New York University  
Department of Media, Culture, and Communication  
MCC-UE 1141  
Hollywood Films and American Life

Course Description

This course examines the vast and rich myth-making power of Hollywood film narratives that influence dominant cultural views of American identity. Students view films that explore problems and promises of American culture and society such as equality, democracy, justice, class, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Students analyze films while considering the work of historians, sociologists, film critics, media studies scholars, anthropologists and journalists. Students will screen films outside of class. Assignments include creating a short film that explores the city where myths are both lived out and refuted on a daily basis.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, students will be able to effectively:

• Contextualize the impact of the American film industry on American society and culture.
• Evaluate different theories and approaches to the study of cultural production.
• Produce specific visual media for various platforms, such as film.

Required Texts & Materials

Readings will be uploaded via NYU Classes when chapters fall within fair use requirements. Most other selections are available through NYU Bobst Library as electronic books. Students are expected to see films before class. DVD copies of the featured films will be available on reserve at Bobst or UGFTV’s Digital Media Library, and when possible we will have the films broadcast on NYU TV.

Assignments

Participation
You are expected to arrive on time, having read the assigned materials, prepared to participate meaningfully in class discussions. This course is conceived as upper level seminar, with considerable discussion, and its success will depend on your participation.

Presentation & Short Paper
You will choose a scene from one of the featured films from our class list and offer an in-class presentation (10 minutes) of that film’s historical context, its relationship to its genre, and especially its framing of issues and the central tensions under consideration. At the time of your presentation you should submit a 5-7 page paper developing the ideas from your presentation and provide a 5-10 item bibliography about the film for the entire class.

Short Film – Visual Essay
Within a four-week period, you will shoot and edit a 3-5 minute film focusing on the historical development/variations and advancing a thesis about the possibilities and problems of “American Splendor.” The film will be shot on location in New York City with the collaboration of two of your classmates. Upon completion of the film, you will screen it in class and engage your peers with a 15 minute conversation (includes the screening) about your work.

Final Exam
Near the end of the semester we will provide you with a half dozen or so final exam questions. These questions will ask you to think about the main themes developed during the course, to re-examine the readings, and to develop your own framework for thinking about the course materials and the course. Our in-class final exam will draw from those questions.
Evaluation

Participation – 15%
Presentation & Short Paper – 25%
Short Film / Visual Essay – 30%
Final Exam – 30%

Evaluation Rubric

A= Excellent
This project is comprehensive and detailed, integrating themes and concepts from discussions, lectures and readings, and reflecting critical and technical topics covered in class. Students who earn this grade are prepared for class, synthesize course materials and contribute insightfully in every class meeting.

B=Good
This project meets the general requirements, offering contributions at a general level of understanding. Classroom participation is consistent and thoughtful in nearly all class meetings.

C=Average
This project is adequate but nothing more, meeting the minimum requirements but without significant original thought, reflection, or inventiveness, whether theoretically or practically. Classroom participation is inarticulate or infrequent.

D= Unsatisfactory
This project is incomplete, and evidences little understanding of the projects and discussions. Critique and implementation demonstrate inattention to detail; misunderstand course material and overlook significant themes. Classroom participation is spotty, unprepared and off topic, or rare.

F=Failed
This grade indicates a failure to participate and/or incomplete assignments

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COURSE POLICIES

Absences and Lateness
Attendance is mandatory. More than two unexcused absences will automatically result in a lower grade. Chronic lateness will also be reflected in your evaluation of participation. Regardless of the reason for your absence you will be responsible for any missed work.

Format
We will provide specific format requirements for the different project assignments. As for written work, please type and double-space submissions. Please also number and staple multiple pages. You are free to use your preferred citation style. Please use it consistently throughout your writing. If sending a document electronically, please name the file in the following format Yourlastname Coursenumber Assignment1.doc

Grade Appeals
Please allow two days to pass before you submit a grade appeal. This gives you time to reflect on our assessment. If you still want to appeal your grade, please submit a short but considered paragraph detailing your concerns. Based on this paragraph, we will review the question and either augment your grade or refine our explanation for the lost points.

General Decorum
Slipping in late or leaving early, sleeping, text messaging, surfing the Internet, doing homework, eating, etc. are distracting and disrespectful to all participants in the course.

**Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism** ([http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/policies/academic_integrity](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/policies/academic_integrity))
The relationship between students and faculty is the keystone of the educational experience at New York University in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. This relationship takes an honor code for granted and mutual trust, respect, and responsibility as foundational requirements. Thus, how you learn is as important as what you learn. A university education aims not only to produce high-quality scholars, but to also cultivate honorable citizens.

Academic integrity is the guiding principle for all that you do, from taking exams to making oral presentations to writing term papers. It requires that you recognize and acknowledge information derived from others and take credit only for ideas and work that are yours.

