



# SCRN 119

## History of US Film Until 1960

### FALL 2021

**CLASS:** WEDNESDAYS, 6-9PM, TC 112

**SCREENINGS:** TUESDAYS, 4:15-6:45PM, RAZZO HALL

#### **PROF. ROX SAMER**

EMAIL: [RSAMER@CLARKU.EDU](mailto:RSAMER@CLARKU.EDU)

OFFICE: 202 TRAINA CENTER

STUDENT OFFICE HOURS: TUESDAYS, 1-4PM BY APPOINTMENT (& LARGELY VIA ZOOM)

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course offers a history of US film until 1960. Narrative fiction film and the Hollywood studio system will be our primary focus. However, we will also study documentary and experimental film, both of which blossomed in the 1920s and developed alongside and often in conversation with Hollywood across the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Together we will take a number of approaches to US film history. We will study how film evolved as a commercial art form, producing genres and stars meant to entertain the masses. We will also study how social and political developments of the 20th century—including Jim Crow, suffrage, immigration, censorship, the Great Depression, WWII, the Cold War—contributed to the evolution of the medium. We will witness how film not only held up a mirror to such changes, reflecting American society back to itself, but also served as an important site for the thinking and imagining of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. While we will at times be concerned with auteurs (and will count among them filmmakers of color, women filmmakers, and queer filmmakers), we will be equally preoccupied with the intellectual labor of film audiences.

Students should leave the class with:

- A thorough introduction to the first half of US film history
- Deeper knowledge of early 20th US history more broadly speaking
- Greater confidence in their skills of film analysis and Screen Studies research

## REQUIRED TEXTS

All texts required for this course will be available as PDFs on Moodle.

## ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING POLICIES

Participation: 10% of final grade

Moodle Assignments: 10%

Production Assignment 1: 10%

Silent Film Comedy Paper: 15%

Take Home Exam 1: 20%

Production Assignment 2: 15%

Take Home Exam 2: 20%

Your final grade will be calculated as a score out of 100 possible points for the semester. A standard 90-80-70-60 scale will be applied.

**“A” work** extends and expands our in-class discussions and offers original and creative thought. It meets all elements of the assignment or exam prompt and responds with a high degree of organizational foresight. “A” is reserved for outstanding work.

**“B” work** responds to the assignment or exam prompt insightfully, revealing strong command of the material we have covered. “B” is reserved for good work. “B” work, however, is less bold, less original, and/or less organized and well written than “A” work.

**“C” work** completes assignments and meets assignment requirements, while demonstrating a partial understanding of course content and minimal original thinking.

**“D” work** meets the technical requirements enumerated in the assignment or exam prompt, while failing to demonstrate any significant course-specific learning.

**“F” work** fails to meet the requirements of the assignment or exam, including but not limited to: lack of concrete textual analysis, inability to answer prompts, insufficient length, excessive grammatical and/or spelling errors, or late submission.

## ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

Barring illness, emergency or development of covid-like symptoms, you are expected to attend every class meeting. Students who miss class will be ill prepared for assignments. If you miss a class meeting, it is your responsibility to secure notes from a classmate and/or meet with the professor during office hours to learn about what you missed.

Students are expected to attend class having completed that day's reading and screening homework and taken careful notes on these materials. Students should come prepared to discuss the homework with their professor and peers.

Good class participation involves contributing to the discussion in an informed manner, being attentive to that conversation, and being respectful of the participants in it.

Across the semester, we will talk about a wide range of complicated and emotionally charged topics, including matters of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I want you to develop the ability to take a strong position on the issues that matter to you most, to defend what you believe in, and to question one another about those beliefs with both kindness and conviction. Acknowledging that we all bring different backgrounds and experiences to the various topics at hand, I also want you to learn how to listen carefully to what others are saying and be willing to change your mind when the ideas, questions, or arguments you hear are convincing. Listening to and learning from the opinions and perspectives of others gives us a broader view of the world we share and is the first step to building a better world to live in together.

