

# COMM 136: CULTURAL HISTORY OF AMERICAN FILMS

## Citrus College Course Outline of Record

Heading	Value
Effective Term:	Fall 2021
Credits:	3
Total Contact Hours:	54
Lecture Hours :	54
Lab Hours:	0
Hours Arranged:	0
Outside of Class Hours:	108
Strongly Recommended:	ENGL 101.
District General Education:	C1. Arts
Transferable to CSU:	Yes
Transferable to UC:	Yes - Approved
Grading Method:	Standard Letter

## Catalog Course Description

In considering the history of American commercial motion pictures from their origins to the present, students will study film language, the social composition of audiences, the economics of the film industry, major themes and genres that have appeared in American films, and the relationship between politics and American motion pictures. Meets IGETC fine arts requirement. 54 lecture hours.

## Course Objectives

- analyze the art and science of film structure and language
- explain the reasons for economic successes and failures in the American motion picture industry
- identify the changing composition of film audiences, from early nickelodeons to modern multi-plex theaters
- evaluate the impact of censorship, politics, and government intervention on motion picture content; assess the impact of the filmmaker on film content
- describe major film genres (such as romantic comedies, westerns, war movies, epics, horror films, film noir etc.) and how these cultural forms originated and have changed over time
- identify major changes in motion picture technologies (such as editing, photography, special effects, etc.)
- interpret American motion pictures for themes and content
- identify changing cinematic depictions of different social and cultural groups, including African Americans, women, Asians, Hispanics, children, gays and lesbians, and other groups

## Major Course Content

Introduction – Film language, Structure and Analysis

1. Basic schools of film criticism
2. Film as narrative and language

3. Film audiences
4. Film as transmitter of ideas, ideologies, and cultural prototypes
1. Early Motion Pictures
  - a. Experiments and technologies before 1896 and the birth of projection (including experiments in Europe )
  - b. Edison and control of technology and the industry
  - c. Urban audiences and film audiences – the nickelodeon
  - d. Edwin S. Porter and early Edison film production
2. The Silent Era
  - a. World War I and the prominence of American Cinema
  - b. The heyday of the movie palace
  - c. D. W. Griffith and the birth of modern film language and the feature-length film
  - d. West coast production, the industry and the economy of southern California
  - e. Adolph Zukor and the studio system
  - f. Cecil B. DeMille, the star system, and European actors
  - g. Silent comedy
  - h. Early censorship, the culture of the 20s, and the morality of motion pictures
3. Sound: the Industry in the 1930s
  - a. Warner Brothers and sound
  - b. The Hays office and censors adjust to dialogue (Production Code Administration)
  - c. The birth of screenwriters and Screenwriter’s Guild
  - d. Actor’s Guild and the unions
  - e. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
  - f. Impact of immigration and its reflection in film themes.
  - g. The depression and financial crises of the studios
4. Motion Pictures in the 30s
  - a. Irving Thalberg and the new generation of producers
  - b. An explosion of genres: crime films, musicals, horror films, comedies, animation and Walt Disney, the B-film, two-reel comedies (The Little Rascals and the Three Stooges)
  - c. Other industries
  - d. African-American motion pictures
  - e. German films
5. World War II
  - a. The government and the film industry
  - b. Women and motion pictures
  - c. Audiences at home and abroad (record film attendance)
  - d. War films and their impact on culture
6. The Post-War Period – the Industry Under Siege
  - a. Paramount course case (1948) – the collapse of the studio system and the rise of independent agents
  - b. Film noir and the darker side of the post-war period
  - c. Fall in movie attendance
  - d. Birth of television
  - e. Britain and the rise of competitive industries abroad (the art house invasion)
  - f. HUAC and anti-Communism in films
7. Response and Adaptation: Films in the 1950s
  - a. New technologies: 3-D, Cinerama, and Cinemascope
  - b. The youth market: horror films, drive-ins, and teen pics

- c. Foreign location films
  - d. The studios and television production
  - e. Changing images of women
  - f. New directors: Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford and the Western, Billy Wilder
8. The 1960s
- a. Films of protest: civil rights and anti-nuclear themes
  - b. Youth and rebellion
  - c. Jack Valenti and the death of the old Motion Picture Production Code and birth of the new ratings systems
  - d. 1967-68 and the renewal of audience interest
9. The 1970s
- a. Vietnam and the industry
  - b. 1972-76 and the "golden era" of new directors: Robert Altman, Sam Peckinpah, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, and Arthur Penn
  - c. Black exploitation films
  - d. New marketing strategies – the shift from platform to saturation marketing: Jaws and the birth of the blockbuster
10. The 1980s and 1990s
- a. Hardbody films: Rambo and the rebirth of the war movie and the retrieval of masculinity
  - b. Slasher films and reappearance of horror
  - c. B-movie and 1930s and 1940s nostalgia – Indiana Jones and the comic book superheroes
  - d. John Hughes and the new generation of teen films
  - e. New Technologies: the VCR, Cable Television, George Lucas and Industrial Light and Magic, the suburban multi-plex theatre
  - f. Independent film makers: Spike Lee, Carl Franklin, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rodriguez, John Singleton, Robert Townsend, Robert Epstein, and Woody Allen
  - g. The appearance of Chicano, African-American, feminist, and gay and lesbian films
  - h.
12. The 2000s and beyond
- a. "Synergistic" (multi-media) mergers and the changing shape of finance, distribution, and control: Time-Warner, MGM, Turner, and the Disney revival
  - b. Superhero movies and franchises
  - c. Technological impacts of digital content and delivery on production, distribution and exhibition

## Suggested Reading Other Than Required Textbook

Lecture notes. Other resources distributed by instructor or linked off of course website.

## Examples of Required Writing Assignments

Write a 1-2 page typed, double spaced paper on the following:  
What is film noir? How is "The Maltese Falcon" a classic Noir film? Be sure to consider visual and thematic ideas.

## Examples of Outside Assignments

View "The Cheat." Read the article about cross-class fantasies. Write a 1-2 page typed, double spaced paper on the following:  
What is a cross-class fantasy? How is "The Cheat" a cross-class fantasy?

## Instruction Type(s)

Lecture, Online Education Lecture

## IGETC Area 3: Arts and Humanities

3A. Fine Arts