You violate the principle of academic integrity when you
- cheat on an exam,
- submit the same work for two different courses without prior permission from your professors,
- receive help on a take home examination that calls for independent work, or
- plagiarize.

Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud. In a community of scholars, whose members are teaching, learning, and discovering knowledge, plagiarism cannot be tolerated. Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score, and/or other materials that are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following:
- copy verbatim from a book, an article, or other media;
- download documents from the Internet;
- purchase documents;
- report from other’s oral work;
- paraphrase or restate someone else’s facts, analysis, and/or conclusions; or
- copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you.

Your professors are responsible for helping you to understand other people’s ideas, to use resources and conscientiously acknowledge them, and to develop and clarify your own thinking. You should know what constitutes good and honest scholarship, style guide preferences, and formats for assignments for each of your courses. Consult your professors for help with problems related to fulfilling course assignments, including questions related to attribution of sources. Through reading, writing, and discussion, you will undoubtedly acquire ideas from others, and exchange ideas and opinions with others, including your classmates and professors. You will be expected, and often required, to build your own work on that of other people. In so doing, you are expected to credit those sources that have contributed to the development of your ideas.

**Avoiding Academic Dishonesty**
- Organize your time appropriately to avoid undue pressure, and acquire good study habits, including note taking.
- Learn proper forms of citation. Always check with your professors of record for their preferred style guides. Directly copied material must always be in quotes; paraphrased material must be acknowledged; even ideas and organization derived from your own previous work or another’s work need to be acknowledged.
- Always proofread your finished work to be sure that quotation marks, footnotes and other references were not inadvertently omitted. Know the source of each citation.
- Do not submit the same work for more than one class without first obtaining the permission of both professors even if you believe that work you have already completed satisfies the requirements of another assignment.
- Save your notes and drafts of your papers as evidence of your original work.
Disciplinary Sanctions
If a professor suspects cheating, plagiarism, or other forms of academic dishonesty, appropriate disciplinary action may be taken following the department procedure or through referral to the Committee on Student Discipline. The Steinhardt School Statement on Academic Integrity is consistent with the NYU Policy on Student Conduct, published in the NYU Student Guide.

STUDENT RESOURCES
• Students with physical or learning disabilities are required to register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities, 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor, (212-998-4980) and are required to present a letter from the Center to the instructor at the start of the semester in order to be considered for appropriate accommodation.
• Writing Center: 411 Lafayette, 4th Floor. Schedule appts at rich15.com/nyu or walk-in.
Course Schedule:

**Weeks 1 & 2: American Exceptionalism: Common Sense, Republicanism and Empire of Liberty**

During the first two weeks the course sets up the basic and ideal ideological formula that undergirds so many films, especially in Hollywood’s classical period, an era dominated by the Production Code with its strict guidelines of do’s and don’ts for the film industry, undergirded by the expectation that good would triumph, evil would be punished, with everything working out in the end. Several conceits shaped the idea of American exceptionalism, particularly the idea that the United States was a new experiment dedicated to democracy, equality, and justice, with bigotry a problem that could be contained by people of good will.

**To Screen and Analyze:**
- *Sergeant York*, 1941, directed by Howard Hawks; screenplay by Harry Chandlee, Abem Finkel, John Huston, Howard Koch, Tom Skeyhill and Sam Cowan
- *Adam’s Rib*, 1949, directed by George Cukor; screenplay by Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin

**Readings:**
- Lary May, selections from *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of American the American Way*
- Roy Rosensweig, et al., selections from *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History*
- Steven J. Ross, selections from *Working Class Hollywood*

**Weeks 3 & 4: National Mythologies: Immigrants, Class Struggles, and the Promise of the “Melting Pot”**

The “melting pot” has functioned for much of the last century as a reassuring concept of American racial and ethnic tolerance, and promises the idea of assimilation and acceptance for succeeding waves of immigrants. The political discourses about immigrants and immigration continue to reveal tensions and fissures around this ideal of the US as a “nation of immigrants,” and the reality of the tensions and conflicts successive wave of immigrants produces is evidenced in a range of films.

**To Screen and Analyze:**
- *West Side Story*, 1961, directed by Robert Wise & Jerome Robbins; screenplay by Ernest Lehman
- *House of Sand and Fog*, 2003, directed by Vadim Perelman; screenplay by Shawn Lawrence Otto and Vadim Perelman

**Readings:**
- David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*
- Readings in Daniel Bernardi, ed., selections from *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*
- Roy Rosensweig, et al., selections from *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History*
- Steven J. Ross, selections from *Working Class Hollywood*


That inexorable engine of global migration, American capitalism, is inextricably bound with immigrants’ narratives, whether stories of self-made men or stories of exploitation and struggle. The promise of American capitalism is also challenged by narratives of excess, exploitation, waste, and violence. The narratives offered by filmmakers reveal an ongoing set of tensions about capitalism as a Darwinian enterprise, one with huge rewards and equally devastating loss.

