

**FOR YOUR OWN SAKE, PLEASE DO NOT DOWNLOAD THIS DOCUMENT;
BOOKMARK IT INSTEAD, SO YOU ALWAYS HAVE THE LATEST VERSION.**

English 414A / A01: American Film to 1945

Fall 2020 /CRN: 11349

Synchronous meetings: Wednesdays, 3:30 pm - 4:20 pm
(recorded for the benefit of those who cannot attend)

Dr. Lincoln Z. Shlensky

Office: CLE D327

Office hours via Zoom by appointment (usually within 24 hours)

Email: shlensky@uvic.ca

Web: www.shlensky.com

Course website: bright.uvic.ca

Territorial acknowledgment

This course is offered in respectful acknowledgment of 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 stands. As the course instructor, I commit to working towards a more just society that challenges historical and existing structures of power and privilege, and I look forward to a future of reparative action and reconciliation among the settler and Indigenous populations in Canada. I invite students to conduct their own research into Canada's devastating history of colonization, and to join in the call for restorative justice for all Indigenous peoples.

Using pronouns

I invite everyone, including those who are transgender, cisgender, or gender ambiguous, to share their preferred pronoun in class or privately with me (Lincoln: he/him). I recognize that one should not make assumptions about anyone's gender identity just by looking at the person. If I make a mistake by using the wrong pronoun to refer to you, please let me know so I can correct my error.

Course Description

This course will offer a succinct and selective survey of American films from the period of the invention of the motion picture, circa 1900, to the prewar pinnacle of synchronized sound films. While the course can by no means offer comprehensive "coverage" of this period, it will provide an opportunity to watch many early short films and a dozen influential feature films in a variety of styles and genres that correspond to the rise of the classical Hollywood narrative and the establishment of the studio production code. In viewing these films, we will develop the fundamentals of analyzing the "visual language" of film by considering narrative form, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, sound and alternatives to the classical 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 desire to envision the American nation as an organic and unified whole. This desire is often shown to be in conflict with social counter-currents such as American individualism, class stratification, political conflict or gender 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. Students will watch, on their own time out of class, approximately one assigned film weekly, all of which are available online.

Assigned readings and screenings

All of the assigned texts, chapters and articles for this course are available online, via the [UVic library's website](#), or via [research databases linked there](#); I will post instructions for viewing course films as we go. I will give ample notice of any changes to the syllabus.

Required Google account

You must have a Google account for this course for accessing certain course materials and resources, and I need to know your Google account address. If you are concerned about online privacy, you may [sign up](#) for a new Google account using a pseudonym, but you must tell me what it is so I can identify you.

Learning outcomes

Students who complete this course will

- be familiar with a general chronology of American film before WW II
- recognize early film genres and styles
- understand the artistic, political and economic contexts in which prewar American film styles have developed
- have a basic understanding of film narrative conventions, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing
- understand the fundamentals of the Hollywood classical narrative style
- hone fundamental skills needed to develop and write a (film studies) research paper
- be able to analyze pre-war films from the perspective of genre, politics, history, style, technology and industry, narrative form, and artistic intertextuality.

Grading scale

I use the University of Victoria's [grading scale](#) to calculate grades. In addition, some assignments will contain their own grading rubrics specific to the assignment.

Late assignments

Late written assignments will result in the subtraction of 5% of the assignment value per late day, including weekends. 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 do not submit all of the following may receive an 'N' grade for the course (failure through incompleteness): at least seven weekly responses, a summary and persuasive response, an annotated bibliography, a thesis and introduction with outline, a research essay, a final assessment. 'N' grades (failure through incompleteness) convert to 'F' on your transcript, so be sure you are clear about which assignments you must submit to pass this course.

Research paper assignment

Based on my suggested topics, the research assignment includes proposing a research topic and argument, locating relevant academic secondary and other sources, and writing a research paper on the assigned topic (under some circumstances, I may approve special topics that students propose). Please see full assignment instructions on the course website.

