

History/HRS 169: Hollywood and America

Spring 2018
TuTh 3:00-4:15

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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. 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 about 1960, when, organized in the “studio” system, they arguably reached the high point of their achievement. The course will end with the flourishing of the “Seventies Film” of 1965-75 described in the Kirshner book.

The course will focus primarily on the relations between American movies and the evolution of **American history, culture, and society?** How did the movies react to the Depression and World War II? What does the **star system** prevalent in American movies say about our culture? What have been the patterns of **censorship** in American movies?

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?

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 25-35 minutes long**, I aim to expose students to some of the great films of the American cinema. The trade-off: many fewer complete films, but familiarity with a lot of films.
- 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.

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.

Jonathan Kirshner, **Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America**. 2012. Covers Hollywood movies between about 1966 and 1976, and their relation with the politics, society, and culture of the USA at that time.

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.html>

Note that the course website is **not in SacCT**. You will access the latter only for quizzes.

For this course you need **access to the Internet**. Most students will use their own computers; you may of course use computers in the university laboratories.

Web materials will include **class materials on the course website** that you can easily download and print. Most of them are in WORD or Adobe Acrobat format. 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.

- c) **You will also be expected to view online video abbreviations of classic American movies.** A few may be whole films. They will be viewed in the university's **Mediasite** service. After viewing the film clips, you will then take the quizzes on **SacCT**.

Course Requirements

- 1) Take about **10 home video assignments**. The (more or less) weekly assignments will be posted on the **course webpage** (not on the SacCT page). The instructor will assign a video clip (25-35 minutes) to be viewed on **Mediasite** 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 answer a few short questions in an on-line **SacCT quiz**. You will receive a maximum of ten points for each on-line assignment successfully completed. Do not copy and paste text into your quiz answers; use your own words.

For **help** with SacCt or Mediasite issues, students may call 916:278-7337; or visit AIRC 2005.

- 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 extended identification answers drawn also from a list. You will need a **blue book** (small is preferred) for each exam. Make sure the blue book is blank; 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 3-4 typewritten pages each based on your reading of the assigned monographs (“Thalberg” and “The Seventies Film”). The essay questions will be posted online; your essays will be due generally a couple of weeks after the first two exams.

Note that all test materials are in essay format.

- 4) You may have extra credit opportunities announced in class (come to class!).
- 5) Since most of the learning in this course occurs in class, your grade will be significantly affected by your **class attendance**. I will take class attendance and count it 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 do not significantly affect your grade.
- 6) I will give make-up quizzes and tests for reasonable cause; there will be a point deduction.

Your Grade

The course uses a point system. Your grade will be calculated according to the following:

- 1) Each **exam** will be worth 70 points – 30 for the essay, 40 for the IDs (10 each).
- 2) **The take-home essays** on the monographs will be worth 50 points each.

- 3) Each of the on-line **video quizzes** is worth 10 points. At least one of the quizzes will be extra credit, i.e., not counted in the base. That makes a total of about 100 points depending on the number of quizzes assigned. At least one of the quizzes will be “dropped”.
- 4) **Class attendance** will be worth 50 points, according to the following scale:

Miss	0-1 class	50 points
	2 classes	48
	3	45
	4	41
	5	37
	6	33
	7	29
	8	25
	9	20
	10-11	15
	12-13	10
	14-15	5
	More than 15	0

Counting class attendance reflects my belief in the importance of being present in class, where much of the viewing of films and class discussion occur.

- 5) Additional small assignments and extra credit opportunities – (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 the following percentages – 88% minimum for an A-, 80% for a B-, 70% for a C-, 60% for a D-; 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 usually 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 (The dates of subject matter covered are approximate)

- Jan 23, 25** Introduction to the course. “The Hollywood Style” of feature film: ‘Casablanca’.
Early films: Lumière, Méliès, Hepworth, Porter.
- Jan 30, Feb 1** Early business: Edison’s grab for monopoly; the emergence of the Independents (e.g., Laemmle). D.W. Griffith as the “father of American film”.
- Feb 6, 8** Stars of the teens and 1920s – Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks (‘Pickfair’!).
Formation of the first studio: Paramount
- Feb 13, 15** The great silent comics of the 1920s: Lloyd, Chaplin, Keaton.
- Feb 20** Melodrama and sex in the silent films of the 1920s: Rudolf Valentino and Greta Garbo.
- Feb 22** *** **Exam #1** ***
- Feb 27, Mar 1** Hollywood and the public; Will Hays; transition to sound
First discussion of ‘Thalberg’
- Mar 6, 8** The road to self-censorship. Pre-Code Hollywood, 1929-34
Second discussion of Vieira, ‘Thalberg’
- Mar 13, 15** Early sound genres: horror and crime
Third discussion of Vieira, ‘Thalberg’
- *** **Spring Break, Mar 20 and 22** ***
- Mar 27** *** **Thalberg Paper due Mar 27** ***
- Mar 27, 29** Early Hollywood sound comedy: Mae West, Marx Brothers, Ernst Lubitsch
- Apr 3** Hollywood returns to order: the late 1930s – Screwball comedy
- Apr 5** *** **Exam #2** ***
- Apr 10, 12** America at War; Film noir.
The existential condition: the films of John Huston
- Apr 17, 19** Hollywood and the Red Scare through the 1950s: 50s science fiction
The Western as a patriotic postwar genre: the films of John Ford.
- Apr 24, 26** Hollywood and popular culture in the 1950s: Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Douglas Sirk
- May 1, 3** The New American movies of the late 60s: appealing to the younger generation; critique
of US society and culture. ‘The Graduate’; ‘Chinatown’, ‘McCabe and Mrs. Miller’ etc.
- May 8** *** **Kirshner Paper due May 8** ***

May 8, 10 Return to the mainstream – Steven Spielberg
Against the mainstream: A sampler of Independent and Independent-style films: Woody Allen, Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino, Coen Brothers, etc.

Tu, May 15, 3:00-4:15 * Exam #3 (not comprehensive) *****

A Final Word

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. Some students associate a film class with kicking back and eating popcorn. This class is fun, but it expects serious academic effort.
- 2) 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.
- 3) If you have a serious issue (missed a quiz, exam, etc.) you need to discuss it 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 reply promptly to emails.
- 4) I will send you important messages through email. Please be attentive to your email inbox.
- 5) I enjoy talking to students about the course and films in general. Feel free to talk to me after class or during my office hour.