

# History/HRS 169: Hollywood and America

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## Catalog Description

**HIST/HRS 169. Hollywood and America.** Chronological survey of American films and their cultural significance from the 1890s to the present. Focus on films produced in Hollywood, the contexts in which they were created, and the impact of Hollywood as a mythical place in the development of American culture. 3 units.

The course fulfills Area C4 of the CSUS GE Program. Students will write about 2500 words. Since the paper and the testing require a lot of writing, I do not recommend that freshmen take the course.

## Course Description

This course will survey the **chronological evolution** of American films (produced and marketed mainly in Hollywood) from their beginnings in the 1890s until the present. The course will emphasize the “classic” period of American movies from the 1920s until the mid-1950s, when, organized in the “studio” system, they reached probably the high point of their achievement. We will also look at the “revival” of American films beginning in the 1970s. The course will not deal extensively with the period since then.

The course will stress the contexts in which the movies were made. What were the various **business organizations** that produced, distributed and exhibited the movies, and how did they change? What was the relation of the movies to **technology** – the original photographic and projection technology, the impact of sound in the late 1920s, and the impact of television beginning in the 1950s?

**How were movies made?** What was the role of the producer, the writer, the director, the cinematographer, the actor? How much “freedom” did moviemakers have? In what ways were movies an art and in what ways a business? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the studio system, and of the system (or lack of same) that came after?

What have been the relations between American movies and **American (popular) culture and society**? Did the movies simply reflect popular culture, did they influence it, or did the influence move both ways? What does the star system prevalent in American movies say about our culture? What has been the relationship between the opinions of the dominant culture and the movies? What have been the patterns of  **censorship** in American movies?

What finally was **the achievement of American movies**? Have American moviemakers produced works of great beauty and significance, or has Hollywood been simply an entertainment medium? If the former, what is it about the system that has produced great films? Do limits – the expenditure of large amounts of money, the appeal to the marketplace, the control of producers – actually increase aesthetic productivity?

## Main Course Objectives

- A chronological overview of the historical evolution of American movies from their beginnings to the present.
- Insight into the relationship of Hollywood movies with American culture, society, and history.
- An appreciation of the artistic achievement of Hollywood moviemakers. I aim to expose students to some of the great films of the American cinema.
- Development of students' critical writing skills through writing short essays in class and one analytical thought paper on the work of a major Hollywood filmmaker Martin. Students will get some experience in using films as a text for analysis.

## Course Procedures

In order to make this course a positive experience for students and instructor, we will have the following rules and procedures.

- 1) Please do not stay enrolled in this class if you are not committed to **significant academic work** to learn the material, do well on the tests, and write a good paper. Some students associate a film class with kicking back and eating popcorn. Although I hope that you will have fun, this class expects serious academic effort.
- 2) The instructor will take roll using a **sign-in roll sheet**. I take your attendance in class very seriously (see below). Poor attendance will significantly lower your final grade in the course. Good attendance can raise it.
- 3) Please **minimize coming late** to class and leaving early, since it is quite disruptive of class proceedings. If you have to leave early, please say something to the instructor, take a seat close to an exit, and leave as quietly as possible.
- 4) Of course turn off your **cell phones** when in class; and any cell phone in sight during exams will induce apoplexy in the instructor and the graduate assistant.
- 5) If you use a **laptop computer** in class, please use it for some class-related activity (taking notes, checking film credits on imdb.com or reviews on mrqe.com, etc.) and not for emailing, shopping for shoes, or surfing the Web! Such activity is disrespectful of your fellow students and disruptive of the class, not to mention a complete waste of time.
- 6) Students sitting in the back of the class are expected to be just as attentive, quiet and **respectful** of other students as are the students sitting in the front. If someone in the class is disturbed by commotion in the class, please raise your hand and say something.

## Required Readings/Video Texts

### a) Required Reading:

Robert Sklar, **Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies**. A good short (and inexpensive) text emphasizing the interaction between Hollywood and U.S. culture and history. Excellent on the beginning and middle part of the history; not so satisfactory on the last part, where the author indulges his own proclivities.

