

ENGL 250
Introduction to US Film History
Georgetown University
Spring 2015

Instructor Information

Instructor: Caetlin Benson-Allott
Office Location: 322 New North
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Office Hours: Wednesdays 8:30-10:30am or by appointment

Course Information

Screening Location: New South Film Screening Classroom
Screening Times: Mondays 6:30-8:30pm except as noted
Seminar Location: Walsh 490
Seminar Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30-10:45am
Prerequisites: none

Course Description/Overview

This course is a survey of US film history, focusing on its technological evolution, economic development, and cultural impact over the past 120 years. We will study the ways that different film technologies affect the movies' social and political significance in the US and examine the role technology plays in the "culture industries." Specifically, I want us to explore how innovations in film production and exhibition have been used to refresh or redirect the movies' effects on their audiences. Film and the cinema may seem like well-established phenomena today, but they have been the newest of new media—multiple times! "New media" often seems synonymous with "digital media" in contemporary discourse, but in fact there is nothing inherently digital about newness. This course will study the evolution of film as a new medium, from its birth in the 1890s through its popular and technical reinventions and the (allegedly) spectacular future of digital cinema.

"Introduction to US Film History" will also acquaint you with the basic vocabulary and methodologies of film studies, including formal analysis, historicism, and ideology critique. We will read famous and foundational articles in the field of film studies, analyze how critics have chosen to study motion pictures, and consider what their approaches exclude or overlook. So in addition to studying various incarnations of "newness" in films like *Modern Times*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Jaws*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, we will read articles by Tom Gunning, Janet Wasko, Douglas Gomery, and Jack Valenti to understand how film has changed and changed us since its invention.

Intellectual Goals

“Introduction to US Film History” is designed to familiarize you with the major technological shifts in filmmaking and exhibition over the past century and help you develop your skills as a film critic. This course will teach you to:

1. Think, speak, and write critically about the cultural, political, and technological forces that shape film production and exhibition.
2. Think, speak, and write critically about film’s influence on US culture and politics.
3. Develop a working vocabulary of critical and technical terms for film studies.
4. Describe audio-visual material in detail and deploy it as evidence in a close reading of a film.
5. Describe audio-visual material in detail and deploy it as evidence in an argument about the historical significance of a film or films.

Course Resources

Course Website

- Blackboard - <https://campus.georgetown.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp>

Required Course Texts

- Jon Lewis, *American Film: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007).
- Amy Villarejo, *Film Studies: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- Films on reserve Lauinger Library (see schedule below)

Course Assignments and Grading Scheme

Course Assignments

- Seminar Participation: On Tuesdays and Thursdays, our class is devoted to talking through the assigned readings and movies together in order to arrive collectively at a better understanding of film history. I expect you to come to class with observations about the assigned material and to be willing to share them with the class. In exchange, I will make sure this classroom is a safe space where everyone’s opinion and ideas are respected and encouraged (10%).
- Silent Film Essay (~3 pages): Your task will be to write a thoughtful and informed close reading of a scene from one of the films we have watched thus far in the semester, with special attention to how its visual and aural composition influences its emotional or cultural impact. I will ask you to use the analytical terminology for film studies that we have established in class. The purpose of this assignment is to practice descriptive writing skills as well as thesis and argument formation (15%).
- Midterm Essay Exam: On February 19th, I will ask you to answer a series of short essay questions about the films and readings from the syllabus. This exam will review your comprehension of the readings and your ability to use that information to inform your analysis of the films (25%).

- Formal Analysis Essay (~5 pages): Your task will be to craft an argument about the historical significance of one of the films on our syllabus using two readings from class and two from your own original research. These additional sources must be articles from academic journals or chapters from academic books (no blogs, newspaper or magazine articles, et cetera). You will use information from these sources together with close readings from the film to explain what unique qualities it exhibits that advance the art form (25%).
- Final Oral Exam: The purpose of the final exam is to assess your engagement with the course's assigned films and readings as you to make connections across the decades. At our final screening on Monday, April 27th, we will watch one last film together, then I will ask you to come speak with me on Monday, May 4th or May 5th for fifteen minutes to discuss how you see this film reflecting and reflecting on US film history (25%).