Attendance

Please attend all scheduled class meetings and keep up with course assignments. If you cannot do so, please let me know why.

Academic concessions

Students who do not complete major assignments due to illness or family emergency should speak with me about applying for academic concession. For information about the concession process, please see the [registrar's website](#). The Request for Academic Concession form is available here: [Request for Academic Concession \(RAC\) for Undergraduate Students](#).

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity entails 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](#).

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](#). Please let me know if anything related to the course makes you feel personally unsafe.

Sexualized Violence

UVic takes sexualized violence seriously and has a high bar for what is considered acceptable behaviour. Students are encouraged to [learn more](#) about how the university defines sexualized violence and its overall approach to preventing it. 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

The Covid-19 pandemic has upended all of our lives in numerous and sometimes challenging ways. If the pandemic or another life difficulty is negatively affecting your work, please reach out to me. I may be able to help you get back on track in this course, if you let me know what's going on. I will work with 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](#) offered by the University of Victoria.

About me

It may be helpful for you to know a little about me. I have lived in Victoria since 2006, when I was hired by UVic as a research faculty member in the English Department. I received my PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley. I have published in the fields of Caribbean literature, Hebrew literature, and film studies. I teach and have research interests in media and film studies, postcolonial literature, Jewish studies, and more. As a non-Indigenous person in Canada, I am a settler; I maintain a keen personal and intellectual interest in restorative justice for Indigenous peoples and equity for racialized people. Feel free to ask me about this or anything else. Just so you'll know, I have two young school kids who keep me very busy at home, but I respond to most queries or requests within two working days.

Graded Assignments with Due Dates* and Percentages
 (*with a 24-hour grace period for students outside of North America.)

Week 1. Personal Media Literacy Statement in answer to the question: <i>how did I come to think about films in the way I do today?</i> Due Monday, September 14 at 11:55 AM .	5%
Ten brief (250-500 words) weekly quizzes in answer to questions I ask about the films and readings. Weekly quiz responses should demonstrate your overall familiarity with the assigned films and readings. Each response is due on Wednesday of the assigned week at 3:00 PM.	20% (2% each)
Week 3. Summary and persuasive response: <i>summarize</i> a chapter we have read; add a two-to-three-paragraph <i>persuasive response</i> in which you defend the text you are summarizing against an imagined critic or skeptic, and submit for peer review.	5%
Week 4. Library research module and related research practice assignment.	2.5%
Week 5. "You are the skeptic" assignment. Locate one academic source (or legitimate non-academic source) dealing with a film we have watched or will watch. Write a paragraph summarizing the source's views and then an additional paragraph in which you explain your disagreement.	5%

Week 6 (A). Research consultation meetings, with a pre-consultation assignment due at the time of the meeting and a post-consultation assignment due in the Dropbox within 24 hours of your meeting.	5%
Week 6 (B). Post to the Discussion Forum your post-consultation research summary, and then respond substantively to the posts of at least three other students.	2.5%
Week 7. Annotated research bibliography: post an MLA-formatted <i>annotated</i> bibliography for your research topic, with four annotated sources, at least three of which <i>must be</i> scholarly secondary sources (two sources may be drawn from your previous "Summary and Persuasive Response" assignment) and one of which <i>may be</i> primary or other non-scholarly sources. Submit two of your sources for peer feedback in advance. Annotations should be ~100 words per source, showing you know each source well and can discern major arguments.	10%
Week 9. Introductory paragraph with thesis statement: post a well-developed and carefully written paragraph (~200-300 words) that will serve as the provisional introduction to your research paper; this introductory paragraph should contain your research question and a <i>revised thesis</i> that is not identical to the provisional thesis you posted previously.	10%
Week 11. A final version of your research paper of 2200-2500 words (approximately 8-10 pp., not counting bibliography) with Grading Reflection, submitted as a Word (.docx) document, including an MLA-formatted Works Cited page with at least seven research sources, four of which <i>must be</i> scholarly secondary sources and three of which <i>may be</i> primary and/or reputable non-scholarly (journalistic, etc.) sources.	25%
Week 13. A final assessment with peer review report, due before midnight on the last day of classes (Friday). You will have a week to reflect on and write about the connection between films we have watched and what you have learned about them. 1200-1500 words (~4-6 pp., not counting bibliography).	10%

