History 4314

American History Through Film
Fall 2006

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Basic Course Information:

Please check the Webct often for announcements and your grades. All grades will be posted on it. Please note that Dr. Petrovich DOES NOT use the Webct email. Contact her at the above email.

Midterm: Make up midterms are given in what Mr. Lust and Dr. Petrovich consider extreme cases. They are given with proper documentation as to the nature of the emergency. Please plan your work schedule ahead of time so you can made the midterm date!

For student with special needs: We are happy to accommodate you! Please email Mr. Lust for further information.

Final examination: We DO NOT accept late final examinations. If it is not in by Wednesday, December 6 at exactly 3pm, it will not be accepted. Consider bringing in your final a few days early to avoid last-minute problems.

Course Description:

One of the central events in twentieth-century American history is the rise of mass communications. In 1900, the modern instruments of mass communications, which today provide Americans of all classes and regions with standardized information and ideas, were almost wholly lacking. There would be no commercial radio broadcasts for another twenty years; no television for another 45 years. The first movie to tell a story was still three years in the future. Not a single newspaper or magazine reached as many as a million readers.

This course examines the evolution of the first, most popular, and most influential instrument of mass culture: the movies. Movies have been a major factor in the "modernization" of American culture, helping to disseminate a new set of norms and fashions that applied to taste, masculinity, femininity, life styles, and politics. Films offer a treasure chest of insights into American values, belief, and behavior.

This course treats motion pictures as texts deserving the same skills of critical thinking and analysis as any other cultural artifact. Film is a type of communication with its own rules and grammar. Just as one must learn to read written language, one must learn to read the images and sounds that comprise the text of a film. In a world in which the visual image has become the dominant mode of communication,
dramatically influencing everything from political campaigns to popular culture, it is important that students develop the tools to read, analyze, and understand visual texts.

**Learning Outcomes:**

Students will obtain through video lecture, film clips, and readings knowledge of the historical development of U.S. History through the lens of Hollywood. The student will learn how U.S. History influences Hollywood and how Hollywood influences U.S. History.

Students will demonstrate the above mentioned knowledge through examinations and long essay papers.

Critical analysis and critical thinking will be obtained by the student by working through the study questions, and examining the primary and secondary sources offered in this course.

Written portions of examinations, as well as the major final essay papers, will allow the student to improve her or his writing skill.

**Online Resources:**

http://www.class.uh.edu/mintz/places/film_index.html

The required film clips are available at:

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/login

If the login does not work the first time, hit the left arrow key at the top of your browser and login a second time. Login should be successful.

Copyright laws restrict use of these online resources exclusively to students enrolled in History 4314 during the Fall 2006 semester. Your user ID is: linked04; your password is: linked04.
Required reading:

Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, HOLLYWOOD’S AMERICA
Robert Brent Toplin, REEL HISTORY: IN DEFENSE OF HOLLYWOOD
Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, AMERICA ON FILM

Examinations:

A **PROCTORED midterm** will take place on Saturday, October 21, 9-10:30 a.m., on campus. Please check the Webct after the second week of class to obtain the building and room number. This will be a closed-book, closed note examination.

You will also take a **TAKE-HOME final**, which is due no later than 3 p.m., December 6, in 523 Agnes Arnold Hall. You can find the TAKE-HOME final at the end of this syllabus.

Lecture Topics and Readings

Required reading for the first examination:
HOLLYWOOD’S AMERICA. Introduction, All sections up to and including the Great Depression
Toplin, REEL HISTORY, 1-138

Required reading for the second examination:
HOLLYWOOD’S AMERICA, Introduction, finish the book
AMERICA ON FILM (all)

Tape 1 /

- Introduction to the Course: Approach and Themes
- Decoding Visual Images
- How to Read a Film: Approaches to Film Criticism and Interpretation
- "It's Just a Movie"
- Reading into Films
- Thinking Analytically

Film Clips: ET: The Extra-Terrestrial
An Officer and a Gentleman

Tape 2 /

- Dream Factories: Movie Theaters
- Reorientation of American Culture in the Late 19th Century
- Mass Communication

Film Clips: Ragtime

Tape 3/

- Chaplin
- Slapstick
- Birth of the Movies
- The Seductiveness of Silence
- Behind the Mask of Innocence: The Politics of Silent Film
- Douglas Fairbanks
- Rudolph Valentino
- Clara Bow
- Jews in Hollywood

Film Clips: A Fool There Was
Traffic in Souls
Little Annie Rooney
Gold Rush
It
Our Dancing Daughters