Relatedly, I want to encourage you to take risks and get involved, even when it might feel easier keep to the sidelines. Here are some guidelines, which should help:

1. Contribute at least once a week to class discussion. Whenever possible, speak in "I" statements and do not generalize or try to speak for the class as a whole or some demographic or group as a whole.
2. Treat one another with respect. This includes using each other's correct pronouns (and correcting yourself if you make a mistake).
3. Know that anything you bring up is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or otherwise respond respectfully to what you have said.
4. Begin comments by responding to what other students or the professor have said before you. If you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction, inform the class of as much and make sure they are ready to move on.
5. Practice making arguments, not simply stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials before you and be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

This course, like all other 1 unit courses at Clark, comes with the expectation that over the course of the semester students will devote 180 hours to its study. This means that in addition to the forty or so hours we will spend together in the classroom (virtual and/or physical) you should plan to devote another 140 hours to your readings, screenings, and assignments. Much of this time should go to reading each week. If you consistently put in this time, you ought to be prepared to serve as a productive class participant.

## **MOODLE ASSIGNMENTS**

Each week you will need to make short Moodle forum post, responding to one of four prompts:

1. What was your number 1 take away from Wednesday's lecture and why?
2. What was your number 1 take away from Wednesday' reading and why?
3. What strike you as this week's 2-3 key concepts and how would you define them after completing Wednesday' reading and attending class Wednesday?
4. What is a question you have leaving Wednesday's class?

You can pick from each of these questions each week but please mix up which you answer and be sure to answer each at least twice over the course of the semester.

You should complete these posts by Thursday at 6pm. You should also aim to respond to one or more of your classmates' posts by noon on Friday. Both your answers and your responses should be roughly 200 words in length. When referencing a reading, provide page numbers, so your classmates know what passages specifically you are referring to. Please title your posts indicating which question you are answering.

One goal of this assignment is to build an archive of lecture and reading notes that you can return to in preparation for the midterm and final exams. Please complete them with the appropriate care. Like participation more generally, you will not receive regular grades on these assignments. But, if you submit these assignments punctually and consistently put thought into them, you will receive an "A" for this portion of your grade come December. If you are not punctual in submitting these assignments, forget to do them altogether, and/or regularly submit them with signs of little thought or care (including poor grammar and typos), you will receive a lower grade.

## **PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENTS**

Over the course of the semester you will complete two production assignments. These assignments are designed to help you learn key concepts by putting them into practice using the digital media tools you have access to.

The first of these two production assignments will be a group assignment. You will work in groups of 6 students to make a modern day cinema of attractions film. Each group member is expected to contribute in a roughly equal fashion. Everyone should be involved in conceptualizing the project and/or writing. But after that, I would recommend delegating roles (for example, one person directing, one editing, one operating the camera, one producing, and the remaining two acting). Group work can be challenging. Try to work through any challenges as a team and let me know if you experience insurmountable obstacles. All group members will receive the same grade unless I learn that one or more did not pull their weight and/or contribute. It is the producer's responsibility to submit group's film punctually via email. In this email, they should note who contributed what and CC all members of the group.

The second production assignment will be a solo film project in which you make a short avant-garde film, following the philosophy and example of either Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage. You will receive a prompt for each of these assignments in class.

## **SUBMITTING WORK VIA EMAIL**

Submit all written assignments as Word docs via email. When submitting work, be sure to include a header at the top of your assignment that includes your name. Also be sure to save all files as "LastName\_Assignment," i.e. "Smith\_Paper1" or "Smith\_Paper2." Students who fail to do as much will be penalized a third of a letter grade.

## **EXTRA CREDIT**

Over the course of the semester, I will announce a number of screenings and events on campus or online related to our course. Attending each of these will earn you a half point of extra credit. Should you attend four such events, you will earn two points of extra credit, such that an 88 (B+) would become a 90 (A-).

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### UNIT I: THE SILENT ERA

Aug. 24 & 25

#### **The Cinema of Attractions**

Screen: *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Porter, 1902); *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903); *Down the Hudson* (Armitage & Weed, 1903); *Panorama from Times Building, New York* (McCutcheon, 1905); *Coney Island at Night* (Porter, 1905); *Interior New York Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street* (Bitzer, 1905); *Mixed Pets* (Guy Blaché, 1911); *Making an American Citizen* (Guy Blaché, 1912); & *Suspense* (Weber, 1913)

Read: Greg Smith, "It's Just a Movie" & Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde"

Aug. 30

#### **Production Assignment 1 due at 6pm via email**

Aug. 31 & Sep. 1

#### **Silent Film Comedy**

Screen: *The Adventurer* (Chaplin, 1917); *A Dog's Life* (Chaplin, 1918); & *Sherlock, Jr.* (Keaton, 1924)