Grading System

Letter Grade	Numeric Scale	Description
A	94 - 100	Outstanding/Superlative
A-	90-93	Excellent
B+	87-89	Very Good
B	83-86	Good
B-	80-82	Pretty Good
C+	77-79	Above average
C	73-76	Average
C-	70-72	Below average
D	65-69	Inferior
F	0-64	Failure

For a more detailed description of how these expectations apply for formal essays, see the grading rubric attached to this syllabus.

Late Assignments

Forty-eight hour extensions on written assignments may be granted if they are requested at least forty-eight hours in advance of the due date. There will be no extensions on exams.

Course Policies

All assignments are due at the beginning of class on the date noted in the class schedule.

You are expected to attend all screenings and seminar meetings. Attendance will be taken when class starts. Every student will be granted **two unexcused absences per semester** (including sporting events, illnesses, and family commitments). After that, your final participation grade will be lowered one third of a grade for each absence. If special circumstances arise, please email or speak to me as soon as possible so that we can form a plan together.

Please note that you need to take notes during all film screenings. I implore you: do not find out the hard way that watching a film for fun is different than watching a film for class. You need to record your observations about images and sounds as they happen, or it will be very difficult to describe this audio-visual evidence convincingly later on (see Corrigan for advice on "Taking Notes" for film writing). Also, please note that some of the films we will be screening this semester contain graphic representations of violence or sexual activity. If you are unwilling to engage critically with such material, you should strongly consider taking another class. If you decide to stay, you must come speak with me about your concerns before the end of the first week of class.

Course Expectations

- I expect you to
 - Be on time to class and attend all classes.
 - Do all of the readings assigned for each class meeting.
 - Participate actively in discussions.
 - Check in regularly on our Blackboard site for course readings, assignments, and announcements.
 - *Come to office hours at least once over the course of the semester.*
- You can expect me to
 - Respond to emails within 24 hours.
 - Provide detailed feedback on your work for this class. If you'd like more feedback on any assignment, please come see me in office hours.
 - Hold regular office hours that are reserved for students. Office hours are our chance to talk about your academic, professional, and cultural interests. If you want a greater sense of engagement with your professors at Georgetown, the most effective step you can take is attending office hours regularly.

Please note that cell phones, PDAs, tablets, and laptops are not allowed in screenings. You may use your laptop to take notes in seminar until and unless it distracts you, other students, or your instructor. At that point, I will require that you leave your computer at home for the rest of the semester.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct, a.k.a. plagiarism, a.k.a. submitting someone else's work as your own, will not be tolerated in this class and will result in course failure. For a more detailed explanation of Georgetown's Academic Integrity Policy, see <https://honorcouncil.georgetown.edu/whatisplagiarism>.

Academic Resource Center

If you are working with the Academic Resource Center for disability or academic support and require modification of seating, testing, or other course requirements, please alert me during the first two weeks of class to make appropriate arrangements. You can contact the ARC at (202) 784-7366 or <http://academicsupport.georgetown.edu/> for more information.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Moving Pictures

Th 1/8 Course introduction
"Fred Ott's Sneeze" (1894, *Edison: Invention of the Movies*, DVD ZXX EDI)

Week 2: The Cinema of Attractions

M 1/12 "Rice-Irwin Kiss," "Annabelle Butterfly Dance," "Electrocuting an Elephant,"
"The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots," and other short films (1895-1896,
Edison: Invention of the Movies, DVD ZXX EDI)
Please read Corrigan - "Taking Notes" (Bb) before the screening!

