Course Description

Everybody loves a good movie. Movies entertain. Movies provide us with welcome distractions. Movies give us something to talk about with family and friends. But are movies just a popular form of entertainment, or are they something more?

This class aims to show that movies are indeed something more. They are windows into the past. Movies tell us what Americans hoped for and what they feared. Movies help us to understand how Americans understood race, class, and gender. Movies allow us to examine the politics of previous eras. While we will certainly consider how movies entertained and amused audiences, we will ultimately focus on how movies shaped (and were shaped by) the American social, cultural, and political landscape. Ultimately, this class aims to show that film is at the center of American history and that the best way to understand Americans of the past is to look at the movies they were watching.

At the same time this class examines the history of film it also explores the contemporary media landscape. Just like people of the past, our contemporary views of race, gender, class, and politics are shaped by the media we consume. By thinking critically about films of the past, this class attempts to encourage students to think critically about media in the present.

This class covers the major themes and eras of American filmmaking from the early twentieth century to the present. We will begin with a discussion of race in the Progressive Era, move on to discuss mass consumerism and mass culture in the 1920s, look at representations of class on screen in the Depression Era, examine gender in film noir of the 1940s, discuss how the Red Scare shaped filmmaking in the Cold War Era, talk about representations of native Americans in 1950s Westerns, look at how the counterculture and then civil rights movement changed filmmaking in the 1960s, explore the “malaise” of the 1970s, and end by exploring Reagan and Hollywood’s role in politics in the 1980s.
Learning Objectives

Students who take this course can expect:

• A better understanding of the history of American cinema, from the early-twentieth century to the present;

• A better understanding of how films shape Americans’ ideas and attitudes about race, gender, class, and national identity.

• To engage in critical discussions about the popular culture of both the past and present;

• To experiment with interdisciplinary approaches to the study of history and explore how methodologies from film studies, media studies, political science, social history, and cultural history can enrich our understanding of both the past and present;

• To hone their writing, analytic, and interpretive skills through thoughtful classroom discussions, written assignments, and careful readings of primary and secondary source documents.

Class Format

This course is organized thematically and chronologically. Each week we will examine a different theme from a different time period of American cinematic history and then watch a film that directly speaks to those themes.

This class meets twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. For the most part (week 1 is the only exception) Tuesdays will be devoted to lecture and then a discussion of films. This means that discussion is a critical part of this course (and a major portion of your grade). You should come to class prepared to discuss major themes presented in the in-class films and engage critically with the ideas raised by those films. In lectures, too, I will routinely ask questions of the class. The main point here is this: come to class ready to talk and participate! Thursdays (again, with the exception of week 1) will be entirely devoted to film screenings.
Assignments

The major writing assignment of this class is a twelve page research essay. Your task will be to independently watch three films on a common theme and then write an essay that situates your chosen films in their historical context and critically assesses their treatment of your chosen theme. A list of potential topics and films will be posted on the course website. On January 19th you must turn in a short (roughly one-page) research proposal that states your intended topic. The final draft of your paper is due on March 9th.

You must also complete a take-home midterm and a (non-cumulative) take-home final. Both the midterm and final will be a combination of short-answer questions and a longer essay that will ask you to synthesize material presented in class and test your comprehension of lectures and films. The take-home midterm is due on February 14th and the take-home final is due on March 23rd. Questions for both the midterm and final will be distributed approximately one week before the due dates.

Finally, participation is a major part of your grade. Please come to class prepared to discuss films and be ready to answer questions posed during lectures and discussions.

You must complete every assignment to receive a passing grade in the class.

Course Website

This course uses the Canvas system. You can access the course website via your Canvas font page. The course website contains this syllabus, assignment guidelines, the questions for the take-home midterm and final (when posted), and lecture slides. Please submit all written work online, via the course website. I will comment on and grade your written work directly in the Canvas system. If you would like me to evaluate and grade a hard copy of your work, please let me know and we can make suitable arrangements.
Grading Guidelines

I will follow the guidelines established by the History Department in evaluating your work:

A+: Work of unusual distinction.

A: Work that distinguishes itself by the excellence of its grasp of the material and the precision and insight of its argument.