Read: Charlie Chaplin, "Pantomime and Comedy," Muriel Andrin, "Back to the 'Slap': Slapstick's Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence," & Tom Gunning, "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity"

Sep. 7 & 8

#### **Gender Slaps(tick)**

Screen: *Mary Jane's Mishap* (UK, GA Smith, 1903); *Léontine's Electric Battery* (France, 1910); *Laughing Gas* (US, Edison, 1907); *Le Torchon Brule* (France, 1911); *La Fureur de Mme Plumette* (France, 1912); *Madame's Cravings* (France, Alice Guy-Blaché, 1906); *Daisy Doodad's Dial* (UK, Florence Turner, 1914); & *A Florida Enchantment* (US, Drew, 1914)

Read: Maggie Hennefeld, "Introduction" from *Specters of Slapstick & Silent Film Comediennes* & Laura Horak, "Cultural Hierarchy and the Detection of Sexual Deviance in *A Florida Enchantment*" from *Girls Will Be Boys*

Guest Lecture by Prof. Maggie Hennefeld

Sep. 14 & 15	<p><b>The Birth of the Studio System &amp; Its Others</b></p> <p>Screen: <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (Griffith, 1915) excerpts &amp; <i>Within Our Gates</i> (Micheaux, 1920)</p> <p>Read: Clyde Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema" &amp; Jacqueline Stewart, "'We Were Never Immigrants': Oscar Micheaux and the Reconstruction of Black American Identity" from <i>Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity</i></p>
Sep. 20	<p><b>Silent Film Comedy Paper due at 6pm via email</b></p>
<p><b>UNIT II: CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD</b></p>	
Sep. 21 & 22	<p><b>Classical Hollywood Style</b></p> <p>Screen: <i>Christopher Strong</i> (Arzner, 1933)</p> <p>Read: Claire Johnston, "Dorothy Arzner: Critical Strategies" &amp; Richard Dyer, <i>White</i> excerpt</p>
Sep. 28 & 29	<p><b>The Motion Picture Production Code</b></p> <p>Screen: <i>The Public Enemy</i> (Wellman, 1931) &amp; <i>Baby Face</i> (Green, 1933)</p> <p>Read: "The Production Code," "Special Regulations on Crime in Motion Pictures," Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face', or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash" &amp; Richard Maltby, "A Short and Dangerous Life: The Gangster Film, 1930-32"</p>
Oct. 5 & 6	<p><b>Genres &amp; Stars, Pt. 1: Screwballs</b></p> <p>Screen: <i>Bringing Up Baby</i> (Hawks, 1938)</p> <p>Read: Stanley Cavell, "Leopards in Connecticut: <i>Bringing Up Baby</i>" from <i>Pursuits of Happiness</i></p>
Oct. 12 & 13	<p><b>Genres &amp; The Stars, Pt. 2: Musicals</b></p> <p>Screen: <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> (Fleming, 1939)</p> <p>Read: Jane Feuer, <i>The Hollywood Musical</i> excerpts &amp; Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men"</p>

Oct. 19

**Take Home Essay Exam 1 due at 6pm via email**

**UNIT III: ALTERNATIVE  
CINEMAS OF THE 40S &  
50S**

Oct. 20

**The American Avant-Garde, Part 1**

Read: Maya Deren, "Amateur Versus Professional" & "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality"

*Special Event: Prof. Sarah Keller, "Both Sides of the Coin: Maya Deren's Experimental Film Practice," 7:30pm, Wednesday, Oct. 20, Razzo Hall—includes a screening of Study in Choreography for Camera (Deren 1945) & Ritual in Transfigured Time (Deren, 1946)—\*ON FILM\* (no separate screening this week)*

Oct. 26 & 27

**The American Avant-Garde, Part 2**

Screen: *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Deren and Hammid, 1943); *At Land* (Deren, 1944); *Fireworks* (Anger, 1947); *Puce Moment* (Anger, 1949); *Bridges-Go-Round* (Clarke, 1958); *The Wonder Ring* (Brakhage, 1955); *Cat's Cradle* (Brakhage, 1959); & *Window Water Baby Moving* (Brakhage, 1959) \*ON FILM\*

Read: Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Doc" & Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision* excerpt

Nov. 2 & 3

**Documentary, Propaganda, & WWII**

Screen: *Prelude to the War* (Capra, 1942) & *The Battle of Britain* (Capra, 1943)

