

Syllabus: English 414B / A01: American Film from 1945
Spring 2019 / CRN 21276
M/R 11:30-12:50 @ MAC D116

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Territorial acknowledgment

The Department of English acknowledges with respect the history, customs, and culture of the Coast Salish and Straits Salish peoples—in particular, the Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples—on whose traditional lands the University of Victoria sits and where we are grateful to have the opportunity to work and learn. Colonial communities, including that of the University of Victoria, are implicated in myriad ongoing impacts on First Nations, and we, members of the University of Victoria community, commit to working towards a more just society that challenges existing structures of power and privilege. We look forward to a future of restorative justice and reconciliation among the settler and Indigenous populations here in Victoria and elsewhere in Canada.

Course Description

A linear historical narrative of film production in the United States post-1945 cannot fully represent American cinema's breadth during this period because the medium's range is so thematically and stylistically diverse. This course will present, instead, a sampling of films that relate to two key topics of post-war filmmaking: an intensifying disruption of the idea of American national unity, and a rising challenge to the dominance of the Hollywood studio system's "classical" aesthetics matched with a corresponding attempt to recuperate any such challenges.

If a major theme of film production prior to WW II could be understood as the formation of an American "People" buttressed by the studios' increasingly seamless and artistically controlled visual narratives, then the post-war period introduces a new era of growing skepticism as to the stability of this social and aesthetic uniformity. To be sure, themes of collective instability and even rupture are evident earlier, especially in formally innovative or "anti-classical" styles such as that of *film noir*, influenced in turn by German expressionism and Italian neorealism; in anarchic comedy such as that of the Marx Brothers; or in early experimental and B-production filmmaking. But the increasing dominance of the Hollywood studio system in the 1920s and, under the sway of the Production Code, in the 1930s, promoted a singular ideal of the unified society alongside a highly developed yet regimented American cinematic aesthetic.

For many reasons, these social and stylistic unities begin to break down in the middle of the twentieth century, and the films of this era at once reflect that breakdown and hasten it. The cinematic heroes of the earlier period often give way to anti-heroes after the war; rebellion and dissent become major social and artistic forces; conventional

gender roles begin to degenerate; and the narrative and stylistic hallmarks of the earlier era fade as the carefully controlled “classical” studio aesthetic is increasingly flouted by younger filmmakers. Artistically, the major innovations of film in the postwar era are not narrative coherence or smoothness but an increasing emphasis on narrative uncertainty, visual disorientation, and stylistic rupture. This course will foreground, therefore, the ways that American films after the mid-twentieth century confront their viewers with signs of disillusionment, critique and rebellion, and give expression to the increasing fragmentation of a previously assumed social coherence.

In viewing these films, we will develop the fundamentals of analyzing the “visual language” of film by considering narrative, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, sound, as well as some exemplary alternatives to the classical Hollywood narrative style. We will use “close reading” of films and aesthetic as well as historical contextualization in our approach to these fundamentals. Many of the films we will consider have as their theme the breakdown of an ideal of the American nation as an organic and unified whole. Such an ideal, which arguably was a staple of the pre-1945 cinema, partakes of social countercurrents such as American individualism, class stratification, political conflict or gender/sexuality discord. The exposure and resolution of these conflicts, although often messy and incomplete, is typically the principal ideological work of the classical Hollywood genres. Recognizing how this process works in the classical narrative—and when it goes awry—offers a key to understanding how the films we will watch in this course are both transnational and yet quintessentially American, even when they deviate from the standard narrative formulas of Hollywood.

Learning outcomes

Students who complete this course will

- be familiar with a general chronology of American film after WW II
- recognize post-WW II film genres and styles
- understand the artistic, political and industrial contexts in which postwar American film genres and styles developed
- have a basic understanding of film narrative, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing
- understand the fundamentals of the Hollywood classical narrative style and some of the challenges to its dominance
- be able to analyze and write about postwar films from the perspective of genre, politics and history, style, technology and industry, narrative form, and influences

Assigned readings and screenings

- Students will watch, on their own time out of class, approximately one assigned film weekly, many (but not all) of which are available in the McPherson Library. It is the student’s responsibility to watch these films via a commercial streaming service or elsewhere online, at the UVic library when a library copy exists, or on DVD via rental from a store like Pic-a-Flic.
- Decherney, Peter. *Hollywood: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016. Available online via the UVic library: <http://bit.ly/2C6QsfT>, or for

purchase via Kobo Books: <https://www.kobo.com/ca/en/ebook/hollywood-a-very-short-introduction> (\$7.19 CAD).

