

Course Title	American Cinema: 1970s to the Present Day
Language	English (Instruction and Assessment)
Instructor	Richard Nowell (Richard_nowell@hotmail.com)
Structure	Six x Biweekly Seminars (04.03.2021, 18.03.2021, 01.04.2021, 15.04.21, 29.04.2021, 13.05.2021)
Semester	Spring 2021
Time	Thursdays, 12:00 – 15:50 (includes screening and breaks)
Location	
Office Hours:	Online, by Appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines some of the most important aspects of American Cinema of the last half century, covering culturally important production trends and industry-changing developments. Largely chronologically organized, the course focuses on The Hollywood Renaissance of 1967-1976, Women-in-Danger thrillers of 1976-1982, the New Cold War Cinema of 1983-1992, Family Films of the early 1990s (and beyond,) the Quirky Cinema of Wes Anderson and Others (1998-), and the Bromances of the 2000s and 2010s. The course combines textual analysis, social history, and industry analysis to shed new light on the textual/thematic nature of these trends and developments, as well as the forces that shaped their content and themes.

It does so to invite students to rethink received wisdom, by asking: whether Hollywood Renaissance films like *Easy Rider* were really just an extension of the 1960s counterculture, whether Women-in-Danger films like *Dressed to Kill* were really as misogynistic as their reputation suggests, whether New Cold War Cinema like *Rocky IV* was really stridently anti-Soviet, whether Family Films like *Finding Nemo* really romanticize family life, whether quirky cinema like *Napoleon Dynamite* was really just about cutesy aesthetics, and whether Bromances like *Step Brothers* were really mindless showcases of growing old disgracefully. In so doing, students will not only enrich their understandings of one of the United States most lucrative and visible export industries, but will be invited to consider how little we really understand the most powerful entertainment industry in the developed world.

COURSE AIMS

This course seeks to familiarize students with important and transferable critical tools, frameworks, approaches, and skills that will serve to deepen their capacity to engage with, and to read, audio-visual texts critically both on, and hopefully outside of, this course. The course also aims to enable students to appreciate that the interplay between media texts and their various contexts is more than a simple a “sign of the times” or products of visionary filmmakers; that it is also characterized by complex processes of mediation, selection, and interpretation at the levels of production, promotion, and reception.

By the end of the course, students will be expected to possess the critical abilities to produce insightful analysis of film texts; the skills necessary to conduct sound contextual analysis; the demonstrable capacity to synthesize original ideas in a lucid and coherent manner, both verbally and in writing; a solid understanding of the complex social, cultural, historical, and political relationships that have shaped important aspects of American cinematic output (and by implication different forms of audio-visual media produced both inside and outside of the US); and solid understanding of debates circulating the case-studies that comprise the course.

For learning outcomes specific to each session, see below for individual session outlines.

ASSESSMENT

Final Paper

Each student is to submit a circa. 1500–2000-word essay in based on **ONE** of the following prompts corresponding to the topics introduced across this course.

Note: films screened on this course may NOT be used as examples for any of the prompts.

Value: 100% of Final Grade

Due Date: 12:00 CET 27 May 2021

Prompt 1: As King suggests, journalists and historians have sometimes been guilty of exaggerating the progressive, experimental, and downbeat nature of the Renaissance movies. With this point in mind, consider how one of the Renaissance movies combines such content with more conservative, conventional, and upbeat material.

Prompt 2: As Lyons reminds us, some feminist activists protested against Hollywood's "women-in-danger" films for what they saw as their a) trivialization, b) sexualization, and c) commodification of violent misogyny, and because d) they feared that such films might inspire real life acts thereof. By contrast, it is clear that some of these films might actually offer critiques of violent misogyny. Explain where you stand on this issue through an analysis of any Hollywood "women-in-danger" film not screened on this course.

Please note that this prompt is not asking you to engage with media-effects theories – models relating to whether media actually influences behaviour – but with the content, themes, and modes of address of the films, and their status as a cultural product tailored for specific audiences.

Prompt 3: Stephen Prince suggests that "New Cold War" cinema was a supremely US-patriotic right-wing mode of filmmaking which a) demonized the Soviet Union while b) promoting positions articulated by the Reagan Whitehouse. However, it seems as though some of these films might also offer critiques of the very aspects of American culture, society, politics, and economics that Prince sees them as supporting. Consider this issue through an analysis of any example of New Cold War Cinema not screened on this course.

Prompt 4: As Kramer suggests, Family Films are deliberately tailored to foster intergenerational understanding through the films' content and themes, as well as through the act of watching the movies as a family. With this point in mind, explain how the makers of a family film of your choosing position the film as a form of family therapy.

Prompt 5: MacDowell's work shows that Quirky films can be seen as offering a detached, hip audience the chance to process trauma in a covert fashion that does not involve losing face. Explain how a quirky film of your choosing is imbued with this type of therapeutic potential.

Prompt 6: As Hansen-Miller and Gill's work illustrates, the post-adolescent comedies of the 2000s and 2010s are typically read as doubly critical films, of both "New Ladism" and a traditional mature masculinity built around monogamy, fatherhood, and working life. However, these films can also be seen as self-promotional pictures, ones which stress to audiences that a measure of juvenile recreation can be a desirable part of a more traditionally

defined adult life. Use an example of post-adolescent comedy not screened on this course to support your position on this topic.

All Essays are to be submitted in PDF or word format to richard_nowell@hotmail.com -

Please include your name and the course title in the name of the file.

NB: Extensions can be arranged with the instructor in advance, based on health, humanitarian, and other grounds.

Tutorials

All students are invited to arrange one-on-one tutorials to discuss assignments and/or any issues arising from the course. Meetings can be arranged by email and can take place either online or at a physical location of mutual convenience.

Feedback

Each student will be emailed individually with detailed personal feedback on his or her mid-term paper and final paper. This feedback is designed to be constructive so will spotlight strengths, shortcomings, and suggestions on how the paper might have been elevated.

Plagiarism Information

It is the duty of every student to ensure that s/he has familiarized him- or herself with the following details pertaining to plagiarism.

(A) Any use of quoted texts in seminar papers and theses must be acknowledged. Such use must meet the following conditions: (1) the beginning and end of the quoted passage must be shown with quotation marks; (2) when quoting from periodicals or books, the name(s) of author(s), book or article titles, the year of publication, and page from which the passage is quoted must all be stated in footnotes or endnotes; (3) internet sourcing must include a full web address where the text can be found as well as the date the web page was visited by the author.

(B) In case the use of any texts other than those written by the author is established without proper acknowledgement as defined in (A), the paper or thesis will be deemed plagiarized and handed over to the Head of School.

Grading/Evaluation: Grades from A-F will be awarded based on the following criteria.

	Argumentation/Understanding	Sources/Evidence	Communication
A 90<	Insightful, vigorous, and demonstrating considerable depth of understanding and a significant amount of original thought; addressing prompt directly through a wholly coherent synthesis of ideas; demonstrating a degree of mastery over subject; demonstrating a deep and thorough understanding of key concepts.	Full range of set resources consulted; sources employed with significant discrimination and sound judgment; thorough assessment of evidence; use of a broad range of examples.	Near-Faultless typography and layout; near-flawless turns of phrase and expression; sophisticated and precise vocabulary; clear structure; exemplary citation and bibliography.
B 80 – 89.99	Perceptive and insightful; some evidence of original thought; for the most part addressing prompt directly; mainly coherent synthesis of ideas; thorough and somewhat critical understanding of key concepts.	A fairly wide range of set resources consulted; solid assessment of evidence; sophisticated use of a fairly broad range of examples.	Very Solid typography and layout; few errors in grammar; mainly sophisticated turns of phrase and expression; mostly clear structure; strong citation and bibliography.
C 70-79.99	Solid understanding addressed, for the most part, to the prompt; good synthesis of ideas; reasonably solid understanding of key	Some sources consulted; evidence of some assessment of evidence; use of mostly workable examples.	Good typography and layout; comprehensible and largely error-free grammar, turns of phrase, and expression; reasonable clearly structured; some

	concepts; evidence of gaps in knowledge and some minor misunderstandings of key concepts.		attempt to provide citation and bibliography.
D 60 – 69.99	Indirectly addressed to prompt; no real synthesis of ideas; mainly descriptive rather than analytical; patchy understanding of key concepts; significant gaps in knowledge.	Restricted range of sources consulted; superficial understanding of evidence; limited range of examples, many of which are inappropriate.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; weak or missing citations and bibliography.
E 50 – 59.99	Barely addressed to the prompt; largely disconnected series of points; poor understanding of key concepts; major gaps in knowledge.	No sources consulted; poor understanding of evidence; few useful examples.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; no citations or bibliography.
F <50	Not addressed to the prompt; largely incoherent; little evidence of an understanding of key concepts; demonstrating little knowledge of subject.	No sources consulted; poor understanding of evidence; no useful examples.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; no citations or bibliography.
ZERO	No paper submitted; or paper clearly showing no effort to respond to prompt.		

