

English 4950 /Special Topics in Literature: Cool Old Movies

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SPRING 2021
[Sec. 001, #12566]
Online/ W 9:30-10:45
Office hours by appointment

1939 has widely been regarded as “Hollywood’s greatest year,” a year in which the industry finally shook off the effects of the Great Depression, reaching new heights in employment and drawing in 50 million patrons a week to see what many consider to be some of the best movies ever made in Hollywood. Of course, Hollywood was the first to break the good news about Hollywood’s artistic triumphs that year, and some of this is just standard entertainment industry hoopla. Moreover, if that year marked a pinnacle of one sort, it was also the beginning of the end for the studio system that had dominated the film industry for a generation: the international markets that had traditionally provided Hollywood with a quarter of its income were about to be lost to World War II, and soon after the war the studios finally lost the fierce battle against antitrust legislation that they had waged for two decades. Even the most successful film of 1939 (indeed, the most successful film ever, to that point), *Gone with the Wind*, can be seen as the precursor of the blockbuster event-movie that dominates the cinema industry of our day, an industry very different in organization from the system that governed American filmmaking in the ‘30s and ‘40s.

In this course we’ll try to see what the excitement was all about by studying several films from that era. Along the way we’ll also learn something about the entertainment industry and the studio system, American cultural history, film language and technology, film stars and genres, and film theory and criticism. We’ll be “taking Hollywood seriously” as a site of artistic, cultural, social, economic, and imaginary importance, both then and now.

Required texts:

- Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*. 2nd ed. Blackwell, 2003. (hence *HC*)
- Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz*. British Film Institute, 1992
- Additional essays available through Canvas. Note: two volumes in the History of the American Cinema series can be accessed through the library catalogue page: Tino Balio’s *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (1993), and Thomas Schatz’s *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (1997). I will be assigning portions of the former.
- Required films will be available for streaming via the “Media Gallery” tab on Canvas and should be watched carefully before the class date for which they are assigned. A high-speed connection is recommended.
- A [reserve list of relevant texts](#) will be maintained in the TJ library.

Course Requirements:

- Weekly discussion board posting, 10%
- Film memory interview assignment, 10%
- *Mise en scène* essay (± 800 words), 15%
- Two critical essays (±1800-2000 words), 20% each
- Film genre group work, 15%
- Additional short bi-weekly writing, 10%

For detailed information see the “Assignment Overview” document on Canvas.

Tentative Syllabus:

MODULE	DATE	READING & VIEWING	ASSIGNMENTS
1	W JAN 20	<u>Introduction; coming attractions; some film technique and vocabulary</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ "Taking Hollywood Seriously," HC 5-22;	
2 <u>Studio production; Hollywood style</u>			
	M JAN 25 & W JAN 27	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ "Entertainment I," HC 33-53○ "Industry 1: to 1948," HC 113-58○ "Sound" and "Color," HC 238-50• Viewing: "American Cinema: The Studio System"; <u>Sullivan's Travels</u> (1941; 90m) (links)	
3 <u>America (and Hollywood) during the Depression</u>			

	M FEB 1 & W FEB 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression" (Canvas) ○ Rauchway, "Americans in the Great Depression" (Canvas) • Viewing: My Man Godfrey (1936; 94m); The Grapes of Wrath (1940; 129m) (links) 	
4 The Production Code			
	M FEB 8 & W FEB 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," <i>Grand Design</i> 37-72 ○ "Narrative 2," <i>HC</i> 471-90 ○ Forman, from <i>Our Movie Made Children</i> (Canvas) ○ "The Production Code of 1930" (Canvas) • Viewing: Casablanca (1942; 102m) 	
5 Genre in film; what we can know about the Western			
	M FEB 15 & W FEB 17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "Genre," <i>HC</i> 74-92 ○ Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre" (Canvas) ○ Altman, "Where do genres come from?" (Canvas) • Viewing: Stagecoach (1939; 96m); Dodge City (1939; 105m) 	<p>Wed Feb 17: Westerns genre work due</p> <p>Fri Feb 19: Interview assignment due</p>
6 Writing about Film			
	M FEB 24 & W FEB 26	<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corrigan, from <i>A Short guide to Writing about Film</i> (Canvas) • "Space I," <i>HC</i> 312-40 	

7 <u>Movie stars</u>			
	M MAR 1 & W MAR 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Performance I,” HC 377-89 (from “Acting as Impersonation”) Dyer, “Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society” (Canvas) Holmes, “The Hollywood Star System and . . . 1916-1934” (Canvas) Viewing: Ninotchka (1939; 110m) (links) 	Mon Mar 1: <i>Mise-en-scene</i> essay due Wed Mar 3: Romantic Comedy genre work due
8 <u>Melodrama and the “women’s film”</u>			
	M MAR 8 & W MAR 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Canvas) Mulvey, “Afterthoughts...” (Canvas) Reading: Klaprat, “The Star as Market Strategy: Bette Davis in Another Light” (Canvas) Viewing: Dark Victory (1939; 106m) 	Wed Mar 10: Melodrama genre work due
9 <u>Film noir</u>			
	M MAR 15 & W MAR 17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir” (Canvas) “Space II,” HC 343-65 Viewing: “American Cinema: Film Noir” (video link on Canvas); The Maltese Falcon (1941; 100m); Double Indemnity (1944; 107m) (links) 	Wed Mar 17: Film noir genre work due
10 Melodrama			
	M MAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Williams, “Melodrama Revised” (Canvas) 	Mon Mar 22: First essay due date

	22 & W MAR 24		
SPRING BREAK MAR 29 & 31			
11 <u>The prestige picture; Hollywood and the Civil War</u>			
	M APR 5 &W APR 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Narrative 1," HC 452-70 "Time," HC 436-48 (from "History as a Production Value") Viewing: Gone With the Wind (1939; 232m) (links) 	
	M APR 12 & W APR 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Entertainment 2," HC 54-73 Burks, "Gone with the Wind: Black and White in Technicolor" (Canvas) or Leff, "Gone with the Wind and Hollywood's Racial Politics" (Canvas) Viewing: <i>Gone with the Wind: The Making of a Legend</i> (1988) 	Wed Apr 14: Series film genre work due
12 <u>Spectacle and estrangement</u>			
	M APR 19 & W APR 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rushdie, <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> Friedman, "Relinquishing Oz: Every Girl's Anti-Adventure Story" (Canvas) or Doty, "My Beautiful Wickedness: The Wizard of Oz as Lesbian Fantasy" (Canvas) Viewing: The Wizard of Oz (1939; 155m) (links) 	Mon Apr 19: Second essay due date

13 Hollywood and politics (links)			
	M APR 26 & W APR 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Politics," HC 268-303 Levine, "Hollywood's Washington" (Canvas) Capra, from <i>The Name Above the Title</i> (Canvas) Viewing: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939; 130m) 	<div>Wed Apr 28: Capra genre work due</div>
15 TBA			
	M MAY 3 & W MAY 5	Conclusions; Academy Awards presentation	<div>Mon May 3: Third essay due date</div> <div>Tue May 4: Optional extra credit assignment due</div>

Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the **Disability Access Services Office in 131 Millennium Student Center at 516-6554** as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are arranged in a timely fashion.