Tu 1/13 Villarejo - pp. 1-12 (*Film Studies*)
Lewis - pp. 3-16 (*American Film*)

Th 1/15 Gunning - "The Cinema of Attractions" (Bb)

Week 3: The Beginning of Continuity Editing and Classical Hollywood Narration

M 1/19 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY
Please watch "The Great Train Robbery" (1903) and "The Lonedale Operator"
(1911) on Blackboard Sharestream (*Landmarks of Early Film*, DVD ZXX LAN)

Tu 1/20 Villarejo - pp. 23-42 (*Film Studies*)
Lewis - pp. 30-41 (*American Film*)

Th 1/22 Gunning - "Weaving a Narrative" (Bb)
Villarejo - pp. 42-49 (*Film Studies*)

Week 4: Fordism and the Hollywood Studio System

M 1/26 *It* (1927, DVD ZXX IT)

Tu 1/27 Dyer - "Stars" (Bb-Please read all three short articles)
Ferlando - "Clara Bow Is *It*" (Bb)

Th 1/29 Villarejo - pp. 109-131 (*Film Studies*)
Gameson - "The Assembly Line of Greatness" (Bb)

Week 5: The Star System

M 2/2 *Modern Times* (1936, DVD ZXX MOD)
Silent Film Essay Due

Tu 2/3 Lewis - pp. 43-46, 70-72 ("Studio Filmmaking"), 74-84 (*American Film*)
Villarejo - pp. 81-94 (*Film Studies*)

Th 2/5 Gomery - "Hollywood Control" (Bb)
Villarejo - pp. 94-108 (*Film Studies*)

Week 6: Color and the Golden Age of American Animation
M 2/9 “Snow-White” (1933, DVD TBA) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937, DVD ENG SNO)

Tu 2/10 Lewis - pp. 91-102 (*American Film*)
Austen, “Hidey Hidey Hidey Ho...Boop-Boop-a-Doop” (Bb)

Th 2/12 Gomery - “Color” (Bb)
Higgins - “Technology and Aesthetics” (Bb)

Week 7: Sync Sound
M 2/16 PRESIDENTS’ DAY
Please watch *Singin’ in the Rain* on Blackboard Sharestream (1952, DVD ENG SIN)

Tu 2/17 Villarejo - pp. 49-53 (*Film Studies*)

Th 2/19 MIDTERM EXAM

Week 8: Widescreen, Spectacle, and Product Differentiation
M 2/23 *Psycho* (1960, DVD ENG PSY)

Tu 2/24 Wilshire – “Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and the Art of Pure Cinema” (Bb)
Lewis - pp. 233-238, 258-264 (*American Film*)

Th 2/26 Please watch “Revenge” (1955, DVD 6919) on your own on Blackboard Sharestream before class
Erish - “Reclaiming Alfred Hitchcock Presents” (Bb)

Week 9: Industry Censorship and the MPAA Rating System
M 3/2 *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968, DVD ENG BON)

Tu 3/3 Lewis - pp. 238-247, 272-276 (*American Film*)
Sklar - “Hollywood’s Collapse” (Bb)
Valenti - “Ratings History: How It All Began” (Bb)

Th 3/5 Lewis - “Those Who Disagree Can Kiss Jack Valenti’s Ass” (Bb)

SPRING BREAK

Week 10: Dolby Sound and the Origins of the Blockbuster
M 3/16 Please watch *Jaws* on Blackboard Sharestream *with quality headphones or on a television equipped with surround sound!* (1975, DVD ENG JAW)

Tu 3/17 Lewis - pp. 319-322, 372-376 (*American Film*)
Sergi - “A Cry in the Dark: The Role of Post-Classical Film Sound” (Bb)

Tu 3/19 Wyatt - "From Roadshowing to Saturation Release" (Bb)

Week 11: The Golden Age of Special Effects

M 3/23 *The Thing* (1982, DVD ENG THI)