COURSE OUTLINE

Session 1

The Hollywood Renaissance

11 March 2021

This session focuses on a transitional period in contemporary American cinema, the period from 1967 to 1976, during which the major US film companies were said to have fought their way out of financial difficulties by responding to a new younger, educated audience with progressive, downbeat, somewhat experimental films. We will consider whether this reputation truly reflected Hollywood output and conduct at this time, or whether they have primarily served political functions for Hollywood and people who make a living writing about it.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. The range of potential causes of the Hollywood Renaissance
- II. the putative characteristics of the Renaissance films
- III. Whether the Hollywood Renaissance really happened at all

Preparation

Reading

King, 11-48.

1. What was the Hollywood Renaissance?
2. What characteristics purportedly distinguished the Hollywood Renaissance Films?
3. What conditions does King suggest led to the Hollywood Renaissance?

Screening: *Easy Rider* (1969)

Session 2

Women-in-Danger Films

25 March 2021

More so than any other production trend of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a series of thrillers about women encountering misogynist maniacs attracted the attention of American public-sphere elites. While these films have tended to be vilified as part of a “backlash” against increases in female social, economic, and professional upward mobility, we might wish to consider the implications of these films having been made for, and pitched to, mature females. This session will therefore consider the complex gender politics that suggest this reviled trend may well have had similar intentions to the critics and activists denouncing them.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. dominant critical understandings of the women-in-danger films of 1976-1982.
- II. the socio-political discourses that shaped the reception and production of these films.
- III. how these films can be seen as a form of topical women's cinema.

Preparation

Reading: Lyons, 53-80.

- I. What does Lyons' suggest concerned feminist groups protesting *Dressed to Kill* and others?
- II. What assumptions underpinned the feminist denunciation of such films?

Home Screening: *Dressed to Kill* (1978)

- I. How did you respond to the violence in this movie?
- II. Which characters did you find likable and which less-so?
- III. Does this film really hate women?

In-class Screening: *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978)

- I. How are women portrayed in this film?
- II. How are men portrayed in this film?
- III. How does this film comment on the relationship between the media/arts and violence against women?

Session 3

New Cold War Cinema

08 April 2021

Hollywood's engagement with important geopolitical issues is perhaps nowhere more apparent in the last thirty years than in a high-profile strand of mid-to-late 1980s output known as New Cold War Cinema. This production trend is typically seen as jingoistic and hawkish on the grounds that it supposedly showcased American patriotism and military might in the face of a dangerous, in-human enemy from the Eastern Bloc. In this session, we will consider whether these films were really quite as reactionary as they are suggested to have been or whether some of them may have sought to critique American political, economic, and social systems, as well as the very act of politicizing entertainment.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. how Hollywood's New Cold War cinema is understood as pro-Reagan/anti-Soviet cinema.
- II. how some of these films offer more critical positions on America and the New Cold War.
- III. the conditions that led some Hollywood filmmakers to critique media propagandizing.

Preparation

Reading: Prince, 49-80.

- I. What does Prince suggest were the main themes of New Cold War Cinema?
- II. What does he suggest were the positions these films took on these themes?
- II. How does Prince understand *Rocky IV*?

Home Screening: *Russkies* (1987)

- I. To what extent does this film exemplify Prince's arguments about NCWC?
- II. In what sense does this film offer a different message about cold war relations?
- III. What does this film have to say about the roles of the media in New Cold War-era America?

In-class Screening: *Rocky IV* (1985)

- I. What characteristics/traits does this film demonize or criticize?
- II. What characteristics/traits does this film valorise or celebrate?
- III. What political positions does the film articulate?

Session 4

Family Films

22 March 2021

In this session we will examine an important way in which Hollywood has developed from the early 1990s to the present day, by focusing on a key product type that is said to distinguish this period from earlier ones: the institutionalization of high-end family films. We will consider why this type of film has become central to conglomerate Hollywood's operations and think about how its multi-generational targeted audience is addressed. Central to this session, will be an examination of how Hollywood has attempted to use these films to posit itself as the glue that binds families together, and how this form of "social work" or family therapy relates to cultivating consumer loyalty for generations to come.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. The forces that led to the institutionalization of family films in early 90s Hollywood.
- II. How these films attempt to speak to both children and adults.
- III. How these films are positioned as contributing to the emotional health of families.

PREPARATION

Readings

Allen, 109-125.

- I. What led to the increased importance of family films in late 1980s and early 1990s?

Krämer, 294-311.