B: Work that satisfies the main criteria of the assignment, and demonstrates command of the material, but does not achieve the level of excellence that characterizes work of A quality.

C: Work that demonstrates a rudimentary grasp of the material and satisfies at least some of the assigned criteria reasonably well.

D: Work that demonstrates a poor grasp of the material and/or is executed with little regard for college standards.

F: Work that is weak in every aspect, demonstrating a basic misunderstanding of the material and/or disregard for the assigned question.

For more information on the History Department’s grading guidelines, please see [http://history.uoregon.edu/undergraduate/](http://history.uoregon.edu/undergraduate/)

Grade Breakdown

Final grades for this class will be determined on the following basis:

- Participation: 20%
- Take-Home Midterm: 20%
- Take-Home Final: 20%
- Research Paper Proposal: 5%
- Final Research Paper: 35%

The following table will be used to translate your point score into your final letter grade:

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<th>Grade</th>
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<td>A+</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>989-940</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>939-900</td>
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<td>B+</td>
<td>899-870</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>869-840</td>
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<td>C+</td>
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Protestors demand the “Hollywood Ten,” the ten directors, writers, and producers who refused to cooperate with HUAC and subsequently found guilty of contempt of Congress, be allowed to go free, 1947.
**Plagiarism**

Don’t do it. Plagiarism or academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated and students found guilty of academic misconduct may face disciplinary action as outlined in the Students’ Code of Conduct:

https://uodos.uoregon.edu/StudentConductandCommunityStandards/AcademicMisconduct.aspx

You should familiarize yourself with the University’s policies concerning plagiarism and what constitutes academic misconduct:

http://library.uoregon.edu/guides/plagiarism/students/index.html

Please come see me if you are unsure about how to properly cite and credit another author’s work, or if you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism.

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**Instructor Contact**

I am here to help you. I encourage you to come see me during my office hours, or, if you can make those, let me know and I’m happy to find another time to meet. You can come see me to talk about any of the material covered in class, a reading you didn’t quite understand, or if there’s some aspect of Northwest history you’d like to know more about. I’m also more than happy to read early drafts of your paper and make suggestions for improvements. Or, you can just stop by just to chat. Email is the best way to get ahold of me. I will respond to all student emails within 24 hours.

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"Nickelodeons," or cheap theatres where patrons could purchase movie tickets for a nickel, proliferated in the early twentieth century and helped make the movies a popular and affordable form of entertainment.
Schedule of Topics and Films

Week 1: The Origins of American Cinema

January 10
Race, D.W. Griffith, and the Making of a Medium

January 12
Film screening: scenes from *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Week 2: Making Cinema Modern

January 17
The Age of the Mass: Consumerism, Mass Culture, and the Studios

January 19
Film screening: *Modern Times* (1936)

Research Paper Proposal Due

Week 3: Hollywood and Hard Times

January 24
The Great Depression and the Laboring of American Culture

January 26
Film screening: *The Devil and Miss Jones* (1941)
Week 4: Tough Guys and Femme Fatales

January 31
Gender and Postwar Anxieties in Film Noir

February 2
Film screening: *Double Indemnity* (1944)

Week 5: The Red Scare on Screen

February 7
HUAC and the Hollywood Ten

February 9
Film screening: *On the Waterfront* (1954)

Week 6: Gunfighter Nation

February 14
Indians in American Popular Culture, from Buffalo Bill to John Ford

Midterm Due

February 16
Film screening: *The Searchers* (1956)
Week 7: The Film School Generation
February 21
Counterculture Hollywood

February 23
Film screening: *The Graduate* (1967)

Week 8: Civil Rights on Screen
February 28
MLK, Sydney Poitier, and the New Black Manhood

March 2
Film screening: *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)

Week 9: The Malaise
March 7
Stayin’ Alive: Hollywood’s Crisis of Confidence

March 9
Film screening: *Taxi Driver* (1976)

Final Research Paper Due
Week 10: Hollywood and the Politics of Personality

March 14
Ronnie, Arnold, and The Donald: Hollywood and the Politics of Personality

February 16
Film screening: Do the Right Thing (1989)

Take Home Final
due by 12:30 p.m. on March 23rd