

## **THE HOLLYWOOD EXPERIENCE: FILM FORM, HISTORY, AND PRACTICE - Jay Steinmetz**

**Code: BMA-MEDD-601.05**

**Type: practice**

**Wednesdays 16.00-17.30**

**Room: -135**

**First class: 12. September**

It was a century ago that Paramount Studios, then called Famous Players Studios, left New York for the perpetual sun of Southern California. The rest of the American film industry soon followed, lured by the agreeable year-round weather, diverse environments (the desert, forest, ocean, and mountains proved attractive for a wide range of films), and a general lack of industry regulation. Soon enough, the Hollywood experience began changing the United States and the world at large. This course takes a historical look at the Hollywood film industry, from its early origins of consolidation, its entrenched studio system, its breakdown and erosion, and its reemergence as a global force of cultural expression. What is the Hollywood film form? Who were the individuals who built the studio system and what was their vision of America and the world? How did censorship develop over time and to what extent did the politics in Washington DC and finance in New York control the movie-making practice in California? These are some of the many questions we will ask and attempt to answer in this course, with the aim of giving students a solid grounding in American film history. Our analysis will cut the Hollywood experience in several ways: we will look at American film through studios (Paramount, MGM, Columbia, and Warner Bros., etc), genres (westerns, horror, melodrama, etc), historical contexts (WWII, McCarthyism, Vietnam, etc), institutions (American government, the MPAA, and Wall Street, etc) and individuals (studio moguls, producers, directors, and actors). At stake in this analysis are the ways in which Hollywood film shaped the cultural identity of the United States and came to dominate the global film market, a trajectory that reinforced broader cultural domination and American imperialism to this day.

There will be five short quizzes throughout the term (quiz material will be the films and the film readings for that week) and a cumulative exam of short essays during finals week. A final 5 page paper is due on Week 8. This paper will critically examine the Hollywood film system through one of the broader lenses discussed in the course (studios, genre, institutions, etc) with a specific argument that shapes your analysis. Paper guidelines will be handed out by Week 3. Paper topics need to be discussed via email or in person to a GTF.

Quizzes: 30% of your grade

Midterm Exam: 30% of your grade

Final Paper: 40% of your grade

**Class Attendance:** Attendance is mandatory, including for screenings. Please treat film screenings like you would any other class and come prepared focused and ready to be critically engaged. Many of these films are quite challenging, even on numerous subsequent viewings. You are being asked to read material and critically engage a film after only one viewing—no small task. So please come prepared for every screening and discussion. Please note that in almost every case we will not be

watching the entire feature length film. There is too much material to cover in this class for full screenings. Watching the entirety of all the films we screen is encouraged for students who want additional material.

**Challenging grades:** Graders are human, and sometimes re-grading material is necessary. The policy of this course is to wait 24 hours after you receive a grade. After this time, you may ask for a regrade from a GTF or myself, but must do so in writing, explaining why you deserve a different grade. Please keep in mind that regrading works both ways—you may end up with a lower grade if the GTF or myself feel one is warranted.

**Disabilities:** Part of my responsibility is ensuring that every student has the ability to achieve their highest potential in class, and I take this responsibility quite seriously. Students with a documented disability should contact me before class and we will make whatever arrangements are necessary. Please note that a letter from a counselor with Students with Disabilities may be required.

**Plagiarism and cheating:** Simply put, plagiarism will not be tolerated and students who intentionally use another author's words or ideas without proper citation will receive at minimum a failing grade for the course. Please be aware that this does not merely entail directly quoting others, but includes claiming another author's ideas as your own.

### **Week 1 – Origins of the Studio System**

Screenings: The Great Train Robbery (1903), Birth of a Nation (1915), The Kid (1921)

Readings:

Neal Gabler. An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood. Chapter 1.  
Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio. U.S. Supreme Court case decision.

Topics:

- American cinema's migration westward
- Genres: the western, the historical epic, the melodrama
- Institutions: Edison's Trust, the Mutual Case
- Individuals: D. W. Griffith, Lillian Gish, and Charlie Chaplin

### **Week 2 – The Late Silent Era and Sin City Hollywood**

Screenings: Ben Hur (1925), The Sheik (1921), Son of the Sheik (1926), Sunrise (1927)

Readings:

Neal Gabler. An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood. Chapter 2.

Kenneth Anger. Hollywood Babylon. Excerpts.

