American Film History
A Survey

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt
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Course number: 512.320
Room and Time: HS 06.02 (Vorklinik), Fri., 13:30-15:00
Course description: One of the reasons for the enormous success of U.S. popular culture can be found in the lasting attraction of Hollywood cinema. This lecture series will discuss the fascination the ‘dream factory’ has exerted upon mass audiences from the beginnings of modern entertainment culture to our present day. Examples will include early short films (by Edison, etc.), slapstick films (by Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd) as well as film noir (Double Indemnity), monumental cinema (The Birth of a Nation), science fiction (Alien), action thrillers (Falling Down), war movies (Full Metal Jacket), animation films (Ratatouille), and contemporary blockbusters (Avatar). Special emphasis will be placed on the discussion of American movie genres and their tradition, the genealogy of cinematic techniques, and the emergence of the classical Hollywood system. While discussing these films on an aesthetic level (examining their strategies of narration and cinematic construction), we will also attempt to situate them within the framework of political and historical events.

Teaching Method: Interactive presentations of important genres and timelines in American film history (mainly in the form of PowerPoint presentations to be made available on Moodle after the session).

Materials: All films will be available at the Media Archive of the Department of American Studies (Attermgsasse 25, top floor) or, in some cases, online.

Aims: The aim of this lecture class is to give an overview of the history of American cinema from the 1890s to the present day.

Assessment: Viewing assignments; final exam.

Important note: Alternatives to the scheduled exam dates are not possible!

Syllabus:

10 March American Film History – An Introduction
Basic texts (recommended):
S. Hayward, “Genre” (Key Concepts in Film Studies (1996) (online).

17 March National Epics and Historical Films
Main film (required):
The Birth of a Nation (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1915). Watch online:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3kmVgQHIEY
Companion films (optional):
Gone with the Wind (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939).
The Grapes of Wrath (dir. John Ford, 1940).

24 March Slapstick, Screwball, Romantic Comedies
Main film (required):
Bringing up Baby (dir. Howard Hawks, 1938). Watch trailer:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-EkAb1h2OM
Companion films (optional):

31 March Art Films & Independent Cinema
Main film (required):
Citizen Kane (dir. Orson Welles, 1941). Watch online:
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x375wgn
Companion films (optional):
Meshes of the Afternoon (dir. Maya Deren, 1943).
A Woman under the Influence (dir. John Cassavetes, 1974).
7 April  Gangster Films & Film Noir  
Main film (required):  
*Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944). Watch online:  
Companion films (optional):  

28 April  The Western  
Main film (required):  
Companion films (optional):  
*The Great Train Robbery* (dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1903).  
*True Grit* (dir. Ethan & Joel Coen, 2010).

5 May  The Musical (No class! Read PPT on Moodle)  
Main film (required):  
*Singin’ in the Rain* (dir. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952). Watch online:  
Companion films (optional):  
*Footlight Parade* (dir. Lloyd Bacon, 1933).  

12 May  Asian American Cinema  
Guest lecture by Philippa Gates (Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada)  

19 May  Thrillers and Horror Films  
Main film (required):  
Companion films (optional):  

26 May  Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Main film (required):  
Companion films (optional):  
*Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009).

2 June  War Movies  
Main film (required):  
Companion films (optional):  
*Der Fuehrer’s Face* (prod. Walt Disney, 1943).  

9 June  Action Films  
Main film (required):  
Companion films (optional):  
*True Lies* (dir. James Cameron, 1994).  
*Enemy of the State* (dir. Tony Scott, 1998).

23 June  Animation  
Main film (required):  
Companion films (optional):  
*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (prod. Walt Disney, 1937).  

30 June  Final Exam