- Langford, Barry. *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology since 1945*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010. Available to read or download from the UVic library: <http://bit.ly/2QoLKIA>.
- A range of scholarly essays, all of which can be found via UVic library databases (Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, etc.) and/or UVic Summon.
- Certain episodes of Mark Cousins's documentary series, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*. Music Box Films, 2012. PN1993.5 A1S76 2012, Music & Media Desk.

Assignments with percentage values and due dates

- 1) 10 weekly quizzes comprised of short answer questions. Make-ups only for a medically or otherwise documented reason. (2% each = 20% total)
- 2) A research proposal based on topics I assign (or I approve) that includes: a provisional introductory paragraph (250-500 words) with a clearly formulated **highlighted** thesis statement; an outline of your argument; and an annotated bibliography with at least three academic secondary sources. *Microsoft Word file only. Due by 10:00 AM on Thursday, Feb. 28.* (10%)
- 3) A research paper (1800-2100 words [that is, about 7-8 pages], not counting the bibliography), based on your research proposal, with at least four academic secondary sources. *Microsoft Word file only. Near-complete draft (6 pp+) due Thursday, March 21, on paper in class only* (for peer editing). **Final version due Thursday, March 28 by 10:00 AM** (online via the submission link only). (35%)
- 4) A final exam, consisting of short-answer and essay questions, based on the readings, presentations and screenings of the course. (30%)
- 5) Class participation. (5%)

Grading

I use the University of Victoria's scale to calculate grades:

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Grade Point Value</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Description</u>
A+	9	90 – 100	Exceptional, outstanding and excellent performance. Normally achieved by a minority of students. These grades indicate a student who is self-initiating, exceeds expectation and has an insightful grasp of the subject matter.
A	8	85 – 89	
A-	7	80 – 84	
B+	6	77 – 79	Very good, good and solid performance. Normally achieved by the largest number of students. These grades indicate a good grasp of the subject matter or excellent grasp in one area balanced with satisfactory grasp in the other area.
B	5	73 – 76	
B-	4	70 – 72	
C+	3	65 – 69	Satisfactory, or minimally satisfactory. These grades indicate a satisfactory performance and knowledge of the subject matter.
C	2	60 – 64	

D	1	50 – 59	Marginal Performance. A student receiving this grade demonstrated a superficial grasp of the subject matter.
F	0	0 – 49	Unsatisfactory performance. Wrote final examination and completed course requirements; no supplemental.
N	0	0 – 49	Did not write examination or complete course requirements by the end of term or session; no supplemental.

Late assignments

Late written assignments will result in the subtraction of two percent per late day from the maximum assignment total of 100 percent. If you need an extension of the due date for an assignment, you must request it *at least one week in advance*.

'N' grades

Students who are absent for more than eight classes, and those who do not sit at least half of the quizzes, submit an essay proposal, a final essay, and sit the final exam may receive an "N" in the course. An 'N' is a failing grade, and it factors into a student's GPA as 0 (maximum percentage that can accompany an 'N' on a transcript is 49).

Research paper assignment

Based on my suggested topics, your assignment is to propose a research topic and argument and then to write a research paper based on one or more of the films we have watched during the term. Written assignments must be submitted **in Microsoft Word format**. Please see full assignment instructions at Shlensky.com/teaching.

Attendance

Students are required to attend class. More than four unexcused absences will result in a grade penalty, and more than eight may result in failure of the course through incompleteness.

Missed classes and quizzes

I highly recommend that students establish an informal "buddy system" with one or two of their peers in the class with whom notes for any missed classes can be shared.

If you miss a quiz for medical or other urgent reasons, you may complete a make-up assignment within one week of the quiz date. The make-up assignment is a two-page (500-600 words) write-up that discusses all of the materials assigned for the weekly quiz, with close readings from the film or text in question, letting me know that you completed the assignment with due care and attention. You must note the quiz number on the late submission, *or you will not receive credit*. Please submit the make-up assignment to the course's upload link on my website.

