

Film, Video, and American History
FILM S247/HISTS187/AMSTS483
Mondays and Wednesdays, 1-5:30pm

2017 Yale Summer Session B
July 3-August 4

Instructor: Andrew Vielkind
E-mail: andrew.vielkind@yale.edu
Office hours: By appointment

Course Description

Since its invention in the 1890s, cinema has been closely linked to American history through its ability to reflect on and shape the course of current events. Films, as forms of mass entertainment, encapsulate the beliefs, values, struggles, and anxieties of both their audiences and creators. This course explores the ways in which films have critically engaged with the various cultural, social, technological, and economic issues that have defined the periods in history at which they were made.

Students will learn to closely read a film while being attentive to the cultural implications surrounding its production and reception. The readings, screenings, and assignments will not only train students to learn how to deconstruct the artistic aspects of a film, but also broaden their understanding of American history. Historical periods and events to be discussed in class are Progressive Era politics, the Jazz Age, the Great Depression, the Second World War, Civil Rights, the Cold War, Vietnam, Reaganism, 9/11, and the 2008 financial crisis.

Attendance

This is an accelerated course in a seminar setting, so attendance is mandatory. Any absences will need to be approved by me in advance. The classroom will be conducive to open discussion of the films and texts that we are analyzing, so you are expected to be active participants in seminar. Make sure that you are prepared for class by reading the assigned texts in advance.

Screenings

Most of the films and short clips on the syllabus will be screened in the classroom, but in some instances the materials will be made available online for private viewing. For films that are not screened in class, it is essential that you watch them on your own before our next seminar meeting. Films that are screened in class will be discussed in the following

meeting. The films will also be available for viewing on DVD or Blu-Ray at the Yale Film Study Center (53 Wall Street).

Assignments

Film Response Journal: After watching each film that is screened during class, you are required to write a 2-3 sentence journal entry and post it to the Canvas server. Your response can be open ended, but ideally you should address a particular aspect of a film that you found intriguing, an issue that it raises, or pose a question that we can discuss further in seminar. You are welcome to draw a connection between the film and the readings from that week, but this is not essential. Your 2-3 sentence response should be posted by **midnight** on the night before our next class meeting.

Reception Paper (3-4 pages, double spaced): In a short essay, you will write a report on one of the films on the syllabus and analyze how it was received by audiences at the time when it was made. Your paper should rely mostly on primary sources from newspapers, magazines, and journals that were published at the time when the film was first released to the public (many of these publications have been digitized and are easily searchable). You should incorporate at least (2) primary sources into your discussion. I will provide students with a tutorial on the various resources that can be used to find your primary sources. After conducting your research and writing your report, you will share your findings to the class in the form of a short (approximately 5 min.) presentation.

Final Paper (8-10 pages): The final paper will require you to conduct close analysis on a particular film or set of films that we screened in the class (excluding the film you discussed for your reception paper). You should also explain how your analysis relates to the historical context in which the film was made by making use of at least (3) primary sources. You will develop your final paper topic in consultation with me. Although you will be working on this project independently, we will workshop your ideas during class before you begin your writing.

Grading

Participation and Attendance: 20%

Film Response Journal: 10%

Reception Paper: 20%

Reception Paper Presentation: 10%

Final Paper: 40%

Readings

Most of the essays and chapters are drawn from the following texts, which can be purchased at the Yale bookstore:

Movies and American Society, 2nd Edition, ed. Steven J. Ross (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014)

Hollywood's America: Understanding History Through Film, 5th Edition, ed. Steven Mintz, Randy W. Roberts, David Welky (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016)

All readings will be available as PDFs on the Yale Canvas system.

Schedule

Week 1

Monday, July 3: Introduction—Early Cinema and the Rise of Mass Spectacle

Films: A series of short films, including *Battleship Maine* (1898), *Capture of Trenches at Candabar* (Edison, 1899), *Coney Island at Night* (Porter, 1905), and *A Trip Down Market Street Before the Fire* (1906)

Read: Ross (chapter 1), Mintz (Introduction)

Wednesday, July 5: *The Birth of a Nation* and Progressive Era Politics

Films: *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) and *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (Griffith, 1912)

Clips: *Traffic in Souls* (Tucker, 1913) and *Children Who Labor* (Miller, 1912)

Read: Ross (chapter 2), Mintz (33-41, 69-70)

Melvyn Stokes, "Griffith's View of History," in *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Week 2

Monday, July 10: The 1920s and the Jazz Age

Film: *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland, 1927)

Clips: *Within Our Gates* (Micheaux, 1920) and *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928)

Read: Ross (chapter 3)

Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pp. 417-453.

Wednesday, July 12: The Great Depression and the Age of Machines

Films: *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936) and *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932)

Clips: *Gold Diggers of 1933* (LeRoy, 1933), *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932), *Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ford, 1940)

Read: Ross (chapter 5), Mintz (75-94)

Week 3

Monday, July 17: World War II: Trauma, Patriotism, and the Homefront

Films: *Why We Fight* (Capra, 1942-1945) and *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Dwan, 1949)

Clips: *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), *Cat People* (Tourneur, 1942), *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin, 1940), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946)

Read: Mintz 166-183

Thomas Doherty, "Government Work," In *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Wednesday, July 19: Cold War Anxieties

Reception Papers Due at the Beginning of Class and Short Presentations

Film: *Dr. Strangelove* (Kubrick, 1964)

Clips: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956), *The Manchurian Candidate* (Condon, 1959), *Duck and Cover* (Rizzo, 1951), *Primary* (Drew, 1960), and *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954)

Read: Ross (chapter 7), Mintz 229-255 and 259-269

Week 4

Monday, July 24: The Civil Rights Movement and the "New" Hollywood

Film: *In the Heat of the Night* (Jewison, 1967)

Clips: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971), *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1976)

Read: Ross (chapter 9), Mintz 270-278 and 297-306

Short excerpts from: Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008)

Wednesday, July 26: Vietnam War and 60s/70s Counterculture

Film: *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979)

Clips: *Hearts and Minds* (Davis, 1974), *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978), and *Platoon* (Stone, 1986)

Read: Ross (chapter 10), Mintz 306-323

Week 5

Monday, July 31: A Crisis of Confidence and the Reagan Era

Film: *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987)

Clips: *Koyaanisqatsi* (Reggio, 1982), *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978), *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976), *Working Girl* (Nichols, 1988), *Roger and Me* (Moore, 1989)

Read: Jimmy Carter's "Malaise" Speech

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis/>>

Raymond Arsenault, "Wall Street (1987): The Stockbroker's Son and the Decade of Greed," in *Film History* 28.1-2 (1998): 16-27.

Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, "Chapters 6: The Nineteen Eighties," in *American Film and Society Since 1945* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002)

Wednesday, August 2: The War on Terror and Crises of 21st Century America

Film: *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006)

Clips: *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow, 2012), *Citizenfour* (Poitras, 2014), *Capitalism: A Love Story* (Moore, 2009)

Read: Ron Rosenbaum, "Hijacking the Hijacking: The Problem with the United 93 Films" in *Slate* (April 27, 2006) <<http://www.slate.com/id/2140676/>>

Conor Friedersdorf, "What the War on Terror Actually Looks Like': Laura Poitras on *Citizenfour*," in *The Atlantic* (October 2014):

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/10/what-the-war-on-terror-actually-looks-like-laura-poitras-on-citizenfour/381749/>>

Guy Westwell, "The Iraq War" and "History," in *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)

Final Papers are due on August 4th by 5:00 pm.