Title: KEY TRENDS IN AMERICAN FILM

Language: English

Semester: Fall 2014

Time: Every Second Thursday, 14:10-17:25 [comprising film screening and lecture/seminar]

Location: TBA

Coordinator: Dr. Richard Nowell

Contact: richard_nowell@hotmail.com

Course Description and Purpose

This course offers students insights into the ways in which socio-political discourses have shaped the production, content, and themes of American motion pictures. The course encourages students to take up more nuanced and pragmatic positions to the relationships between these two phenomena than those posited by the preeminent socio-symptomatic and ideological analyses, both of which have been guilty of reducing the commercial and creative forces behind films to mere ciphers of the irresistible force of the zeitgeist. Rather than considering films to be simply signs of the times or unwitting witnesses to the mores and values of American society, this course invites students to think about how the American film industry *uses* and *appropriates* socio-political discourses in a rational and strategic fashion in order to make its products attractive and relevant to targeted audiences. Students will explore these issues in relation to six of Hollywood's most high-profile topical production trends of the last forty years: the Blaxploitation cycle of the early-to-mid 1970s, women-in-danger films of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the New Cold War Cinema of the mid-late 1980s, Gen-X cinema of the early-to-mid 1990s, the Family Film of the 1990s (and beyond), and the Post-9/11 cinema of the mid-to-late 2000s.

Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

Key Trends in American Film aims to facilitate students' deeper understanding of the relationships that exist between, on the one hand, the content and themes of American mainstream cinema, and, on the other hand, certain prominent social, cultural, political discourses circulating the public (and private) sphere. In doing so, the course will seek 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, audiovisual texts critically both on, and hopefully outside of, the course. *Key Trends in American Cinema* aims to enable students to appreciate that the interplay between texts and contexts is more than a simple "sign of the times" but is 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 posses: 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 audiovisual media produced both inside and outside of the US); and solid understanding of debates circulating the case-studies that comprise the course.

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. All of the readings will, well before the first day of the semester, be available in PDF form to download from the course website. Students are advised to bring to class **hard copies** of the relevant readings as use of electronic devices will not be permitted during seminars.

One-on-One 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.

Assignments

Mid-term Paper

Value: 40% 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 prompts will be announced on Friday 17 October 2014.

Deadline: 12:00 CET Sunday 26 October 2014

Final Paper

Value: 60% 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 prompts will be announced on Friday 28 November 2014.

Deadline: 12:00 CET Friday 12 December 2014

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

Late Submission of Work

Penalties

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

Exemptions

Penalties are waved on medical and compassionate grounds (e.g. familial bereavement) only; please do not enquire about the waving of penalties on other grounds incase refusal offends.

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.
1.5 (65-69.9)	Perceptive and insightful; some evidence of original thought; mainly addressing prompt 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.
2 (60-64.9)	Strong understanding addressed, for the most part, to the prompt; a synthesis of ideas; solid understanding of key concepts; evidence of minor gaps in knowledge, and minor misunderstandings of key concepts.	Several relevant 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; clearly structured; solid citation and bibliography.
2.5 (55-59.9)	Addressed to prompt; limited synthesis of ideas; too much description compared to analysis; general understanding of key concepts; some misunderstanding of key concepts.	Restricted range of sources consulted; superficial understanding of evidence;	Solid typography and layout; comprehensible and largely error-free grammar, turns of phrase, and expression; reasonably clearly structured; some attempt to provide citation and bibliography.

3 **(40-54.9)**	Loosely addressed to the prompt; little synthesis of ideas; mainly descriptive rather than analytical; patchy understanding of key concepts; some major gaps in knowledge and some misunderstandings of key concepts.	Few relevant sources consulted; limited range of examples, some of which are poorly chosen.	Patchy typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; somewhat limited vocabulary; some ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; weak or missing citations and bibliography.
4 (Fail) **(<40)**	Barely if at all addressed to the prompt; no real synthesis of ideas; mainly or entirely descriptive significant gaps in knowledge and major misunderstanding of key concepts.	Few if any relevant sources consulted; very limited range of examples, many of which are poorly chosen.	Poor typography and layout; countless errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; myriad ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; weak or missing citations and bibliography.

Session 1   **Blaxploitation**   **2 October 2014**

This session's focuses on one of the most prominent and controversial production trends of the early-to-mid 1970s: the Blaxploitation cycle of circa 1970 to 1975. Comprising tens of mainly low-budget crime pictures featuring black protagonists, these films boasted a surprising combination of sex, violence, and criminality, and thought-provoking commentary on some of the changing social and economic aspects of urban black life. Students will take up the implications of this blend of sensation and social critique, with reference to two of the most thoughtful contributions to the cycle: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972).