Assignment Schedule

UNIT 1	FILM FORM: early cinema, avant-gardes, anarchic comedy
Week One (Sept. 9-11): Early Cinema	<p>Watch:</p> <p>Early cinema (Please note that early silent films were typically accompanied by live music and/or narration presented in nickelodeon parlours or other theatres and spaces where they were shown. Some of the titles below are accompanied, but the sound accompaniment, for obvious reasons, is not original.)</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cinematographic experiments and early narratives: an animated retelling of Eadweard Muybridge's innovations; the complex process used by Muybridge to create the illusion of motion with the Zoopraxiscope. ● Louis & Auguste Lumière: early experiments in <i>actualités</i> film with the invention of the Cinématographe. "Workers Leaving the Factory" (1895, 45 s.); "Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat" (1895, 48 s.) (see an upscaled version – amazing!); "The Sprinkler Sprinkled" (1895 50 s.); "Babies Quarrel" (1896, 50 s.); "Demolition of a Wall," (1896, 42 s.). ● Alice Guy Blaché, the first female film director: women played a larger role in early film than later in the Hollywood era, when they were more actively excluded. "The Cabbage Fairy" (1896, 56 s.); "Pierrette's Escapades" (1900). W. W. Dixon, "Frame by Frame: Alice Guy Blaché." ● Thomas Edison (with William Kennedy Dickson): Kinetoscope films (1894-1896) and the Edison Studios in New Jersey. Backgrounder: PBS, "The Kinetoscope" (3:32). Early films: "The Kiss" (1896); "Serpentine Dance" (1895); "Sandow (the Strong Man)" (1903); "Glenroy Brothers (Comic Boxing)" (1894); "Cockfight" (1896). ● Georges Méliès (epic and dramatic filmmaking's invention in France). Le voyage dans la lune / A Trip to the Moon (1902, 12 m.); "After the Ball" (1897). Backgrounder (A Matter of Film). <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Peter Decherney, Hollywood: A Very Short Introduction (online), Chapter 1: "Before Hollywood" (also available for \$7.19 as an e-Book at Kobo Books). ● Tom Gunning, "'Primitive' Cinema: A Frame-up? Or the Trick's on Us" (10 pp.). <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Technology and learning survey, due on Friday. ● "Media Literacy Statement," due on Monday, before noon.
Week Two (Sept. 14-18): Avant-Gardes and Anarchic Comedy	<p>Watch:</p> <p>Avant-garde cinema</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paul Strand & Charles Sheeler, Manhatta (USA 1921, 10 m.) ● Hans Richter, Rhythmus 21 (Germany 1921, 4 m.) ● Fernand Leger, Ballet mécanique (France 1924, 16 m.) ● Viking Eggeling, Symphonie Diagonale (France 1924, 7.5 m.) ● Slavko Vorkapich & Robert Florey, The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra (USA 1928, 14 m.) ● Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, Un chien andalou (France 1929, 16 m.) ● Orson Welles & William Vance, The Hearts of Age (USA 1934, 8 m.) ● Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, Meshes of the Afternoon (USA 1943, 14 min.)

