

TEN ESSENTIAL FILMS FOR OUR TIMES

The politics in Hollywood movies

Can American movies help us understand our current political and social climate? Can we gain historical perspective on American society by watching certain films? Are there political messages embedded in movies? Do movies influence public opinion or simply reflect it? These are some of the questions explored in this course through an analysis of ten significant films spanning the 1930s to the 2000s. Examined through the lens of popular culture, these films chart the evolution of American society over several decades and provide a window into the current zeitgeist. Each class will concentrate on five major themes in American society: class, populism, race, gender, and militarism.

The ten films are:
My Man Godfrey (1936)
Hell Or High Water (2016)
Pinky (1949)
Do The Right Thing (1989)
Mildred Pierce (1945)
Thelma and Louise (1991)
All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)
American Sniper (2014)
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)
Network (1976)*

Movies remain one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America. With the advent of new means of production and distribution (Netflix, Amazon, etc.) Hollywood continues to wield considerable influence in our culture. This course postulates that by examining movies beyond their aesthetic and narrative elements, films, in fact, provide a unique

window into how American attitudes have been transformed from the early decades of the last century to the present.

Each class (excepting the first one) will use two films to study a single topic; one film from Hollywood's classic period and the second from more recent decades. Aside from the political content, the films selected are significant because of their artistic achievement and box office success.

Week 1 Hollywood and American ideology Hollywood is primarily about entertainment, but movies have always been coded with messages that reveal cultural and political attitudes. In this session, we'll review the history of Hollywood as a purveyor of an American ideology that has defined our nation, (e.g. individualism, meritocracy, exceptionalism, etc.). We'll look at how the Hays Code and

the HUAC hearings influenced Hollywood's politics. We'll study the differences between explicit and non-explicit political messages in films.

Week 2 Class: From passivity to rebellion Inequality is at the forefront of political discourse today. But class inequality has always existed although hardly acknowledged in movies. We'll study two films that demonstrate the fundamental shifts in the way Hollywood has represented class: *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Hell Or High Water* (2016). A comparative examination of these two films shows a dramatic reordering of the social/economic class paradigm in America.

Week 3 Race: Disrupting the social order We'll trace Hollywood's early treatment of racial prejudice and how it reflected America's racist attitudes. In

Pinky (1949) racial prejudice is acknowledged, while still affirming white superiority. This tepid approach to race would be the Hollywood standard until the notion of racial harmony is finally dismantled in Do The Right Thing (1989).

Week 4 Gender and the feminization of American society In the beginning, Hollywood generally depicted female characters as malleable whose primary purpose was to serve male desires. In Mildred Pierce (1945) Joan Crawford's character makes a successful life for herself without a man and is punished for it. In Thelma and Louise (1991) the two main characters fight back against patriarchy, but their triumph ends with a suicidal escape from a male-dominated world.

Week 5 The rise of militarism We'll analyze the growing influence of the military

in American life from pacifist sentiment in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930); to public ambivalence in *American Sniper* (2014)

Week 6 Populism and celebration of the individual. From *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) to *Network* (1976) Hollywood has dramatized the tension between individual liberty and popular will in American society.

*This list may change prior to the first class meeting. We will update the list if necessary.

While it is not mandatory, it is recommended that students watch the films prior to attending each session. The films' plots will be synopsisized and clips will be shown in class.

A list of other recommended films and books will be available at the end of the course.