Read: Thomas Doherty, "Documenting the 1940s" & Erik Barnouw, "Bugler"

Nov. 8

**Production Assignment 2 due at 6pm via email**

**UNIT IV: HOLLYWOOD IN  
CRISIS**

Nov. 9 & 10

**Hollywood Goes to War**

Screen: *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942) \*ON FILM\*

Read: Umberto Eco, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage"

Nov. 16 & 17	<b>Civil Unrest, the Red Scare, &amp; the Hollywood Blacklist</b>
	Screen: <i>The Defiant Ones</i> (Kramer, 1958)
	Read: James Baldwin, <i>The Devil Finds Work</i> excerpt
Nov. 30 & Dec. 1	<b>New Hollywood On the Horizon</b>
	Screen: <i>Psycho</i> (Hitchcock, 1960)
	Read: Robin Wood, "Psycho" & <i>Hitchcock/Truffaut</i> excerpt
Dec. 9	<b>Take Home Essay Exam 2 due at 6pm via email</b>

## SCREENING CONTENT WARNING

Many of this course's screenings contain physical violence, sexual violence, hate speech and other derogatory and/or outdated terms. Please speak to me at the start of the semester if you have any specific concerns. In my teaching experience as well as that of colleagues in gender and sexuality studies and cinema and media studies, it has been nearly impossible for a professor to predict what will be triggering to individual students. Many triggers (such as names, colors, sounds, etc.), in their very nature, cannot be predicted. Trigger warnings do not distinguish between oppositional or critical representations of traumatizing experience and sensationalistic or gratuitous representations. Overreliance upon trigger warnings can sometimes censor important representations of challenging histories and experiences authored by and for queer, transgender, women, and/or POC subjects. For these reasons, it is my policy that each individual student take responsibility for their own mental health needs and proactively research and clearly communicate any concerns at the start of the semester.

## MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

College can be stressful. This stress can be exasperated by crises. If you suspect you might be experiencing excessive anxiety, depression or some other mental health concern, please visit Clark's Office of Counseling and Personal Growth. They are located at 114 Woodland Street and open Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm (closed 12-1pm for lunch). Their phone number is (508) 793-7678. Their website also has a great list of resources: <https://www.clarku.edu/offices/counseling/mental-health-toolbox/>.

## ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

If you require accommodations in this course due to a disability or a personal circumstance that will affect your learning in this course, please contact me, so we can discuss the best ways to meet your needs. Any student who needs accommodations for disabilities should also register with the Office of Disability Services. For information, please contact Adam Kosakowski, Director of Disability Services, at 508-798-4368 or at <AKosakowski@clarku.edu>.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Academic integrity is a basic value for all higher learning. Simply expressed, it requires that work presented must be wholly one's own and unique to that course. All direct quotations must be identified by source. Academic integrity can be violated in many ways: for example, by submitting someone else's paper as one's own; cheating on an exam; submitting one paper to more than one class; copying a computer program; altering data in an experiment; or quoting published material without proper citation of references or sources. Attempts to alter an official academic record will also be treated as violations of academic integrity.

To ensure academic integrity and safeguard students' rights, all suspected violations of academic integrity are reported to the College Board. Such reports must be carefully documented, and students accused of the infraction are notified of the charge. In the case of proven academic dishonesty, the student will receive a sanction, which may range from an F in the assignment or course to suspension or expulsion from the University.

The complete academic integrity policy is available with Academic Advising at <http://www.clarku.edu/offices/aac/integrity.cfm>

## **NOTICE: FACULTY MEMBERS ARE “RESPONSIBLE EMPLOYEES”**

This notice is to inform you that the faculty member associated with this course is considered a “Responsible Employee” by Clark University. As such, I am required to report all alleged sexual offenses to the University's Title IX Coordinator, Lynn Levey, [llevy@clarku.edu](mailto:llevy@clarku.edu). The only exceptions to this reporting responsibility are the community members who have been designated and/or trained as “Confidential” Sources. This includes the professional staff in Clark's Center for Counseling and Personal Growth and the medical providers at the Health Center, as well as other individuals listed at <http://bit.ly/2eUOGGx>

## **DISCLAIMER**

As the professor, I reserve the right to make changes to any information contained in this syllabus at any time during the semester. Changes will be announced, and an updated version of the syllabus will be posted on Moodle and/or distributed to students.