due 11/25<br>at 3 PM | <p>In-class viewing: clips from <i>Sinners</i> (DVD).</p> <hr/> <p>Out-of-class viewing: <b><i>Pan's Labyrinth / El laberinto del fauno</i></b> (Swank Digital Campus) (1h 59m).</p> <p>Out-of-class reading: Tanya <b>Fedak</b>, "Guillermo del Toro Says There Is 'Absolutely No Goddamn AI' in 'Pan's Labyrinth' 3D Re-Release: 'We're Protecting a Lineage of Art'" (PDF pages 1-2).</p> <p><b><i>Pan's Labyrinth</i></b> Movie Take due.</p> |
| <b>Week 15</b>                          | Death and the Meaning of Life                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 11/30 12/2<br><br>due 12/2<br>at 3 PM   | <p>In-class viewing: clips from <i>The Good Place</i> episode <i>Jeremy Bearimy</i> (DVD) and <i>Everything Everywhere All at Once</i> (Swank Digital Campus).</p> <hr/> <p>Out-of-class reading: Susan <b>Wolf</b>, "The Meanings of Lives" (PDF pages 1-16).</p> <p><b>Wolf</b> Reading Annotation Assignment due.</p>                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Week 16</b>                          | Concluding Discussion                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 12/7 12/9                               | <p>In-class viewing: TBD.</p> <hr/> <p>Out-of-class: prepare for the final exam.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>12/14</b>                            | <b>In-Person Final Exam 5:30-7:30</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |