History/HRS 169: Hollywood and America

Fall 2014
MW 1:30-2:45

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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 about the 1970s. The course will emphasize the “classic” period of American movies from the 1920s until the mid-1950s, when, organized in the “studio” system, they arguably reached the high point of their achievement.

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 (e.g., Irving Thalberg), the writer, the director (e.g., John Huston), the cinematographer, the actor? 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?

The course will focus primarily on the relations between American movies and the evolution of American (popular) culture and society? Did the movies simply reflect popular culture, did they influence it, or did the influence move both ways? How did the movies react to the Depression? What does the star system prevalent in American movies say about our culture? 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 about the 1970s.
- Insight into the relationship of Hollywood movies with American culture, society, and history.
- An appreciation of the artistic achievement of Hollywood moviemakers. Mostly through extensive film clips 25-30 minutes long, 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 and out of class. 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, please note the following:

1) Do not stay enrolled in this class if you are not committed to significant academic work to learn the material, do well on the exams, and write good papers. Some students associate a film class with kicking back and eating popcorn. This class is fun, but it 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. It is a hybrid course that uses on-line materials.** 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 discourteous and 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 without explanation will be recorded as absent.

4) If you use a laptop computer or tablet 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! All cell phones must be turned off at all times.

5) 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 hour. Smaller things we can take care of via email. I usually reply promptly to emails.

6) I will send you important messages through email. Please be attentive to your email inbox.
Required 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 in the last section.

Mark A. Vieira, *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince.* A detailed, readable account of the famous head of production at MGM Studios from 1924 to 1936; Thalberg introduced the producer-dominated model of filmmaking.


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. Some of them may be rented from the Hornet bookstore. The Sklar and Vieira books will be needed by the second week of the course.

b) There will be extensive course materials posted on the course website:

[http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/craftg/HistHRS%20169/overview.htm](http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/craftg/HistHRS%20169/overview.htm)

The instructor’s general webpage may be found at: [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 detailed summaries of classroom materials, study questions for the assigned books, study questions for the exams, suggested questions for the essays, and mandatory critical resources on core materials.

ii) You will also be expected to view **video** materials posted on SacCT. To get to them you will have to sign in to Sac CT: [http://www.csus.edu/sacct/](http://www.csus.edu/sacct/). 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 optional review of clips already seen in class. To view these materials you will need a high speed Internet connection.

iii) 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 a 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.’
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.’

Entertaining information and insights on especially classic films.

Entertaining site good for getting a quick summary of critical and viewer response.

All students truly interested in film should be familiar with these sources.

c) And of course don’t forget to come to class for film clips, lectures, and discussion.

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.

Not all browsers are created equal. PC users should use Mozilla Firefox (Internet Explorer and Chrome can cause problems) and Mac users should use Safari.

When you get to the film clip page, you will notice that some of the film clips are in WMV format (the ones that have ‘wmv’ after them), some in Real format (no suffix), and some are links to ‘Youtube’.

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://realplayer.downloadable.co/?c=23&gclid=Cj0KEQjwveufBRDlsNb3kb-twMIBEiQASNH0xh3ssiDF9ukarQkwrfgJXh_VCiQXHoujtGVWHTQvQxEaAgEM8P8HAQ

This procedure is valid for both PCs and Macs.

b. If you are viewing a WMV film clip (has ‘wmv’ after the link), it is a little more complicated. Students using PCs may view the wmv files the same way they did with the Realplayer ones, assuming you have Windows Media Player read in your computer. If you are using a Mac, you have to take some special steps. 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. If all else fails, use a computer on campus that is connected to the university network; they work almost all the time. Many students view all the assigned film clips on campus to minimize connection issues.

It is the student’s responsibility to find an acceptable method for viewing the on-line materials, either with your own computer or on one in the University lab. You should do this early in the semester.

Course Requirements

1) Take about 12 home video assignments, generally one for each week. The assignments will be posted on the course webpage (not on the SacCT page). I will assign a video clip (20-30 minutes each) located in the course’s SacCT file along with two or three on-line readings (e.g., articles from Turner Classic Movies or from my own film reviews on the course website). You will have two days to read the articles, view the video clips, and then to answer a few short questions in an on-line SacCT quiz. You will receive
a maximum of twelve points for each on-line assignment successfully completed.

2) Take **three in-class exams** spaced at roughly equal intervals throughout the course – check the Course Outline for dates. The exams will consist of: a) an in-class essay written on a topic derived from a list posted on the course website; c) four-five identification answers also drawn also from a list. You will need a **large blue book** for each exam. When you come to class for an exam, bring a **blank** blue book with you; I will verify its pristine condition before you begin.

I may conduct a **study session** outside of regular class time to help you prepare for the exam. The third exam on the final exam date will not be cumulative, but will be based on the course material covered since the second exam.

3) Turn in **two take-home essays** of about 3 typewritten pages each based on your reading of the assigned monographs. The essay questions will be posted online; your essays will be due generally a couple of weeks after the exams.

Note that all test materials are in essay format.

4) You may have extra credit opportunities announced in class (come to class!).

5) I may have one or two reading quizzes in class based on the two assigned monographs.

6) 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 70 points – 30 for the essay, 40 for the IDs.

2) **The take-home essays** on the monographs will be worth 60 points each.

3) Each of the on-line **video quizzes** is worth 12 points. I will drop your lowest quiz score.

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

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<th>Miss</th>
<th>0-1 class</th>
<th>60 points</th>
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<td>2 classes</td>
<td>57</td>
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5) Additional small assignments and extra credit opportunities – 12-24 points (not counted in base).

The final grade will be determined as follows: 1) divide the number of points earned by the number of total points possible 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.; 3) the instructor will make adjustments in the interest of justice.

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

**Tentative Course Outline**

Even with the 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 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. Exam dates and due dates are in bold below.

**Week Beginning (The dates are approximate)**

**Sept 3**

**Sept 8**

**Sept 15**
The first studios: Zukor creates Paramount. Stars of the teens and 1920s – Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks (‘Pickfair’!).

**Sept 22**

**Sept 29**
Oct 6  *** Exam #1 ***
Thursday – Pre-Code Hollywood, 1929-34
Third discussion of Vieira, ‘Thalberg’

Oct 13  Early sound comedy: Mae West, Marx West, Ernst Lubitsch
The New Deal. Frank Capra’s myth of Jeffersonian individualism in America.

Oct 20  *** Thalberg paper due on Oct 20 ***
Hollywood at war
Film noir

Oct 27  Hollywood and the Red Scare through the 1950s: 50s science fiction.
The Western as a postwar genre. The films of John Ford.


Nov 10  *** Exam #2 ***
Thursday: Hollywood and popular culture in the 1950s: Marilyn Monroe and James Dean.

Nov 17  The 50s, continued.
The decline of Hollywood, 1950s and 1960s.

Nov 24  *** ‘Picture’ Paper due on Nov 24 ***
The New American movies of the late 60s: appealing to the younger generation.

Dec 1  70s continued.
Films of the Reagan Era: blockbusters, patriotism, and nostalgia.

Dec 8  Against the mainstream: A sampler of Independent and Independent-style films: Woody Allen, Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino, Coen Brothers, Alexander Payne, etc.

Dec 15, 12:45-2:45  *** Exam #3 (not comprehensive) ***

Final Note:  This is an 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.  DO THE READING, TAKE THE QUIZZES AND COME TO CLASS!