Tape 4 /
The Jazz Singer
Hollywood and Race
The Arrival of Sound
Technicolor
Classic Hollywood Cinema
Shifting Cultural Values
Film Meets the Great Depression
The Gangster
The Shyster
Depression-Era Comedy
The Depiction of Women in Depression-Era Film
The Production Code
'30s Musicals
Cartoons
King Kong

Film Clips:
Jazz Singer
Little Caesar
I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang
Animal Crackers
Duck Soup
42nd Street
Gold Diggers of 1933
King Kong
It Happened One Night
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

Tape 5 /
The Oscars
Hollywood’s Golden Age - and Movies Today
Depression Genres
The G-Man
Social Consciousness Films
Screwball Comedy
Depression Themes
Knights in the Urban Wilderness
History Goes to the Movies
Mickey Mouse History: Pocahontas
Costume Drama
Docudrama
Ethnocentric and Presentist Approaches
Cinematic Social History
Revisionist History

Film Clips:
Maltese Falcon
Pocahontas
Forrest Gump

Tape 6 /
Forrest Gump and Reflections on the Meaning of History
History Goes to the Movies: Authenticity and Accuracy
Ideology and Hollywood Film
The Western Where Did the Western Go?

Film Clips: Stagecoach
They Died With Their Boots On

Tape 7 /
Motherhood at the Movies
Women in Disney Films
Women in ‘30s Film
Women in ‘40s Film

Film Clips: Imitation of Life
Stella Dallas

The MIDTERM EXAM will include the material presented on TAPES 1-7 as well as the outside reading

Tape 8 /
Anti-Catholicism in the Movies
Postwar Women
Symbolic Annihilation of Women
Impact of Feminism on Film
Masculinity in Film
Misogyny and Masculinity in Film
Crises of Masculinity
Racial and Ethnic Caricatures in Film
Images of African Americans in American Popular Culture

Tape 9 /
A Separate Cinema: Race Films
African American Film in the Silent Era, the ‘20s, the ‘30s, the War and Postwar Years
The ‘60s
Blaxploitation
New Black Cinema
Mexican Americans in American Popular Culture
Immigration and Immigrants in Film
1939

Film Clips: Within Our Gates
Citizen Kane

Tape 10 /
World War II and Film
Wartime Hollywood
War Films During the 1950s
Hiroshima and Film

Film Clips: Bataan
Schindler’s List
Night and Fog
Saving Private Ryan
Atomic Café, clip 1
Tape 11 /
Celebrity in American Culture
James Dean and Marilyn Monroe
Postwar Hollywood
Anticommunism and Film
Science Fiction
Biblical Epics
Family Melodramas
Elia Kazan
Informing in Film

Film Clips: American Graffiti
On the Waterfront
Rebel Without a Cause
Splendor in the Grass

Tape 12 /
The Red Scare in Hollywood
Films of the 1960s
Seeds of the '60s
The Anti-Western
Film and Youth
Confusion of Values
Revising History
Violence in '60s Film
Gays and Lesbians in Film
Heterosexuality in Film
Censorship and Film

Film Clips: Wild Angels
Easy Rider
Little Big Man

Tape 13 /
The Miracle Decision
Vietnam in Film
The Green Berets
My Lai
The Deer Hunter
Rambo
Platoon
POWs and Film
Films of the 1980s and 1990s

Film Clips: Platoon
Deer Hunter
Rambo

Tape 14/
Foreign Film
I Learned It at the Movies

Second examination due NO LATER THAN 3 p.m., WEDNESDAY, December 6 in 523 Agnes Arnold Hall
STUDY QUESTIONS

Study questions for the FIRST EXAMINATION:

Reel History:

1. Be prepared to identify the specific objections that have been leveled against the depiction of history in Hollywood films.
2. What does Toplin mean by the term "genre"?
3. What, according to Toplin, are the specific features and narrative conventions of the genre of historical films?
4. What are various forms that historical films have taken?
5. Precisely how does Toplin defend Hollywood’s historical film?