Tu 3/24 Miller - "The Archaeology of Special Effects" (Bb)
Kirschenbaum - "The New Flesh" (Bb)

Th 3/26 CLASS CANCELLED

Week 12: The Home Video Revolution

M 3/30 *The Watermelon Woman* (1996, DVD ENG WAT)

Tu 3/31 Lewis - pp. 351-358 (*American Film*)
Gomery - "Home Video" (Bb)
Foote - "Hoax of the Lost Ancestor" (Bb)

Th 4/2 **EASTER BREAK**

Week 13: The "Indie" Film

M 4/6 **EASTER BREAK**

Please watch *Do the Right Thing* on your own on Blackboard ShareStream (1989, DVD ENG DOT)

Tu 4/7 Lewis - pp. 342-347, 380, 387-390 (*American Film*)
Klienans - "Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams" (Bb)

Th 4/9 Grant - "Reflecting the Times" (Bb)
Perren - "Sex, lies, and marketing" (Bb)

Week 14: Computer-Generated Imagery

M 4/13 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, DVD CHI CRO)

Tu 4/14 Lewis - pp. 401-414 (*American Film*)
Whissel - "Tales of Upward Mobility" (Bb)

Th 4/16 Cook - "Hollywood Enters the Digital Domain"

Week 15: Digital Cinema and RealD

M 4/20 *Coraline* (2009, DVD ENG COR)

Tu 4/21 Belton - "Digital Cinema: A False Revolution" (Bb)
Higgins - "3D in Depth" (Bb)

Th 4/23 Villarejo - pp. 132-151 (*Film Studies*)

Formal Analysis Essay Due

Week 16: Looking Back to Look Forward

M 4/27 Final Screening: TBA
Sign up for final exam slot

M 5/4 and Tu 5/5: FINAL EXAMS in 322 New North

Persuasive Essay Rubric
 Heidi Goodrich Andrade
 Rubrics and Self-Assessment Project, Harvard University

Criteria	A	B	C	D-F
The claim	I make a claim and explain why it is controversial.	I make a claim but don't explain why it is controversial.	My claim is buried, confused and/or unclear.	I don't say what my argument or claim is.
Reasons in support of the claim	I give clear and accurate reasons in support of my claim.	I give reasons in support of my claim but I may overlook important reasons.	I give 1 or 2 weak reasons that don't support my claim and/or irrelevant or confusing reasons.	I do not give convincing reasons in support of my claim.
Reasons against the claim	I discuss the reasons against my claim and explain why it is valid anyway.	I discuss the reasons against my claim but leave some reasons out and/or don't explain why the claim still stands.	I say that there are reasons against the claim but I don't discuss them.	I do not acknowledge or discuss the reasons against the claim.
Organization	My writing has a compelling opening, an informative middle and a satisfying conclusion.	My writing has a beginning, middle and end. It marches along but doesn't dance.	My writing is organized but sometimes gets off topic.	My writing is aimless and disorganized.
Voice and tone	It sounds like I care about my argument. I show how I think and feel about it.	My tone is OK but my paper could have been written by anyone. I need to tell more about how I think and feel.	My writing is bland or pretentious. There is either no hint of a real person in it or it sounds like I'm a fake.	My writing is too formal or too informal. It sounds like I don't like the topic of the essay.
Word choice	The words I use are striking but natural, varied and vivid.	I make routine word choices.	The words I use are often dull or uninspired or sound like I am trying too hard to impress.	I use the same words over and over and over and over. Some words may be confusing to a reader.
Sentence fluency	My sentences are clear, complete, and of varying lengths.	I have well-constructed sentences.	My sentences are sometimes awkward, and/or contain run-ons and fragments.	Many run-ons, fragments and awkward phrasings make my essay hard to read.
Conventions	I use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	I generally use correct conventions. I have a couple of errors I should fix.	I have enough errors in my essay to distract a reader.	Numerous errors make my paper hard to read.