Readings:

Eithne Quinne and Peter Kramer, "Blaxploitation", in Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (eds.), *Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: Open University Press, 2006), pp. 184–185, 188–198.

Jan Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements", *The Velvet Light Trap* 50 (Fall 2002), pp. 48–61.

Home Screening: *Superfly* (1972)

In-Class Screening: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1971)

Session 2   __The Hollywood Women-in-Danger Film__   **16 October 2014**

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 – leading to an unusual alliance of left-wing feminists and right-wingers and to deeply entrenched discourses about the nature of filmic violence and misogyny. Yet, despite their vilification as part of a "backlash" against increasing levels of female social, economic, and professional upward mobility, these films were usually made for, and pitched to, mature females as well as male audiences. This session considers the complex gender politics of these films, with Brian De Palma's polarizing 1980 film *Dressed to Kill* and the glossy *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978) providing principal referents.

Preparatory Readings:

Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 53–80.

Robin Wood, "Returning the Look: *Eyes of a Stranger*", in Gregory A. Waller (ed.), American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 79–85.

Home Screening: *Dressed to Kill* (1978)
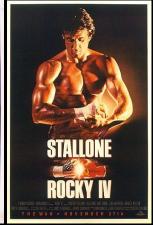
In-Class Screening: *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978)

American cinema's engagement with important geopolitical issues has been a reoccurring feature of film history, and it is perhaps nowhere more apparent in the last quarter of a century than in a high-profile, politically-engaged, strand of mid-late 1980s output known by most cultural historians as New Cold War Cinema. Often proclaimed to be the quintessence of this right-wing, hawkish mode of filmmaking was a series of late-Cold War fantasies that supposedly showcased American patriotism and military might in the face of dangerous, in-human enemies, especially those from the Eastern Bloc. This session will consider whether these films were quite as simplistically reactionary as they are often suggested to have been or whether they also delivered quite forceful critiques of American political, economic, and social systems. Case-studies will be provided by *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Rocky IV* (1985).

Preparatory Reading:

Stephen Prince, *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992), pp. 49–80.

Home Screening: *Red Dawn* (1984)

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

The 1990s is widely thought to have seen the rise to prominence of a youthful cohort that was characterized by irony, cynicism, an outward rejection of consumer-capitalism, and hyper media-literacy: Generation X. This session will consider how Gen X was courted as an audience through on the screen by films that depicted – and attempted to reshape – this audience. We will examine the tensions that lay in both the representation of the group and the fraught cultural politics of reaching out to a discerning, ostensibly anti-consumerist, anti-establishment demographic through that most "mainstream" of late capitalist entertainment forms: the Hollywood motion picture. Helping us to do so will be two films quite distinct Hollywood Gen-X pictures the largely despised *Reality Bites* (1994) and the cult favorite *Mallrats* (1995)

Preparatory Readings:

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

Jonathon I. Oake, "*Reality Bites* and Generation X as Spectator", *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 53, (Spring 2004), pp. 83–97.

At-Home Screening: *Reality Bites* (1994)

In-Class Screening: *Mallrats* (1995)

This session examines one of the most prominent – and enduring – production trends of the last quarter- century: family films. We will consider why this type of film rose to prominence in the 1990s, and why it has remained central to Hollywood's operations. Central to this session will be an examination of how the industry positions these films as the glue binding families together, and how this form of "family therapy" derives less from an inherent social conservatism – of which Hollywood has oft been accused – than from efforts to cultivate long-term consumer loyalty. Helping us do these things will be *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), and one of the biggest family films in history, *Finding Nemo* (2003)

Preparatory Readings

Robert C. Allen "Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'Family Film'", in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds.), *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 109–134.

Peter Krämer, 'Would you take your Child to see this Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-adventure Movie', in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds.) *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 294–311.

At-Home Screening: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)

In-Class Screening: *Finding Nemo* (2003)

Critics and commentators have exerted considerable energy thinking about the ways in which American cultural products might engage with the events, aftermath, and repercussions of September 11 2001. In some respects then, post-9/11 cinema is more a series of reading strategies than a coherent industrial practice. The films in question are grouped together because they are seen to dramatize or thematize the more divisive aspects of the Bush-Cheney administration's domestic and international policies, including a strict division between good and evil; valorization of hyper-masculinity; justification of pre-emptive violence, US overseas interventionism, surveillance, and torture. We will consider the manner in which individual instances of post-9/11 cinema use this popular vision of the Bush-Cheney era. Helping us do so will be *V for Vendetta* (2006) and *Taken* (2008).

Preparatory Reading

Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 163–199.

At-Home Screening: *V for Vendetta* (2006)

In-Class Screening: *Taken* (2008)

Journals

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
Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies
Screen

Periodicals

To access historical reception of recent American cinema, see the following on-line archives:
www.time.com
www.nytimes.com
www.rogerebert.com
See also 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.