History/HRS 169: Hollywood and America

Fall 2010
TR 3:00-4:15; Amador 153

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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 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. Students will get some experience in using films as a text for analysis.

**A Word to the Wise**

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. This class expects you to do the following: come to class about 85% of the time; write an analytical paper on a Hollywood director; view 12 online film clips and take quizzes on them; take two essay-based exams. I hope that you will have fun, but 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). **This is not an on-line course.** If you don’t come to class regularly, your grade will be penalized (see below) and you will miss much valuable material which you will be responsible for on your exams. **Do not take this course unless you plan to come to class regularly.**

3) Please **minimize coming late** to class and leaving early, since it is 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. Students leaving early will be recorded as absent.

4) 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.

5) **Students** should be attentive, quiet and **respectful** of other students. If a student is disturbed by commotion in the class, please say something to the instructor.

6) If you have a serious issue (missed a quiz, exam, etc.) you need to discuss with me, please do it in **person** – talk to me after class or come to see me in my office hours. Smaller things we can take care of via email. I am always open to receiving emails from students.
7) I may sometimes send you an important message to you through email. I will do this through ‘My Sac State’; so please check your email through that site regularly.

**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.


Roger Ebert and Martin Scorsese, *Scorsese by Ebert.* Excellent book containing Ebert’s reviews of all Scorsese’s films, as well as transcripts of several interviews. Only students who intend to write their research papers on Scorsese are required to use this 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.*


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](http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/craftg). For this course you need **high speed computer access** to the worldwide web. Most students will use their own computers; you may of course use computers in the university laboratories. 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 materials on the course website** that you can easily download and print. They include 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.

For instructions on how to access the clips, see the section below under “Course Requirements”.

iii) Excellent online reference sources include:

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. Consists of reviews of most movies, but with much greater detail and variety since the mid-1980s.

www.AFI.com. The site of the American Film Institute. Excellent information and insights, including AFI’s ‘100 Greatest American Films.’

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.’


All students truly interested in film should be familiar with these sources, especially the first two.

c) You will also be required to view three Martin Scorsese films outside class (or the films of another director; see the writing assignment on the course homepage). You may rent them from a video store; buy them from an Internet merchant such as www.deepdiscountdvd.com or 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 list of possible paper topics is posted on the course website. The due date is late in the semester. To complete the paper, you will be required to view three Scorsese films.

If you prefer, you may write a similar paper on the work of another famous American director. Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Ernst Lubitsch, King Vidor, Howard Hawks, Fritz Lang, Orson Welles, Samuel Fuller, Billy Wilder, William Wyler, Frank Capra, Otto Preminger, Preston Sturges, John Huston, Stanley Kubrick, Elia Kazan, Francis Ford Coppola, John Cassavetes, Brian DePalma, Woody Allen, Spike Lee, Tim Burton, the Coen Brothers come to mind. If you decide on this option, please speak to the instructor before beginning your work. I would prefer that you not do your paper on Steven Spielberg or M. Night Shyamalan.

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

2) You will also have two 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 will probably conduct a **study session** outside of regular class time to help you prepare for the test. The second test on the final exam date 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.

3) You will have **12-13 home video assignments**, one for each week except for the midterm and the week that the paper is due. The assignments will be posted on the course webpage. Some of the film clips are in Real format, some in Windows Media. I will assign a video clip (20-25 minutes each) located in the course’s SacCT file along with a couple on-line readings (e.g., articles from Turner Classic Movies or from my own film reviews [on the course website]). You will have about three days to view the video clips and then to answer a few short questions in an on-line SacCT quiz. You will receive a maximum of eleven points for each on-line assignment successfully completed.

4) You will have extra credit opportunities announced in class (come to class!). There will be a deadline toward the middle of the semester and another toward the end.

**Instructions on Viewing Film Clips:**

First log on to SacCT from either the university homepage or the course homepage; and then proceed to the course SacCT page, and then the film clip page.

When you get to the film clip page, you will notice that some of the film clips are in Real format and some in WMV format (the ones that have ‘wmv’ after them).