	<p>Anarchic comedy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Marx Brothers and Leo McCarey, Duck Soup (1933, 68 min.). <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two UVic documents on academic integrity and plagiarism (see the Brightspace Week 2 module). Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, <i>Film Art: An Introduction</i>, Chapter 2: "The Significance of Film Form," pp. 50-72. Michael Koller, "Duck Soup." <i>Senses of Cinema</i>, 2001. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly quiz 1 (avant garde & anarchic comedy), due on Friday at 10:00 AM PST.
UNIT 2	NARRATIVE CINEMA: Griffith, Porter, Keaton, Ford
<p>Week Three (Sept. 21-25): Early Narratives and 1920s Comedy</p>	<p>Watch:</p> <p>Early narratives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Edwin S. Porter, The Life of an American Fireman (1903, 7 min.); The Great Train Robbery (1903, 12 m.) (or watch a silent but authentically hand-tinted version). D. W. Griffith, "A Corner in Wheat" (1909, 14 min.). Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, "Suspense" (1913, 10 min.); Lois Webber backgrounder (Reel Women, 16 min.). Recommended (but not required): Hypocrites (1915, 49 mins.) <p>Comedy and the Hollywood classical narrative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Buster Keaton, Sherlock, Jr. (1924, 44 min.). PN1997 O863 1995. <p>Background</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mark Cousins, <i>The Story of Film: An Odyssey</i>, Episode 1, "Birth of Cinema" (60 min.) <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manohla Dargis, "Thrills, Tears and the Real Gone Girls of Cinema." <i>New York Times</i>, July 19, 2018. Recommended (not required): Lisa Trahair, "Short-Circuiting the Dialectic: Narrative and Slapstick in the Cinema of Buster Keaton." <i>Narrative</i> 10.3 (2002): 307-325. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly quiz 2, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST. Summary and persuasive response, due Sunday.
Week Four	Important dates:

(Sept. 28-Oct. 2): the Classical Hollywood Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> September 30: 50% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date. <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> John Ford, Stagecoach (1939, 96 min.). PN1997 S8. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classical narration blog. Grant, Barry Keith (ed.), <i>John Ford's Stagecoach</i> (2003), Introduction "Spokes in the Wheels" (1-21) and Chapter 1 "A-Western Renaissance" (Thomas Schatz) (23-44). <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly quiz 3 (Ford), due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST. Library research module with research practice assignment, due Sunday.
UNIT 3	GENRE: COMEDY, MUSICAL
Week Five (Oct. 5-9): Classical Hollywood Comedy	<p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charles Chaplin, Modern Times (1936, 87 min.); PN1997 M59. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tom Gunning, "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity." <i>Early Popular Visual Culture</i> 8:3, 2010, 237-45. McGowan, Todd. "The Location of Silent Comedy: Charlie Chaplin's Outsider and Buster Keaton's Insider." <i>Quarterly Review of Film and Video</i> 33:7 (2016), 602-19. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly quiz 4, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST. "You Are the Skeptic" assignment, due Friday. <p>Research consultations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sign up for a research consultation meeting (to take place in Week 6) with me.
Week Six (Oct. 12-16): Classical Hollywood Musical	<p>Important dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuesday, October 13: 100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date. <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mervyn LeRoy (with Busby Berkeley), Gold Diggers of 1933 (USA 1933, 96 min.). PN1997 G585. Assorted clips from Pre-Code Hollywood films (10 mins.) <p>Read:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mike Mashon and James Bell, "Pre-Code Hollywood: Before the Censors." <i>Sight and Sound</i> 24.5 (May 2014). ● Lauren Pattullo, "Narrative and spectacle in the Hollywood musical: contrasting the choreography of Busby Berkeley and Gene Kelly." <i>Research in Dance Education</i> 8.1 (2007), 73-85. <p>Research consultations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sign up for a research consultation meeting for this week with me, if you haven't already done so. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Weekly quiz 5 (Berkeley), due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST. ● Research consultation meeting summary assignment, due within 24 hours of your research consultation. ● Post to the Discussion Forum your research consultation summary, and comment substantively on the posts of at least three other students by Sunday at midnight.
UNIT 4	STYLE: STERNBERG & MURNAU
Week Seven (Oct. 19-23): Sternberg's Silent Aesthetics	<p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Josef von Sternberg, The Docks of New York (1928, 76 min.). PN1997 D63. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Peter Decherney, Hollywood, Chapter 2: "The Studio System." ● Gordon Thomas, "Memos from a Chinese Laundry: Reading Josef von Sternberg," <i>Bright Lights Film Journal</i>, 2010. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Weekly quiz 6, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST. ● Annotated research bibliography, due Sunday.
Week Eight (Oct. 26-30): Murnau and American Expressionism	<p>Important dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Saturday, October 31: Last day for withdrawing from first term courses without penalty of failure. <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● F. W. Murnau, Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (1927, 95 min.); PN1997 S929. ● Mark Cousins, <i>The Story of Film: An Odyssey</i>, Episode 2, "The Hollywood Dream" (60 min.). PN1993.5 A1S76 2012. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jonathan Amerikaner, "Expressionism and Realism in Sunrise – A Song of Two Humans" (blog).