Thomas Schatz. The Genius of the System. Chapter 1.

Topics:

- Hollywood scandals of the 20s and the emergence of the Code. The Taylor Murder, Fatty Arbuckle, Olive Thomas and Jack Pickford
- Studio system's entrenchment
- The aesthetics of the late silent era

### **Week 3 – Hollywood's Golden Age and the Dominance of the Studio System: 1930s**

Screenings: Frankenstein (1932), Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933), King Kong (1933)

Wizard of Oz (1939)

Readings:

Neal Gabler. An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood. Chapter 3.

Thomas Schatz. *The Genius of the System*. Chapter 3.

David Thompson. *The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood*. Excerpts.

Topics:

- Aesthetics and practice of early sound cinema
- Immigrant Hollywood in the interwar years
- Classical film form and narrative: development and challenges
- Individuals: Louis B. Mayer, James Whale, David O. Selznick, and Judy Garland

#### **Week 4 – War, Consolidation, and the Struggles with Labor: 1940s Hollywood**

Screenings: *Casablanca* (1942), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *White Heat* (1949)

Readings:

Otto Friedrich. *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s*. Chapters 3, 4, and 11.

Topics:

- World War II and Hollywood's war effort
- Hollywood's New Deal
- Labor strikes and American film's first Red Scare
- Individuals: Warner Bros., Orson Welles, Humphrey Bogart, and Ingrid Bergman

#### **Week 5 – Turbulence and High Modernism in Hollywood's 1950s**

Screenings: *A Place in the Sun* (1951), *Rear Window* (1953), *Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958)

Otto Friedrich. *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s*. Chapter 12.

Peter Biskind. *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s*. Chapter 4.

Thomas Schatz. *The Genius of the System*. Chapter 6.

Topics:

- McCarthyism in Hollywood
- Masculine anxieties in the 1950s
- The threat of television and the decline of the studio system
- Genres: 3D, biblical epics, and the emergence of Sci-Fi

#### **Week 6 – The 60s: The Studio System's Breakdown and the Rise of New American Cinema**

Screenings: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Easy Rider* (1969)

Readings:

Peter Biskind. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Chapters 1-3.

Topics:

- Challenges to the Studio: television, European art film, and a changing cinema audience
- Cinema Verité: film form and the political aesthetic of New American Cinema
- Vietnam, counterculture, Civil Rights, and the erosion of urban America
- Industry collapse and the downfall of the Code

#### **Week 7 – The Movie Brats and American Cinema's Renaissance in the 1970s**

Screenings: *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Readings:

Peter Biskind. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Chapters 4-7.

Topics:

- The rise of the MPAA ratings system
- Revolutionizing American cinema in the 1970s
- Wither Hollywood: The obsolescence of the physical studio and backlot
- Individuals: The Movie Brats – Scorsese, Bogdanovich, Friedkin, and Coppola

### **Week 8 – The 1980s, or: How Corporate Hollywood Gained Control**

Screenings: Heaven's Gate (1980), Raider's of the Lost Ark (1981), Full Metal Jacket (1987), Platoon (1986), Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988)

Readings:

Stephen Prince. A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989. Chapters 1-3.

Topics:

- Implosion of the Movie Brats and the dominance of corporate Hollywood
- Spectacle and American film form: the anti-political decade
- Individuals: Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas

### **Week 9 – Lost Decade or New Beginning? The Hollywood 90s**

Screenings: The People Under the Stairs (1991), Forrest Gump (1994), Pulp Fiction (1994), Fargo (1996)

Readings:

David Thompson. The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood. Excerpts.

Bordwell and Thompson. Film History. Excerpts.

Topics:

- The Global reach of Hollywood cinema
- Race and liberalism in the Hollywood nineties
- Individuals: Coen Bros, Quentin Tarantino, and Tom Hanks

### **Week 10 – Contemporary Hollywood: Promises and Challenges**

Screenings: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), Day After Tomorrow (2004), There Will Be Blood (2007), Avatar (2009)

Readings:

David Thompson. The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood. Excerpts.

Bordwell and Thompson. Film History. Excerpts.

Topics:

- Is there such a thing as Hollywood film anymore?
- Internationalization in context: globalized discourse or American imperialism?
- Studios: Universal and United Artists in the 21st Century
- Individuals: James Cameron, Tom Cruise, and PT Anderson