

Title: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA: HISTORY, INDUSTRY, MOVIES

Language: English

Semester: Fall 2013

Duration/Frequency: 6 x 180 minute sessions comprising film screening and seminar

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Course Description and Purpose

This module offers students insight into the ways in which the American film industry has functioned as an economic and aesthetic institution in the contemporary period – accepted by most film historians to have begun in 1967. Focusing on both the dominant major Hollywood studios and diverse companies that have made up the American independent sector across the last forty years, the module asks students to consider how the structure of the industry, along with different forms of commercial logic and strategy, have shaped the conduct and output of the most powerful film industry on the planet.

Accordingly, we will examine how US-based film companies have produced, promoted, and disseminated their products in response to changing social and historical circumstances and in response to changing market conditions. The module therefore encourages students to analyse a wide variety of film texts – from exploitation and art cinema to blockbusters and teen films – within the production, marketing and merchandising, publicity, distribution, and exhibition contexts that they have operated. In the process, we will be assessing issues such as the impact on the American movie business, its product, profile, and practices of conglomeration, globalization, and the rise of powerful independent companies.

Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

Contemporary American Cinema aims to facilitate students' deeper understanding of: the dynamic and complex relationships that have existed, and which continue to exist, between Hollywood and the American independent sector; the intersecting social, cultural, political, economic, and industrial contexts in which the Contemporary American film industry has conducted business vis-a-vis economic strategy, production, film content, distribution, marketing, merchandising, and exhibition/delivery. *Contemporary American Cinema* also aims to familiarize students with the critical tools, research methods, and key filmic and extra-filmic objects needed to conduct sound industrial analysis.

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 film industrial 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, historical, political, and industrial relationships that have existed between Hollywood and the American independent sector; a solid understanding of key debates circulating the American film industry's domestic activities; a solid understanding of Hollywood's status as a social, cultural, economic, and aesthetic institution; and a solid understanding of the complex ways in which American film companies have sought to generate revenue from their products and services.

Texts and Resources:

Students are expected actively to contribute to seminar discussions, which will center on the mandatory film screenings, the mandatory readings, and critical analyses thereof. Accordingly, students are required to study all of the relevant set readings before each class. Well before the first day of the semester, all of the readings will be available to download in PDF form. Students are advised to bring to class **hard copies** of the relevant readings as use of electronic devices will not be permitted during seminars.

Assignments:

Mid-term Paper

Value: 50% of Final Grade

Each student is to submit a 2,000 word essay in based on a topic introduced in sessions 1–3. A choice of three questions will be revealed in good time.

Deadline: TBC

Final Essay

Value: 50% of Final Grade

Each student is to submit a 2,000 word essay in based on a topic introduced in sessions 4–6. A choice of three questions will be revealed in good time.

Deadline: TBC

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

Penalties for Late Submission of Work

On the day following the due date – 5 marks out of 100 deducted

On the 2nd day following the due to date – 10 marks out of 100 deducted

On the 3rd day following the due date – 15 marks out of 100 deducted

On the 4th day following the due date – 20 marks out of 100 deducted

After the 4th day following the due date – all marks deducted

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 at a location and time 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 and any possible shortcomings.

Grading/Evaluation: Grades from 1-4 will be awarded based on the following criteria:

	Argumentation/Understanding	Sources/Evidence	Communication
1 70<	Insightful, vigorous, and demonstrating considerable depth of understanding and a significant amount of original thought; addressing question directly through a wholly coherent synthesis of ideas; demonstrating a degree of mastery over subject; demonstrating a deep and thorough understanding of key concepts.	A wide range of sources 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.
2 55–69.9	Perceptive and insightful; some evidence of original thought; for the most part addressing question directly; mainly coherent synthesis of ideas; thorough and somewhat critical understanding of key concepts.	A fairly wide range of sources 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.
3 40–54.9	Solid understanding addressed, for the most part, to the question; good synthesis of ideas; reasonably solid understanding of key concepts; evidence of gaps in knowledge and some minor misunderstandings of key concepts.	Several 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 attempt to provide citation and bibliography.
4 (Fail) <40	Barely if it all addressed to question; no real synthesis of ideas; mainly descriptive rather than analytical; weak and patchy understanding of key concepts; significant gaps in knowledge and misunderstanding of key concepts.	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.

Session One

The Hollywood Renaissance



This session focuses on a transitional period in contemporary American cinema, the period from 1967 to 1976, during which the major US film companies fought their way out of financial difficulties by responding to a new younger audience. Focused upon will be the films made by, and the status of the movie brats, a group of high profile young filmmakers including Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, that was said to have been given unprecedented power and creative freedom by studio management. We will consider whether the movie brats and their films truly reflected industry output and conduct at this time, or whether they and the films served primarily public relations objectives.

Readings

Geoff King, Chapter One “New Hollywood Version 1: The Hollywood Renaissance”, *New Hollywood Cinema* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2002), pp. 11–48.

Murray Smith, “Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History”, in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 3–20.

Mandatory Screenings

In-Class: *Easy Rider* (1969)

At-home: *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967)

Selected Additional Topic-Relevant Films

The Graduate (1967)

The Last Picture Show (1970)

The Conversation (1974)

Taxi Driver (1976)

Session Two

Post-Classical Exploitation



This session examines the conduct and output of smaller companies operating in the shadow of the New Hollywood majors, the independent outfits that traded in such diverse fare as black audience films, sex pictures, car crash films, hardcore pornography, and films aimed at a rural Christian Americans. We will consider the different economic and aesthetic strategies that non-Hollywood companies like New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures employed in the 1970s and early 1980s to forge for themselves a profitable niche.