**To Screen and Analyze:**
- *The Fountainhead*, 1949, directed by King Vidor; screenplay by Ayn Rand
- *Man Push Cart*, 2005, written and directed by Ramin Bahrani

**Readings:**
Weeks 7 & 8: The American Political System and the Promise of Democratic Processes

Hollywood films have historically averred that the American political system – including its legislative bodies, journalistic practices, and independent court system – can or ought to resolve many of the problems of inequality, intolerance, violence, exploitation, corruption, and thuggery. Films about the American political system articulate a long history of tensions between expectations and perceived realities, and draw on familiar tropes of purity versus corruption, idealism versus cynicism, and “the system” as transformative versus the system as fixed.

To Screen and Analyze:
Seven Days in May, 1964, directed by John Frankenheimer; screenplay by Rod Sterling
Who Killed Vincent Chin? 1987, directed by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña

Readings:
Lawrence Levine, “Hollywood’s Washington: Film Images of National Politics During the Great Depression,” in Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History
Lauren Berlant, selections from The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship

Weeks 9 & 10: Reason in an Unreasonable World: The Courtroom and Liberal Jurisprudence

If the political system has historically been understood as susceptible to corruption and the protection of entrenched interests, American filmmakers have held out strong hopes for the courtroom, and the legal system, as site and process in which justice is more likely than not to be carried out, where rational discourse and an ethos of patient discovery triumphs over haste, prejudice, and violence. Courtroom and legal system films revolve around a cluster of tensions, including: Rule of law versus arbitrary justice; the courtroom deliberation versus vigilantism; and protection of the individual against majoritarianism and hysteria.

To Screen and Analyze:
The Ox-Bow Incident, 1943, directed by William A. Wellman; screenplay by Lamar Trotti
Erin Brockovich, 2000, directed by Steven Soderbergh; screenplay Susannah Grant

Readings:
Alan Brinkley, Liberalism and Its Discontents
Nora Sayre, Running Time: Films of the Cold War
Lauren Berlant, selections from The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship


These first weeks will consider issues of racial inequality, racial violence, and color-based hierarchies versus the promises of equality and color-blindness that are central to the American credo and to the idea of American Splendor. While Hollywood films have historically tended to address these issues indirectly and not very forcefully (by naturalizing “whiteness” and its privileges), American films have nonetheless articulated core tensions at the center of American discourses about race, including: whiteness as a norm; conquest and subjugation; equality and inequality; violence and domination; integration and segregation; resistance and accommodation. Numerous films articulate these tensions, for Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos & Latinas, and others.
To Screen and Analyze:
*Shaft*, 1971, directed by Gordon Parks; screenplay by Ernest Tidyman & John D. F. Black
*Falling Down*, 1993, directed by Joel Schumacher; screenplay by Ebbe Roe Smith

Readings:
Matthew Frye Jacobsen, selections from *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*
Michele Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

Weeks 13 & 14: Gender Slippage: Manhood and Womanhood on Trial

Historically Hollywood films privileged and manufactured the manliest of men and the womanliest of women for audience delectation and emulation. Gender roles were carefully patrolled and reinforced, leaving little space for the negotiation of alternative sexualities and gender performance. But this repression masked deeper anxieties about manhood & masculinity and its definitions, and womanliness and femininity as well, and those anxieties have long manifested themselves in Hollywood films replete with fears about castration, impotence, small guns, homophobic epithets, queerness, same sex desire, and breakdown of ‘natural’ roles. In addition to tensions about inadequately masculine men and feminine women, in Hollywood’s frameworks madness and violent pathologies lurk within and around unresolved sexual identities.

To Screen and Analyze:
*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, directed by Mike Nichols; screenplay by Ernest Lehman, based on Edward Albee’s play of the same title.
*Boys Don’t Cry*, 1999, directed by Kimberly Peirce; screenplay by Kimberly Peirce and Eva Kolodner.

Readings:
Michael Kimmel, selections from *Manhood in America*
Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, “National Identity, Gender Identity”
Susan Jeffords, selections from *The Remasculinization of America*
Lauren Berlant, selections from *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*

Week 15: Wrap Up and Final Exam

Full List of Course Readings:
Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*
George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*
David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*
Roy Rosensweig, et al., *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History*
Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*
John Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*
Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*
John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*
Robert Westbrook, “Fighting for the American Family: Private Interests and Political Obligations in World War II” in Fox and Lears, *The Power of Culture*
Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*
Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men*
Steven J. Ross, *Working Class Hollywood*
Rosenzweig et al, *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History*
Lary May, “Confronting the Great Depression: Renewing Democracy in Hard Times,” in Ross, *Movies and American Society*
Production Supervision:
Production Supervision is the process by which NYU Film/Television works with filmmakers to manage the intersection of their films with the 'real world' beyond the set. Production Supervision is focused on working out solutions to production challenges and fostering safe, professional production practices on NYU sets.

