History/HRS 169: Hollywood and America

Spring 2010
TR 1:30-2:45; Amador 152

George S. Craft
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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. 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 will excuse up to a maximum of two absences with appropriate official documentation (no exceptions; usually a doctor’s or employer’s note). 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.

4) Of course turn off your cell phones when in class; and any cell phone in sight during exams will induce instructor apoplexy.

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.

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 say something to the instructor.
7) 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.

8) 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.


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. 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](http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/craftg).

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.’


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 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 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, Samuel Fuller, Billy Wilder, Frank Capra, Samuel Fuller, Otto Preminger, Preston Sturges, Francis Ford Coppola, John Cassavetes, Brian DePalma, 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.
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 twelve home video assignments, one for each week except for the midterm and the week that the paper is due. 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.

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).

a. 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.

b. 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 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 12 on-line video assignment is worth 11 points for a maximum total of 120 points (obviously you can score as high as 132 points on these quizzes – the extra 12 points is potential extra credit).

4) Class attendance will be worth 60 points, according to the following scale:

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5) (Additional small assignments might total no more than 20 points.)

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.

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. 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. 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)**

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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Feb 2</td>
<td>Early film styles: Lumiére, Méliès, Porter, etc. Early business: the nickelodeon, Edison’s grab for monopoly (The Trust). The emergence of the Independents.</td>
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<td>Sklar, chs. 1, 2, 3.</td>
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<td>Feb 9</td>
<td>D. W. Griffith. The beginnings of the feature film: Griffith as the “Father of American Film” and the originator of the Hollywood Style. ‘The House that Adolph Zukor Built:’ the origins and development of the studio system. The early career of Mary Pickford.</td>
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<td>Feb 16</td>
<td>The Great Silent Comics: Lloyd, Arbuckle, Keaton, Chaplin. The art of physical comedy in pre-sound Hollywood. The middle career of Mary Pickford.</td>
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<td>Sklar, ch. 7. Discussion on Whitfield, 112-249.</td>
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<td>Feb 23</td>
<td>Melodrama and drama in 1920s Hollywood: Rudolf Valentino and Greta Garbo. The later career of Mary Pickford</td>
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<td>Sklar, ch. 6. Discussion on Whitfield, 250-374.</td>
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<td>Mar 2</td>
<td>Hollywood culture and dealing with censorship: Will Hays and MPPDA. Transition to sound film.</td>
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<td>Sklar, chs. 5, 8. Web: “The Sins of Hollywood”</td>
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Sklar, chs. 10, 14.
Begin Reading Ross

Mar 16  *** Midterm Exam on Mar 16 ***

The 1930s: the Golden Age of Hollywood: from the Age of Turbulence to the Age of Order.

Sklar, ch. 11.
Web: Arthur Schlesinger, “When the Movies Really Counted”
Continue with Ross


Finish Ross.
Sklar, ch. 12
Begin research and viewing on your director of choice.

[Mar 29 – Apr 4 – Spring Break; no classes held]

Hollywood at war before and after 1945 – World War II and the Cold War.
‘Film noir’

Sklar, ch. 15.

The Western as a postwar genre. The films of John Ford.

Sklar, ch. 16.
Web: Testimony of John Howard Larson to House Un-American Activities Committee, 1947

April 20  *** Scorsese (or other director) Paper due ***


Sklar, ch. 17.

Apr 27  The decline of Hollywood, 1946-70: divestiture and television.
The New American movies in the late 1960s: appealing to youth in the counter-culture
era.

Sklar, ch. 19.

May 4    The 1960s – continued.
The 1970s and the 1980s – the Film School Generation and the blockbuster: Francis Ford
Coppola and Steven Spielberg.

May 11   Films of the Reagan Era – 1980s: blockbusters, patriotism and nostalgia; the home
viewing revolution.
The contribution of the Independents – the 1990s and beyond: Woody Allen, Spike Lee,
Quentin Tarantino, the Coen Brothers, and Todd Solondz.

Sklar, chs. 20, 21.

Th, May 20  *** Exam #2 (not comprehensive) at 12:45 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.