	<p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly quiz 7, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST.
UNIT 5	SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: HAWKS & FLAHERTY
<p>Week Nine (Nov. 2-6): Hawks and Gender Norms</p>	<p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Howard Hawks, His Girl Friday (1940, 92 min.); PN1997 H553. • Mark Cousins, <i>The Story of Film: An Odyssey</i>, Episode 4, "The Arrival of Sound" (60 min.). PN1993.5 A1S76 2012. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • William Rothman, "Stanley Cavell" (Chapter 9), <i>The Routledge Companion to Film and Philosophy</i>, 206-220 (at least). • Decherney, Hollywood, Chapter 3: "Sound and the Production Code." <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly quiz 8, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST. • Introductory paragraph with thesis and outline, due Sunday.
<p>Week Ten (Nov. 9-13) (Reading Break: Nov. 9-11): Flaherty and Colonialism</p>	<p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robert J. Flaherty, Nanook of the North (1922, 69 min.), E99 E7N296. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shari Huhndorf, "Nanook and His Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimos in American Culture, 1897-1922," <i>Critical Inquiry</i>, 27:1, 2000, pp. 122–148. • Louis Menand, "Nanook And Me," <i>The New Yorker</i>, Aug. 9, 2004. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly quiz 9, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST.
<p>Week Eleven (Nov. 16-20): Completing the Research Essay</p>	<p>Watch: (No new assignments this week.)</p> <p>Read: (No new assignments this week.)</p> <p>No Zoom class this week.</p> <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final research essay with grading reflection, due on Sunday, November 22, by 11:55 PM PST.
UNIT 6	SIGNATURE CINEMA: WELLES & GRIFFITH
Week Twelve	Watch:

<p>(Nov. 23-27): Griffith's Innovative Directing and Retrograde Politics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● D. W. Griffith, Birth of a Nation (1915, 190 min.); PN1997 B5642. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation" (46 pp.). ● Richard Brody, "The Worst Thing about Birth of a Nation is How Good It is." (New Yorker, 2013). [Thanks for suggesting this, Hugh.] <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Weekly quiz 10, due Wednesday at 3:00 PM PST.
<p>Week Thirteen (Nov. 30-Dec. 4): Welles's Break with Classical Hollywood</p>	<p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Orson Welles, <i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941, 119 min.); PN1997 C572. Buy on YouTube \$14.99, or watch it on NetFlix (subscription required). ● Mark Cousins, <i>The Story of Film: An Odyssey</i>, Episode 5 (<i>Stagecoach</i> and <i>Citizen Kane</i>). PN1993.5 A1S76 2012. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Knapp, Jeffrey. "Throw That Junk!' The Art of the Movie in Citizen Kane." <i>Representations</i> 122:1 (Spring 2013), pp. 110-142. <p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Final assessment and peer review report, due on Friday.

UVic Copyright notice

All course content and materials are made available by instructors for educational purposes and for the exclusive use of students registered in their class. The material is protected under copyright law, even if not marked with a ©. Any further use or distribution of materials to others requires the written permission of the instructor, except under fair dealing or another exception in the Copyright Act. Violations may result in disciplinary action under the Resolution of Non-Academic Misconduct Allegations policy (AC1300).