Questions based on the lectures and Hollywood's America's introduction:

1. In what specific ways can movies open windows into American cultural and social history? Be prepared to discuss films as sociological documents; ideological constructs; psychological texts; and cultural documents.
2. The decade of the 1890s witnessed profound changes in American values and behavior.
   a. Describe the important changes that took place in American sports, music, women's roles, and cultural values during the '90s and explain why these changes took place.
   b. How can one explain the sudden obsession with sport, strength, and virility?
3. What were the defining characteristics of Victorian culture and entertainment?
4. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of mass communication and commercialized forms of entertainment.
   a. What new instruments of modern mass culture and commercial entertainment appeared during this period?
   b. What common background did the creators of mass culture share?
   c. What kind of aesthetic style characterized the new mass culture? How did it differ from the "genteel tradition"?
   d. Describe the social consequences of the rise of mass communication and commercial entertainment. How did the new commercialized amusements reshape American leisure patterns?
5. Identify and state the significance of:
   "persistence of vision"
   magic lantern
   realism
   actualities
   William K.L. Dickson
   Motion Picture Patents Company
6. Describe the attitude of Progressive reformers toward the movies.
7. What did the Supreme Court rule in its 1915 Mutual decision?
8. Describe the changes that took place within the film industry between 1900 and 1920--in exhibition, industrial organization, film narrative, and so on.
   a. Why did Jewish producers play a central role in the industry's growth?
   b. To what extent were these individuals conspiring against "traditional" American values and the power structure that maintained them? Did they challenge conservative community standards or did they share the middle class morality of their public?
   c. How did film themes shift in the late 1910s and 20s?
d. How did patterns of movie-going change during the 20s?

e. How did ownership of theaters shift?

9. Why did the film industry base itself in Hollywood?

10. What kinds of films did movie makers produce during the 1900s and 1910s? What kinds of generalizations can one make about their content?

11. How did film content change during the late teens and twenties?

12. Discuss the impact of the arrival of sound on the movies.

13. Discuss the major cultural cleavages in the U.S. during the 1920s.

14. How did the movies respond to the dislocations of the Depression?
   a. Identify the kinds of films people attended during the Depression and analyze their appeal.
   b. Were they essentially escapist?
   c. Were they attacks on the conventional social and moral order? Or did they have a different significance? If so, what was it?

15. Identify the Production Code Administration of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association.
   a. How and why was the Production Code created?
   b. Identify Joseph Ignatius Breen and explain why he had so much influence in Hollywood.
   c. What was the impact of the Breen Office on the character of films?

16. Identify the diverse forms of cinematic history.

17. Trace the evolution in the treatment of motherhood and womanhood in film.

Questions based on the essays in Mintz and Roberts, HOLLYWOOD'S AMERICA for the first examination:

FRONT PAGE MOVIES
1. How, according to Kay Sloan, did early silent film differ from later American cinema?
2. What does Sloan mean when she says that early film often served as a vehicle for overt political causes?

BIRTH OF A NATION--PROPAGANDA AS HISTORY
1. How does the historian John Hope Franklin assess Birth of a Nation as history?
2. How does he explain the film's distortions?

WORK, IDEOLOGY AND CHAPLIN'S TRAMP
1. How does the film historian Charles Musser locate Chaplin and his tramp persona in a specific historical and economic context?
2. What does Chaplin's tramp have to say about work and productive labor?

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, MARY PICKFORD AND THE NEW PERSONALITY
1. How does Lary May account for Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks popularity during the 1910s.

LAUGHING THROUGH TEARS
1. Describe the impact of the Depression on the film industry.
2. Identify the genres through which Hollywood responded to the Depression.
3. Assess the impact of the Production Code on the Depression-era films.
GANGSTERS AND FALLEN WOMEN
   Explain the succession of gangsters and prostitutes that appeared in film during the Depression’s early years.

GONE WITH THE WIND AND GRAPES OF WRATH
   In what sense can these films be understood as Hollywood histories of the Great Depression?

EVOLUTION OF BLACK FILM
   1.  To what extent were African Americans able to create a distinctive African American cinema prior to World War II?

TERMS YOU NEED TO KNOW
   (For the first exam)

Blind Bidding: Exhibitors are forced to rent a film before seeing it.

Block Booking: Exhibitors are forced to rent groups of films in order to exhibit any one film distributed by a particular studio.

Camera Angle: The angle at which the camera looks at the action. In a low-angle shot, the camera looks up from below the action.

Camera Distance: The distance of the camera from the action being filmed; e.g., extreme closeup, medium shot, long shot.

Classical Hollywood Cinema: Certain narrative and stylistic practices characteristics of American film between the 1930s and 1960s. Narratives are structured around characters who have specific, clearly defined goals, and deal with their triumph over various obstacles that stand in the way of the goals’ attainment. The narratives are presented in a manner as invisible as possible.

Continuity Editing: Editing that creates the illusion of temporal and spatial coherence, unity, or continuity.

Crosscutting: Editing that involves cutting back and forth between two or more separate scenes.