Readings

Ed Lowry, “Dimension Pictures: Portrait of a 1970s Independent”, in Chris Holmund, and Justin Wyatt (eds.) *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 41-53.

Frederik Wasser, “Four Walling Exhibition: Regional Resistance to the Hollywood Film Industry”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1995), pp. 51–65.

Richard Nowell, “‘There’s More Than One Way to Lose Your Heart’: The American Film Industry, Early Teen Slasher Films, and Female Youth”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2011), pp. 115–140.

Mandatory Screenings

In-Class: *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976)

At-home: *Eat My Dust* (1976)

Selected Additional Topic-Relevant Films

Foxy Brown (1975)

Halloween (1978)

Roller Boogie (1979)

Session Three The Blockbuster Era and High Concept



This session concentrates on the years 1975 to 1989, the foundational period in the recent history of the American film industry, which has also been called the blockbuster era. We will examine the developments that unfolded therein and how they have shaped the structure and output of the American film industry until the mid-1990s, and in some respects, to the present day. We will also examine how conglomeratization influenced film production, distribution, and promotion, paying particular attention to a marketing-friendly approach to film that has been called High Concept.

Readings

Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood", in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Collins, (eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (Routledge, New York, 1993), pp. 8–37.

Justin Wyatt, Chapter One, "A Critical Re-definition: The Concept of High Concept", *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 1-22.

Mandatory Screenings

In-Class: *Top Gun* (1986)

At-home: *Flashdance* (1983)

Selected Additional Topic-Relevant Films

Jaws (1975)

Star Wars (1977)

E.T.: The Extraterrestrial (1982)

Back to the Future (1985)

Session Four

Major Independents



Those independent companies that have for a brief time managed to challenge Hollywood in terms of profile or commercial performances are the subject of this session. Covering the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, we will focus on the rise to prominence of major independents, instant majors, and mini-majors including The Canon Group, Orion Pictures, Miramax Films, and New Line Cinema. In particular, we will be examining how these companies balanced the replication of Hollywood's conduct and attempts to dominate niche markets. We will also be continuing to question the clear distinctions that have been said to have existed between Hollywood and the American independent sector.

Readings

Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood", in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds.), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp 74–87.

Alisa Perren, "Sex, Lies, and Marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 30–39.

Mandatory Screenings

In-Class: *Dirty Dancing* (1987)

At-home: *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (1988)

Selected Additional Topic-Relevant Films

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990)

Pulp Fiction (1990)

The Mask (1994)

Scream (1996)

Session Five

Indiewood



This session will examine how major studios have responded to the commercial viability of the off-beat idiosyncratic motion pictures that often are considered to be the quintessence of “independent” cinema. Concentrating on the rise to prominence of major studio-owned boutique labels like News Corp.’s Fox Searchlight Pictures and their distribution of indiewood product such as *Adaptation* (2002) and *Juno* (2007), we will question further the validity of the distinctions that have been drawn between Hollywood and Independent American Cinema.

Readings

Geoff King, “Chapter One – Indiewood in Context”, *Indiewood USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*, (London: I. B. Taurus, 2009), pp. 1–43.

Michael Z. Newman, “Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2009), pp. 16-34.

Mandatory Screenings

In-Class: *Rushmore* (1998)

At-home: *Adaptation* (2004)

Selected Additional Topic-Relevant Films

Being John Malcovich (1999)

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou (2004)

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)

Juno (2007)

Session Six

Global Hollywood



In this session we will examine the ways in which Hollywood developed from the mid-1990s to the present day, by focusing on the type of product that is both central to its practices and which distinguishes the period from earlier periods: Global Blockbuster properties. Our focus will be on the way intensified globalization and conglomerate restructuring have transformed blockbusters from high-end films to components in networks of cross-media international products. We will also think about how appealing to certain international markets has influenced the big-budget American cinema has come to look for the last decade and a half.

Readings

Tino Balio, “A Major Force in all of the World’s Important Markets’: The Globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s”, in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds.) *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 47–57.

Thomas Schatz, “New Hollywood, New Millennium”, in Warren Buckland (ed.), *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 19–46.

Mandatory Screenings

In-Class: *Madagascar 3: Europe’s Most Wanted* (2012)

At-home: *Cars 2* (2011)

Selected Additional Topic-Relevant Films

Titanic (1997)

Mission Impossible 2 (2000)

X2 (2003)

Mamma Mia! (2008)

RESEARCH

Some excellent work on American cinema is published in the following English-language peer-reviewed journals, which are, to the best of my knowledge, in the most part accessible through on-line resources such as Ebsco, J-Store, and Project Muse:

Cinema Journal

Film Quarterly

Journal of Film and Video

Journal of Popular Film and Television

New Review of Film and Television Studies

Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Periodicals

See LexisNexis and newspapers.google for additional popular press articles.

Disclaimer about Securing Films

With the exception of the in-class screenings, it is the responsibility of each student to ensure that s/he views each of the films assigned for mandatory at-home viewing. It is also strongly encouraged that each student “views around” each of the set topics by watching topic-related films including, but not limited to, those highlighted above. Both the instructor and the department strongly discourage students from sourcing films from illegal downloading and streaming websites. Instead, both the instructor and the department encourage the purchase or rental of films from legal video-on-demand websites and/or from legitimate retailers.