

History/HRS 169: Hollywood and America Spring 2007

TR 12:00-1:15

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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.

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 the coming 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**? 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?

Course Objectives

- A chronological overview of the historical evolution of American movies from their beginnings to the present.
- An understanding of the business, financial and technical environment in which American movies have been made.
- Insight into the impact of American movies on U.S. popular culture, and vice versa.
- Development of students' critical writing skills through writing short essays in class and two analytical thought papers on topics covered in class.
- Development of research and citation skills through the optional completion of a research paper on a significant subject.
- An appreciation of the artistic achievement of Hollywood moviemakers, and of the aesthetic connections between films and the other arts (literature, painting, photography, etc.).

Required Readings/Other 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. popular culture. Excellent on the beginning and middle part of the history; not so satisfactory on the last part, where the author indulges his own proclivities.

Cari Beauchamp, **Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood**. Entertaining and insightful treatment of the life and career of the most successful woman screenwriter in Hollywood between about 1915 and 1935.

Lillian Ross, **Picture**. Compelling 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.

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.

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.

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.

b) There will be extensive course materials posted on the **course website**. It can be found by going to the instructor's webpage: <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/craftg>. For this course you

obviously need computer access to the worldwide web. The course materials you can download are usually in Word or Adobe Acrobat format.

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.

Your instructor is currently trying to install software that will enable you to view film clips or even whole films on your own computers or, if you do not have an up-to-date machine, on a computer in a university computer lab. If this works, you will be asked to view films and film clips before class, thus enabling more extensive class discussion.

Excellent online reference sources include:

www.mrqe.com. Consists of reviews of most movies, but with much greater detail since the mid-1980s.

www.imdb.com. Has a wealth of factual information about anyone or anything to do with the movies. This site is where you usually start.

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.’

c) You will also be required to view **three Martin Scorsese films** outside class. You may rent them from a video store; buy them off an internet merchant such as www.deepdiscountdvd.com or www.amazon.com (more expensive); buy them used from Amazon, which is usually cheaper; or, if they are available, view them in the University Media Center (first floor of the University Library).

Course Requirements

You will have assignments in take-home writing (a short paper) and in-class testing.

a) 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 **Tuesday, May 15**. To complete the paper, you will be required to view three Scorsese films, one from each of the following categories:

Early Films 1967-77

Boxcar Bertha
Mean Streets
Taxi Driver
New York, New York

Middle Period 1980-91

Raging Bull
The King of Comedy
The Last Temptation of Christ
Goodfellas
The Age of Innocence

Late Period 1992-2006

Cape Fear
Casino
The Gangs of New York
The Aviator
The Departed

Your essay should be clearly and correctly written. **Grammar and clear expression** will count! You should focus on answering the question and not narrating or summarizing your sources. The first paragraph should define the issue and suggest your interpretation. Several paragraphs making up the body of the essay should develop your ideas and cite characters, events and ideas from the text to back up your interpretation. You must include some quotations from your sources. You should end up with a short concluding paragraph summarizing your argument or bringing in an interesting new perspective.

Focus on developing your ideas and using the text of your sources to back up and illustrate your argument. **Do not plagiarize** material! When you copy words from a source, you must put them in quotation marks and give a reference (a footnote or endnote). When you paraphrase, there is no need to put your words in quotation marks, but you must give a **reference**. For reference form, you may use any reasonable system; but I suggest you use a simplified version of MLA form, which will be explained briefly in class. History majors should use the Chicago style, if possible. Every paper must have a **Words Cited** or **Bibliography** (even if it contains only a single book) and adequate references. All internet sources consulted must be cited in the Works Cited. These instructions are explained in more detail in the ‘Guidelines for Writing Thought Papers’ posted on the website.