Computers in the classroom

Numerous studies have shown that using a computer for note-taking during class is a source of distraction for the computer user and the user's neighbours; that taking notes on a computer harms memory retention; and that those who use laptops in class

generally fare worse on quizzes and exams (see [2013](#), [2013](#), [2014](#) and [2014](#)). Using a laptop during class lecture and discussion almost inevitably leads to straying attention, as students check email, Facebook, texts, etc. It also hinders us from having face-to-face interaction in class discussion. So, I ask you not to use laptops in this class. If you feel you need to use a laptop, please come talk to me. There are circumstances when students do need to use a laptop; in that case, I will simply ask you to commit to using it only for note-taking.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity requires commitment to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. It is expected that students, faculty members and staff at the University of Victoria, as members of an intellectual community, will adhere to these ethical values in all activities related to learning, teaching, research and service. Any action that contravenes this standard, including misrepresentation, falsification or deception, undermines the intention and worth of scholarly work and violates the fundamental academic rights of members of our community. Violations of academic integrity will impact grades and may result in failure of the course. Please review the University of Victoria's policy on academic integrity:

<https://web.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/info/regulations/academic-integrity.html>.

Learning environment

We at the University of Victoria are committed to promoting a supportive and safe working and learning environment for the whole community. Students and faculty members are expected to adhere to the UVic human rights policy (www.uvic.ca/universitysecretary/assets/docs/policies/GV0200_1105_.pdf). Please let me know if anything in the classroom or related to classwork makes you feel personally unsafe.

Sexualized Violence

UVic takes sexualized violence seriously and has raised the bar for what is considered acceptable behaviour. Students are encouraged to learn more about how the university defines sexualized violence and its overall approach by visiting www.uvic.ca/svp. If you or someone you know has been impacted by sexualized violence and needs information, advice, and/or support please contact the sexualized violence resource office in Equity and Human Rights (EQHR).

Life challenges

If you are facing difficult life challenges this term, I may be able to help you get back on track in this course. Please let me know what is going on which may interfere with your class performance and I will try to be of assistance. (Please be aware that, as a university employee, I have an obligation to report any instances of on-campus sexual or physical abuse that are disclosed to me.) I will seek to accommodate you in whatever ways I can and, if you wish, I will help connect you with further resources. You may also wish to know about the community resources and counselling services listed on the UVic counselling site: <https://www.uvic.ca/services/counselling/resources/index.php>.

English 414b Assignment Schedule

Mon., Jan. 7	Welcome and introduction. Syllabus review. In class: excerpts from Leni Riefenstahl's <i>Triumph of the Will</i> (Germany 1935). In class: screening of the "Prelude to War" section of Frank Capra's wartime documentary series, <i>Why We Fight</i> (USA 1942-4, 52 mins).
Thurs., Jan. 10	In class: conclude screening and discuss Capra's "Prelude to War." In class: excerpts from Roberto Rossellini, <i>Germany, Year Zero</i> (Italy 1947).
Mon., Jan. 14	Quiz 1 (on Wyler's film). Due today: William Wyler, <i>The Best Years of Our Lives</i> (USA 1946, 172 mins.) PN1997 B477 2012.
Thurs., Jan. 17	Discuss <i>The Best Years of Our Lives</i> . Read: Peter Decherney, <i>Hollywood</i> , Chapter 4 ("Hollywood at war"). In class: Mark Cousins, <i>The Story of Film: An Odyssey</i> , Episode 5 ("Post-War Cinema") PN1993.5 A1S76 2012.
Mon., Jan. 21	Quiz 2. Robert Aldrich, <i>Kiss Me Deadly</i> (USA 1955, 104 mins.) PN1997 K575.
Thurs., Jan. 24	Discuss <i>Kiss Me Deadly</i> . Read: Decherney, <i>Hollywood</i> , Chapter 5 ("The blacklist and the Cold War"). Read: Barry Langford, <i>Post-Classical Hollywood</i> (eBook), Chapter 1 ("Autumn of the Patriarchs" + "The Biggest and the Best"), 11-44.
Mon., Jan. 28	Quiz 3. Billy Wilder, <i>Some Like It Hot</i> (USA 1959, 120 mins) PN1997 S62763.
Thurs., Jan. 31	Discuss <i>Some Like It Hot</i> . Watch at home: Cousins, <i>The Story of Film</i> , Episode 6 ("Sex & Melodrama"). Writing workshop: choosing a topic.
Mon., Feb. 4	Quiz 4. Alfred Hitchcock, <i>Vertigo</i> (USA 1958, 129 mins.) PN1997 V3745.
Thurs., Feb. 7	Discuss <i>Vertigo</i> . Read: Garry Leonard, "A Fall from Grace: The Fragmentation of Masculine Subjectivity and the Impossibility of Femininity in Hitchcock's <i>Vertigo</i> ," <i>American Imago</i> 47:3/4 (Fall-Winter 1990), 271-91. Writing workshop: the thesis statement.
Mon., Feb. 11	Quiz 5. Arthur Penn, <i>Bonnie and Clyde</i> (USA 1967, 111 mins.) PN1997 B6797 2010.