Eileen Whitfield, **Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood**. Although a fairly long book, an entertaining biography of film star Mary Pickford and her relationships with Hollywood and the American public from about 1910 to about 1940.

Lillian Ross, **Picture**. Compelling and celebrated book about the making of “The Red Badge of Courage” (1951) by director John Huston. Keen insights into the operation of the Hollywood system at the end of the studio era, for good and for bad; a tribute to John Huston. Often cited as one of the most admired works of American journalism.

Andy Dougan, **Martin Scorsese**. A survey of Scorsese’s career from the beginnings to the late 1990s. The book quotes liberally from Scorsese’s interviews, and includes in the appendix the initial reviews of his films from *Variety*; judgments of these reviews should be complemented with others. (Because only a limited number of copies are available, the instructor will designate an alternative book.)

All of these books are available at on-line book sellers like Amazon, where they can often be purchased for less than Bookstore prices, especially if you are willing to take used copies. The Sklar and Whitfield books will be needed by the second week of the course.

There are many excellent reference materials that you can access by asking a reference librarian in the university library. Some books worth being familiar with (not required) are:

Louis Giannetti, **Understanding Movies**.

Ephraim Katz, **The Film Encyclopedia**.

Tom Schatz, **The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era**. Impossible to praise this book too much for the study of Hollywood from about 1930 to 1955!

Gerald Mast, **A Short History of the Movies** is an always insightful analysis of the films of the world, including the USA.

Louis Giannetti, Scott Eyman, **Flashback: A Brief History of American Film**.

### b) There will be extensive course materials posted on the **course website**.

The website can be found by going to the instructor’s webpage: <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/craftg>. For this course you need **high speed computer access** to the worldwide web. The text materials you can download are usually in Word or Adobe Acrobat format; the video materials will be in Real and Windows Media formats.

i) Web materials will include class **‘handouts’** – study questions for the assigned books, study questions for the exams, suggested questions for the short essays, mandatory critical resources on core materials, and miscellaneous optional materials of interest.

ii) You will also be expected to view **video** materials posted on WebCT. Most of these are abbreviated versions of classic movies. Some of them you will be required to view outside of class; some will be there for review of clips already seen in class. To view these materials you will need a high speed

Internet connection; if you don't have one on your personal computer, you can use a computer in a university computer lab.

To access the video clips, you need to click the WebCT link on the course webpage, sign on to WebCT with your Saalink ID and password. When you click on the assigned video clip, it will be streamed to your computer using RealPlayer or Windows Media. If you don't have RealPlayer, you can download it at <http://www.realplayerweb.com/co/real/realplayerweb/?sid=M2AG0002cGS>. If the clip is in the wmv format, you will need Windows Media Player.

If you use a Mac computer, you will have to view the wmv files in a university computer lab or on a friend's computer. (Some Mac users have old copies of Windows Media Player that might work.) The wmv files are noted in the WebCT video clip page.

For each exam I will post a list of required film clips for viewing outside of class.

**Note:** Not all the Web materials for the course are on WebCT. The film clips and the quizzes are on WebCT and are reserved for students participating in the course. The 'printed' materials (Course summaries, Test Questions, etc.) are on the regular course webpage and available to anyone.

Excellent **online reference sources** include:

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). Has a wealth of factual information about anyone or anything to do with the movies. It generally does not include evaluation of movies. This site is where you usually start when researching film.

[www.mrqe.com](http://www.mrqe.com). Consists of reviews of most movies, but with much greater detail and variety since the mid-1980s.

[www.AFI.com](http://www.AFI.com). The site of the American Film Institute. Excellent information and insights, including AFI's '100 Greatest American Films.'

[www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org). Tom Dirks' excellent long analyses of "the greatest films," as well as a lot of other information and opinion such as 'Greatest Films Quotes' and 'Greatest Box Office Hits of All Time.'

[www.tmc.com](http://www.tmc.com). Wonderful source of information and insights on especially classic films.