- Film clips in Real format (no ‘wmv’ after the item) can be viewed easily by just clicking on the item. Of course, you have to have Realplayer installed in your computer. If you don’t have it, you may download it free from the Internet at http://www.realplayerweb.com/co/real/realplayerweb/?sid=M2AG0002cGS.

This procedure is valid for both PCs and Macs.

- If you are viewing a WMV film clip (has ‘wmv’ after the item), it is a little more complicated. Read the following instructions for both PCs and Macs:

  http://www.csus.edu/training/handouts/workshops/ViewingWMV.pdf

Of course, it is possible that you won’t be able to connect with the film clips using your own computer, especially if you are relying on a wireless connection. Wired connections seem to work generally better. If all else fails, use a university PC on campus that is connected to the university network. This always seems to work.

**Note:** Not all the Web materials for the course are on SacCT. The film clips and the quizzes are on SacCT 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. You would normally access the SacCT page through the course webpage.

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 or printed explanations** (work or medical related) will be
accepted as excuses for class absences (no more than two absences will be excused). 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 240 points for two exams).
2) The film research **paper** will be worth also 120 points.
3) Each of the on-line **video assignment** is worth 11 points. You may miss one of the video quizzes with no penalty.
4) **Class attendance** will be worth 60 points, according to the following scale:

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<tr>
<th>Miss</th>
<th>0-1 class</th>
<th>2 classes</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>10-11</th>
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<td>60 points</td>
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5) Additional small assignments and extra credit opportunities.

The final grade will be determined as follows: 1) divide the number of points earned by the number of total points in the course; 2) convert the percentage to a letter grade according to standard percentages – e.g., 90% for an A-, 80% for a B-, etc.

**Taking the quizzes and regular attendance are extremely important for your grade.** Bad grades in this class most often come from not taking enough quizzes and from a poor attendance record.

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 view excerpts from films in class. I may 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. Readings and web assignments will be given in class. Test dates and due dates are in bold.

**Week Beginning (Only the Tuesday date is recorded; the dates are approximate)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Nickelodeons and early short films.</td>
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<td>Sept 7</td>
<td>Early film styles: Lumière, Méliès, Porter, etc.</td>
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<td>Early business: the nickelodeon, Edison’s grab for monopoly (The Trust).</td>
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<td>The emergence of the Independents.</td>
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<td>Sept 14</td>
<td>D. W. Griffith. The beginnings of the feature film: Griffith as the “Father of American Film”</td>
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<td>and the originator of the Hollywood Style.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>‘The House that Adolph Zukor Built:’ the origins and development of the studio system.</td>
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<td>The early career of Mary Pickford.</td>
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<td>Sept 21</td>
<td>The Great Silent Comics: Lloyd, Arbuckle, Keaton, Chaplin. The art of physical comedy</td>
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<td>in pre-sound Hollywood.</td>
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<td>The middle career of Mary Pickford.</td>
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<td>Sept 28</td>
<td>Melodrama and drama in 1920s Hollywood: Rudolf Valentino and Greta Garbo.</td>
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<td>The later career of Mary Pickford.</td>
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<td>Oct 5</td>
<td>Hollywood culture and dealing with censorship: Will Hays and MPPDA.</td>
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<td>Transition to sound film.</td>
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<td>The studios; studio styles; pre-Code Hollywood – the films that upset the Legion of Decency.</td>
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<td>Oct 19</td>
<td>*** Midterm Exam on approximately Oct 19 ***</td>
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<td>The 1930s: the Golden Age of Hollywood: from the Age of Turbulence to the Age of Order.</td>
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<td>Note on Hollywood Goes to War.</td>
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<td>Hollywood at the end of the studio era: John Huston, Dore Schary, L.B. Mayer and Nicholas</td>
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<td>Hollywood at war before and after 1945 – World War II and the Cold War.</td>
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<td>‘Film noir’</td>
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(Nov 11) Veterans’ Day – no class.

Nov 16 *** Scorsese (or other director) Paper due ***


Tu, Dec 14 *** Exam #2 (not comprehensive) 3:00-5:00 PM ***

**Final Note:** This is a very entertaining course that is more fun if you take it seriously. Perform the assignments, come to class with the right attitude, and you will have an enjoyable and profitable semester.