Thurs., Feb. 14	Decherney, <i>Hollywood</i> , Chapter 6 (“The New Hollywood”). In class: watch Cousins, <i>The Story of Film</i> , Episode 8 (“New Directors, New Form”). Read: Jeff Menne, “The Cinema of Defection: Auteur Theory and Institutional Life,” <i>Representations</i> , 114:1 (Spring 2011), 36-64.
Mon. Feb. 18	Reading Break.
Thurs., Feb. 21	Reading Break.
Mon., Feb. 25	Quiz 6. Stanley Kubrick, <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (USA 1968, 142 mins.) PN1997 T97.
Thurs., Feb. 28	Research essay proposal due by 10:00 AM (uploaded to the submission link at Shlensky.com/materials; see posted instructions). Discuss <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> .
Mon., Mar. 4	Writing workshop: research I. Read: Barry Langford, <i>Post-Classical Hollywood</i> , Chapter 5 (“New Wave Hollywood”), 133-53.
Thurs., Mar. 7	Writing workshop: Research II. In class: watch Cousins, <i>The Story of Film</i> , Episode 9 (“American Cinema of the 70s”).
Mon., Mar. 11	Quiz 7. Francis Ford Coppola, <i>The Conversation</i> (USA 1974, 113 mins.) PN1997 C7158 2010.
Thurs., Mar. 14	In lieu of class: watch Cousins, <i>The Story of Film</i> , Episode 12 (“Fight the Power: Protest in Film”).
Mon., Mar. 18	Quiz 8. Spike Lee, <i>Do the Right Thing</i> (USA 1989, 120 mins.). PN1997 D6 1998. Read: Dan Flory, “Cinematic Presupposition, Race, and Epistemological Twist Films,” <i>Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism</i> 68:4 (Fall 2010), 379-87.
Thurs., Mar. 21	Research essay draft (6 pp+) due, on paper in class (for peer editing only). Discuss <i>Do the Right Thing</i> . In class: watch Cousins, <i>The Story of Film</i> , Episode 14 (“New American Independents & The Digital Revolution”). Read: Barry Langford, <i>Post-Classical Hollywood</i> , Chapter 7 (“Corporate Hollywood”), 191-215.
Mon., Mar. 25	Quiz 9. David Lynch, <i>Mulholland Drive</i> (USA 2001, 146 mins.).
Thur., Mar. 28	Research essay due (uploaded to the submission link at Shlensky.com/materials).

	<p>Read: Decherney, <i>Hollywood</i>, Chapter 7 (Section 2 only: “Indiewood”).</p> <p>In class: watch Cousins, <i>The Story of Film</i>, Episode 15 (“Cinema Today and the Future”). Discuss <i>Mulholland Drive</i>.</p>
Mon., Apr. 1	<p>Quiz 10. Kathryn Bigelow, <i>Zero Dark Thirty</i> (USA 2012, 157 mins.).</p>
Thurs., Apr. 5	<p>Discuss <i>Zero Dark Thirty</i>.</p> <p>Read: Barry Langford, <i>Post-Classical Hollywood</i>, Chapter 8 (“Culture Wars”), 219-240.</p> <p>Course wrap-up and exam preview.</p>