Students enrolled in this class will need to work within the production guidelines of Tisch. The guidelines can be found on the NYU Production wiki (see below); students are expected to be familiar with and to follow these guidelines for their projects. The class will be assigned a Production Supervisor who can help clarify the guidelines and answer any questions students have regarding production questions.

Production Supervision is also a team of faculty who apply their production expertise to help guide and support filmmakers as they prepare to shoot their films. This course gives filmmakers a chance to work directly with Production Supervisors (in addition to class instructor) to identify whether elements of their film create higher levels of risk on the set - "Special Scenes and Activities" - and how to address those risks while preserving their creative vision.

Production Guidelines:
Work produced in “American Splendor – The Possibilities and Problems of American Life in US Films” must use class allotted/school issued production equipment (no outside equipment rentals under any circumstances will be allowed). Additionally, student productions must not exceed a 100-mile shooting radius from 721 Broadway. Students must become familiar with University and Departmental policies concerning the use of simulated weapons, as well as the restrictions or limitations for shooting in higher-risk situations (subways, rooftops, stunts, moving cars).

CSI Insurance
In addition to insurance provided through New York University, each student is responsible for purchasing student personal property insurance (CSI) through Fireman’s Fund. This supplemental insurance will cover students for one year & can be used in all production classes during the year of coverage. No equipment will be issued until the insurance certificate is presented to instructor.

Areas of coverage
Personal Property - This policy insures all personal articles owned or in the care, custody or control of the named insured while the insured is an enrolled student.

Rented or Borrowed Equipment - Covers photography or film related equipment that is rented or borrowed, provided the equipment is rented or borrowed for a period of thirty days or less.

Cost of CSI Insurance
The total minimum cost of the plan is $155. This total is broken down as follows:

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<td>Equipment Endorsement ($25,000 Limit)</td>
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**How to Purchase CSI Insurance**

**Step 1:** Go to www.collegestudentinsurance.com. Click *Order Policy*.

**Step 2:** From the pull-down menu, select *New York* as the School State and *New York University (Film/Photo/Journalism)* as the School Name.

**Step 3:** Select *YES* for the $60 Equipment Endorsement and choose your personal property coverage: The minimum Policy Limit is **$6000** with a **$500** Deductible for a cost of **$90**. Continue to fill in your personal information.

**Step 4:** Enter your credit card information and purchase the policy. Once your order has gone through you will receive a confirmation E-mail. Print out your confirmation E-mail and deliver it to your Instructor. (You will not be permitted to check out equipment from the Production Center without turning in a copy of your policy.)

**PRODUCTION WIKI**

All pertinent production information can be found on the Film/TV Wiki site: [http://www.nyu.edu/filmguide](http://www.nyu.edu/filmguide)

**Visual Essay Projects:**

Completed work files that is ready for screening must be saved as QuickTime files and must be delivered on a *USB Thumb Drive* with the following information presented on the departmental slate or countdown sequence: *(Name, Project #, Instructor, Length of Project).*

Projects that are not properly presented for screening *will* not be screened in class. Please remember to pick up your *USB Thumb Drive* at the end of class.
Recommended Films

**Weeks 1 & 2: American Exceptionalism: Common Sense, Republicanism and Empire of Liberty**


**Weeks 3 & 4: National Mythologies: Immigrants, Class Struggles, and the Promise of the “Melting Pot”**


**Weeks 7 & 8: The American Political System and the Promise of Democratic Processes** *Mr. Deeds*

Comes to Town, All the King’s Men, Gentleman’s Agreement The Manchurian Candidate, All the President’s Men, Parallax View, The Candidate, Failsafe, Good Night and Good Luck, Wag the Dog, Bob Roberts, Missing, JFK, Being There, Malcolm X, Syrian, Primary Colors, Advise and Consent, Bullworth, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Fog of War, Primary.

**Weeks 9 & 10: Reason in an Unreasonable World: The Courtroom and Liberal Jurisprudence**


Thunderheart, Two Towns of Jasper, Powwow Highway, Smoke Signals, Frozen River, Bad Day at Blackrock, World of Suzy Wong, Eyes on the Prize, Grand Torino, Stand and Deliver, Lone Star, La Familia, Gentleman’s Agreement, Blackboard Jungle, In the Heat of the Night, Guess Whose Coming to Dinner, The Defiant Ones, To Kill a Mockingbird, Souder, Do the Right Thing, Mississippi Burning, Amistead, Glory, Crash, Django Unchained, 12 Years a Slave.

**Weeks 13 & 14: Gender Slippage: Manhood and Womanhood on Trial**