Deep Focus: Style of filming using wide angle lenses, coated lenses, fast film, and powerful illumination to produce an image in which the extreme foreground and background appear in sharp focus.

Dissolve: Fluid form of shot transition that involves fading out on one shot while fading in on another.

Film Noir: Style of filmmaking that presents crimes or criminal actions in a manner that disturbs, disorients, or induces anxiety in the viewer.

Flashback: A sequence that shows events that take place at an earlier moment than the present time in the film.

Genre: A category of filmmaking possessing familiar narrative and stylistic conventions.

Mise-en-scene: The staging of action for the camera, including set design, costume design, performance, lighting, camera movement, camera angle, camera distance, and composition.

Montage Sequence: Editing to condense or expand action, space, or time.

3-Point Lighting: Standard lighting setup employed in Hollywood. The 3 points refer to key light (chief directional light source), the fill light (weaker light source that fills in shadows cast by key light), and back light (minor light that illuminates space between back of the set and characters).
**Vertical Integration:** System of motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition in which a single entity makes and distributes a product that is exhibited in its own theaters.

**Voice-Over Narration:** Speech that accompanies a filmed sequence but does not come from the sequence itself

### How to Read a Film

1. **Analyzing film narratives:**
   
   A typical 90-120 minute Hollywood film consists of 600 to 800 individual shots and 5 to 40 discrete episodes. To expose how film narrative works, it is necessary to break a film down into its basic narrative units. This process of structural analysis is known as segmentation.

2. **Analyzing film style:**

   Classical Hollywood cinema possesses a style that is largely invisible and difficult for the average spectator to see. The film's narrative seems to come magically off the screen. Classical Hollywood films create the illusion of realism through set design, costume design, the actors' performances, lighting, editing, camera movement, camera angle, camera distance, and composition--or what is technically known as mise-en-scene.

3. **Analyzing genre:**

   Films that belong to a specific genre draw from a more or less fixed body of character and story types, settings and situations, costumes and props, thematic concerns, visual iconography, and conventions that are shared by other films in that particular genre.
Part 1. Short Essay (25 points) Write a two-to-three page double-spaced essay on ONE of the following:
1. How, according to William Joe Palmer, has Hollywood depicted "yuppies," their values, virtues, and vices?
2. How, according to Richard Schickel, did Hollywood shape President Ronald Reagan's ideology and outlook?

Part II. Short Essay (25 points)
Write a two-to-three page double-spaced essay on ONE of the following:
1. In what ways does the film The Magnificent Seven combine the political concerns of the Cold War with the traditional terms of the Western?
2. Explain why Dr. Strangelove is a significant film.
3. Describe the variety of ways that Hollywood has dealt with the American experience in Vietnam; explain how Hollywood depicted Vietnam veterans; and describe how Hollywood dealt with the meaning of and reasons for the Vietnam war.

Part III. Essay (25 points)
Write a three-to-four page double-spaced typewritten essay on one of the following topics. You must answer ALL the questions under a given topic.

World War II and Film
1. What kinds of films did Hollywood produce during WWII? What do these films tell us about attitudes and concerns on the homefront?
2. In what ways were World War II combat films allegories of a democratic nation at war?
3. How did the federal government seek to shape wartime films? How successful were its efforts?
4. What political messages does the film CASABLANCA convey?

Postwar Hollywood
1. Thoroughly identify the major genres and themes of Hollywood films of the late 1940s and 1950s.
2. How would you account for these particular themes and genres?

Hollywood Films of the 1960s and 1970s
1. During the "Golden Age" of film, Hollywood helped create a shared conception of the meaning of the American dream and America’s role in the world. How and why did this change in the 1960s and early 1970s?
2. What were the defining characteristics of the popular politically-oriented films of the late 1960s and early 70s? How were older Hollywood genres—crime film, western, the historical romance—revised?
3. How and why did the tone, themes, and nature of popular films change in the late 1970s?

Part IV. Benishoff and Griffin, AMERICA ON FILM (25 POINTS)
In a 2-4 page essay, draw on AMERICA ON FILM to address each of the following questions:
• What are the factors that shape cinematic representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality?
• Do popular films reflect preexisting racial, class, gender, and sexual biases or does it construct them?
• Has the portrayal of racial and ethnic minorities, the white working class, women, and gays and lesbians grown more realistic over time? Has this changing portrayal moved in a single direction over time?
• How would you evaluate book’s argument that the formulas and stereotypes found in popular film reflect a male, middle class, northern Europe, and heterosexual bias?