A particular warning about use of internet materials and plagiarism. Do not rely exclusively on internet materials. I am assuming that your principal source will be the assigned Dougan book. If you use websites, be sure to cite them with the following: name of website; the URL (web address); and the date you accessed it. Any student discovered **plagiarizing** significant quantities of web or printed material will receive a low failing grade in that assignment.

b) You will also have **three tests using short essays** spaced at roughly equal intervals throughout the course – check the Course Outline for dates. The exam questions will be drawn from a list of study questions posted on the website as the course progresses. You will write in a blue book and have a choice of questions to write on. The third test will not be cumulative, but will be based only on the course material covered since the second test.

c) Since I believe that a great deal of the learning in a course occurs in class, your grade may be significantly affected by your class participation and especially by your attendance. If you miss more than about 15% of the classes (about one in seven), expect your grade to suffer. In other words, hoard your cuts for that rainy day (illness, auto accident, etc.). If you attend class regularly and take a positive attitude toward class participation, your grade may improve.

Your Grade

I will calculate your grade according to the following:

Three ‘short essay’ exams	70%
One thought paper on Scorsese	30%

And a consideration of your class participation and especially attendance.

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. I decided not to view entire films in class time, since they are so long they leave us no time to talk. The “Red Badge of Courage” (1951) will be the only exception since it is only 68 minutes long. More of the video viewing may be shifted toward personal viewing at home if the technology works out.

As indicated, good attendance and participation in class discussion are important. To encourage your participation, I may assign “specialists” for the reading assignments. Specialists would be expected to have read the assigned material carefully and to help lead the discussion with questions and informed comments.

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 reading listed. Test dates, due dates, and reading assignments are in bold.

Week Beginning (Only the Tuesday date is recorded)

- January 30 Introduction to the course. “The Hollywood Style”.
The social and technological origins of film.
Nickelodeons and early short films.

Sklar, chs. 1, 2.
- February 6 Early film styles: Lumière, Méliès, Porter, etc.
Early business: the nickelodeon, Edison’s grab for monopoly, early censorship,
etc.

Sklar, 33-47
Begin reading Beauchamp
- February 13 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.
Continue Beauchamp
- February 20 The Great Silent Comics: Lloyd, Arbuckle, Keaton, Chaplin. The art of physical
comedy in pre-sound Hollywood.
The life and career of Frances Marion until the early 1920s.

Beauchamp through 189.
Sklar, ch. 7.
- February 27 Melodrama and drama in 1920s Hollywood: Rudolf Valentino and Greta Garbo.
Beauchamp, Part 2 – Later Career of Frances Marion

Sklar, ch. 6.
Beauchamp, 190-378

- March 6 ***** Test #1 *****
 Hollywood culture and dealing with censorship: Will Hays and MPPDA.
- Sklar, chs. 5, 8.**
Begin reading Ross.
Web: “The Sins of Hollywood”
- March 13 The Production Code (1930) and the Breen Office (1934).
 The studios; how the studio system worked.
- WEB: Joan Mellen on “The Mae West Nobody Knows”**
Sklar, chs. 10, 14.
- Continue with Ross**
- March 20 The 1930s: the Golden Age of Hollywood: from the Age of Turbulence to the
 Age of Order.
- Sklar, chs. 11, 12.**
Web: Arthur Schlesinger, “When the Movies Really Counted”
Continue with Ross
- [March 27 **Spring Recess]**
- April 3 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
 (Loew’s Inc.) (1951).
- Finish Ross.**
- April 10 Hollywood at war before and after 1945.
 ‘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.
- April 17 ***** Test #2 *****
 The postwar crisis of Hollywood: Divestiture and changing popular culture –
 television.
- Web: Robert Warshow, “The Westerner”**
Sklar, ch. 16.
- April 24 Achievements of the 1950s; the collapse of Hollywood?
 The late 1960s: the impact of the art house; in search of an audience.
- Begin Dougan; view first Scorsese film**
Sklar, ch. 17.

May 1 The New American movies; the revival of the 1970s – the blockbuster and the Film School Generation.

**Continue Dougan; view second Scorsese film.
Sklar, ch. 19.**

May 8 The career of Martin Scorsese; personal statement and the building of a commercial career.

Finish Dougan; view third Scorsese film

May 15 ***** Scorsese Paper due *****

Films of the Reagan Era: blockbusters; the home viewing revolution.
The contribution of the independents – the 1990s.

Sklar, chs. 20, 21.

Tu, May 22 ***** Test #3 (not comprehensive) at 12:45 PM *****

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