- I. In what ways do family films try to speak to children?
- II. In what ways do family films try to speak to adults?

Home Screening: *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993)

- I. How does this film address the interests and concerns of children?
- II. How does the film address the interests and concerns of parents?
- III. How does this film try to tell audiences it can help families in front of the screen?

In-Class Screening: *Onward* (2019)

- I. What family-related topics does this film thematise?
- II. What does it have to say about these topics?

Session 5

Quirky Cinema

06 May 2021

The 2000s witnessed the institutionalization of “Indiewood” cinema – hip middlebrow films usually handled by Hollywood companies or their subsidiaries – of which quirky cinema was arguably the most high-profile variant. Typically associated with director Wes Anderson, these ironic/sincere tales of the pains of personal growth have been mainly understood as a response to the emergence of a new “hipster” perspective in the late 1990s. However, in this session we will consider whether quirky films are in fact a long-standing aspect of American cinema, one designed to offer covert support to an audience whose self-image might

otherwise prevent it from accepting a low, feminine, emotional cinematic form that effectively amounts to melodrama for cool kids.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. How quirky has been conceptualized as distinctive way of telling stories.
- II. Why quirky cinema is tailored for hipster audiences.
- III. How quirky cinema offers covert therapy to a self-styled detached audience.

Preparation

Reading: MacDowell, 1-16.

- I. What content and themes distinguish Quirky Cinema?
- II. How do these films invite audiences to view this material?
- III. Why do quirky films encourage audiences to respond in such ways?

Home Screening: *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)

- I. Why do the characters in this film behave like they do?
- II. How did you respond emotionally to this film?
- III. How does it use comedy and visual style to avoid viewers becoming *too* emotionally affected?

In-class Screening: *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)

- I. How do the characters in this movie make you feel?
- III. How would you describe the tone of this film?
- III. Why, according to this film, might the characters be behaving like they are?

Session 6

Bromances

20 May 2021

The mid-to-late 2000s and 2010s witnessed a spate of comedies about grown men torn between and what might traditionally be seen as juvenility and more adult lifestyles and values. Associated with producer-directors Judd Apatow and Todd Phillips, these films were typically explained as politically incorrect outlets for a contemporary culture preoccupied with prolonging adolescence, especially among males. However, this session considers

whether these films actually represented a contemporary incarnation of a long-standing means by which Hollywood has sought to maximize attendance, one which promoted a lifestyle that promoted both responsibility and a need for youthful recreation; recreation like the act of consuming the films themselves.

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. How the “New Lad” has been conceptualized as a key social figure in Anglophone society.
- II. How filmmakers drew on the figure of the new lad to address post-adolescent males.
- III. How this genre was used to promote film consumption as a part of adult masculinity.

Preparation

Reading

Hansen-Miller and Gill, 36-50.

- I. What was the New Lad of Anglophone cultures?
- II. What conditions led to the emergence of this new social type?
- III. According to these scholars, what were the main themes and positions of New Lad films?

Home Screening: *The Hangover* (2009)

- I. How does this film picture traditional adult life?
- II. How does it picture youthful conduct?
- III. What might be the intended impact of all this on the film’s targeted male audience?

In-Class Screening: *Step Brothers* (2008)

- I. How does this film depict fortyish men?
- II. What does the film have to say about the different lifestyles they live?
- III. What roles does it suggest youthful entertainment and recreation might play in their lives?

Readings

Allen Robert C. “Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the ‘Family Film’.” *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*. Eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby. London: BFI, 1999: 109-134. Print.

Hansen-Miller, David, and Rosalind Gill. "Lad Flicks: Discursive Reconstructions of Masculinity in Popular Film." *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*. Eds. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer: New York: Routledge, 2011: 36-50. Print

King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema*. London: I. B. Taurus, 2002, 11–48. Print.

Kramer, Peter. "Would You Take Your Child to See this Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-adventure Movie." *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. London: Routledge, 1998: 294-311. Print.

Lyons, Charles. "Murder of Women in Not Erotic: Feminists against *Dressed to Kill* (1980)", in *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 53-80.

MacDowell, James. "Notes on Quirky", *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, Issue 1 (2010), pp. 1-16. Print.

Prince, Stephen. "Brave Homelands and Evil Empires", in *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992), pp. 49-80.

Films

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Easy Rider (1969)

Eyes of Laura Mars (1978)

Hangover, The (2009)

Mrs. Doubtfire (1992)

Napoleon Dynamite (2004)

Onward (2019)

Rocky IV (1985)

Russkies (1987)

Royal Tenenbaums, The (2001)

Step Brothers (2008)