In this class you must become familiar with at least the first two sites above.

c) You will also be required to view **three Martin Scorsese films** outside class (or the films of another director; see the writing assignment below). You may rent them from a video store; buy them from an Internet merchant such as [www.deepdiscountdvd.com](http://www.deepdiscountdvd.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) (more expensive); buy them used from the used DVD section of Amazon, which is usually cheaper. A few of them may also be available in the University Media Center (first floor of the University Library).

## Course Requirements

To complete the course, you will have to do the following:

1) You will be required to write a paper on the **films of Martin Scorsese**. The question(s), which will deal with the themes and film style of the author, will be distributed later. The due date will be late in the semester. To complete the paper, you will be required to view three Scorsese films.

If you prefer, you might write a similar paper on the work of another famous American director. John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Ernst Lubitsch, Howard Hawks, Fritz Lang, Orson Welles, Billy Wilder, Frank

Capra, Samuel Fuller, Otto Preminger, Preston Sturges, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, Brian DePalma, Spike Lee, the Coen Brothers come to mind. If you decide on this option, please **speak to the instructor** before beginning your work.

Further instructions for this assignment are available on the course website under “Assignment for Scorsese Paper”.

2) You will also have **three tests** spaced at roughly equal intervals throughout the course – check the Course Outline for dates. The exams will consist of two short essays drawn from a list of study questions posted on the website as the course progresses; and four short identifications also drawn from a list from the website. You will write in a **large blue book** and have a choice of questions to write on. I or the graduate assistant will conduct a study session outside of regular class time to help you prepare for the test. The third test will not be cumulative, but will be based only on the course material covered since the second test. When you come to class for the test, bring a **blank** blue book with you; I will verify its pristine condition before you begin the exam.

One of the essay questions offered for each exam will be based on film clips viewed by the student independently outside of class time.

3) You will have six **home video assignments**, two in each course unit. These assignments will be viewed through WebCT. I will assign a video clip (20-25 minutes each) located in the course’s Web CT file. You will have about three days to view the video clips and to answer a few short questions in an on-line WebCT quiz. You will receive a maximum of eight points for each on-line assignment successfully completed. To receive credit you **must** view the assignment (the instructor will check this through WebCT) and answer the questions correctly.

4) Since I believe that a great deal of the learning in a course occurs in class, your grade will be significantly affected by your class attendance. I will take class attendance, and it will count in your grade computation. Only **formal written explanations** (work or medical related) will be accepted as excuses for class absences. The first two or three absences would not significantly affect your grade.

Please take the attendance requirements seriously, since the attendance points can significantly raise or lower your final grade in the class.

## Your Grade

I will calculate your grade according to the following:

- 1) Each exam will be worth 120 points, 40 for each of the two essays, 40 for the IDs. (Total 360 points for three exams)
- 2) The film research paper will be worth also 120 points.
- 3) Each on-line video assignment is worth 8 points for a maximum total of 48 points.
- 4) Class attendance will be worth 60 points, according to **roughly** the following scale:

|      |           |           |
|------|-----------|-----------|
| Miss | 0-1 class | 60 points |
|      | 2 classes | 57        |
|      | 3         | 54        |

|       |    |
|-------|----|
| 4     | 48 |
| 5     | 41 |
| 6     | 33 |
| 7     | 26 |
| 8     | 20 |
| 9     | 15 |
| 10-15 | 5  |
| >16   | 0  |

There is thus a total of 588 points in the course. The points will convert to final grades according to approximately the following scale:

|         |           |
|---------|-----------|
| 529-588 | A, A-     |
| 470-528 | B+, B, B- |
| 412-469 | C+, C, C- |
| 353-411 | D+, D, D- |
| <353    | F         |

I reserve the right to raise certain grades in the interest of justice.

## Tentative Course Outline

Even with the course's extensive home assignments, the focus of learning in this course is in the classroom.

Class time will be devoted to lecture and structured discussion based on assigned readings and to viewing film clips illustrative of the material being discussed; I will choose the clips as we go along. We will not view entire films in class time since they are so long they leave us no time to talk. At 68 minutes the "Red Badge of Courage" (1951) may be the only exception. I will assign some of the video viewing to be done at home.

Dates and assignments are by week rather than date; they are approximate and subject to modification. There will be web assignments in addition to the readings listed. Test dates, due dates, and reading assignments are in bold.

### Week Beginning (Only the Monday date is recorded; the dates are approximate)

Sept 3 Introduction to the course. "The Hollywood Style".

Sept 8 The social and technological origins of film.  
Nickelodeons and early short films  
Early film styles: Lumière, Méliès, Porter, etc.

Early business: the nickelodeon, Edison's grab for monopoly (The Trust), early censorship, the emergence of the Independents.

**Sklar, chs. 1, 2, 3.**

- Sept 15 D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille. The beginnings of the feature film: Griffith as the “Father of American Film”.  
‘The House that Adolph Zukor Built:’ the origins and development of the studio system.
- Sklar, 4, 9.**  
**Discussion on Whitfield, 1-111.**
- Sept 22 The Great Silent Comics: Lloyd, Arbuckle, Keaton, Chaplin. The art of physical comedy in pre-sound Hollywood.  
The middle career of Mary Pickford.
- Sklar, ch. 7.**  
**Discussion on Whitfield, 112-249.**
- Sept 29 Melodrama and drama in 1920s Hollywood: Rudolf Valentino and Greta Garbo.  
The later career of Mary Pickford
- Sklar, ch. 6.**  
**Discussion on Whitfield, 250-374.**
- Oct 6 **\*\*\* Exam #1 \*\*\***
- Hollywood culture and dealing with censorship: Will Hays and MPPDA.
- Sklar, chs. 5, 8.**  
**Begin reading Ross.**  
**Web: “The Sins of Hollywood”**
- Oct 13 Censorship in Hollywood: the Production Code (1930) and the Breen Office (1934).  
The studios; how the studio system worked; studio styles; pre-Code Hollywood.
- Sklar, chs. 10, 14.**  
**Read Ross**
- Oct 20 The 1930s: the Golden Age of Hollywood: from the Age of Turbulence to the Age of Order.  
Note on Hollywood Goes to War.
- Sklar, chs. 11, 12.**  
**Web: Arthur Schlesinger, “When the Movies Really Counted”**  
**Continue with Ross**
- Oct 27 Hollywood at the end of the studio era: John Huston, Dore Schary, L.B. Mayer and Nicholas Schenck and the making of ‘The Red Badge of Courage’ at MGM (1951).
- Finish Ross.**

- Nov 3            Hollywood at war before and after 1945 – World War II and the Cold War.  
                   ‘Film noir’  
                   Hollywood and the Red Scare through the middle 1950s.
- Web: Testimony of John Howard Larson to House Un-American Activities  
 Committee, 1947**  
**Sklar, ch. 15.**
- Nov 10            **\*\*\* Exam #2 \*\*\***
- The postwar crisis of Hollywood: Divestiture and changing popular culture – television.
- Sklar, ch. 16.**
- Nov 17            The career of Martin Scorsese; personal statement in film and the building of a  
 commercial career.
- Finish reading on Scorsese (or other director).**
- Nov 24            **\*\*\* Scorsese Paper due \*\*\***
- The Western as a postwar genre.  
                   Hollywood and popular culture in the 1950s.
- Web: Robert Warshow, “The Westerner”**  
**Sklar, ch. 17.**
- Dec 1             The New American movies: appealing to youth in the late 1960s.  
                   The 1970s – the Film School Generation and the blockbuster.
- Sklar, ch. 19.**
- Dec 8             Films of the Reagan Era: blockbusters; the home viewing revolution.  
                   The contribution of the independents – the 1990s.
- Sklar, chs. 20, 21.**
- Mon, Dec 15    **\*\*\* Exam #3 (not comprehensive) at 12:45 PM \*\*\***

**Conclusion:** This course should be a lot of fun. But I am asking you to do some real work. If you both enjoy yourselves and do the assigned work, I think you will have a satisfying learning experience.