

Society and Culture in the American Film

Társadalom és kultúra az amerikai film tükrében BBLAN09100

Lecturer: Balogh, Beatrix balogh.beatrix@btk.ppke.hu

Time and place: Three longer in-person sessions: **February 15** and **March 8**, Saturdays 13.15-17.15, **April 11** Friday 14.30-18.45. All mandatory-item movies are viewed at home. The movies must be watched by the time indicated in the syllabus.

Purpose of the course is to gain further insight into American culture and society through investigating how cinema reflects on certain American myths; social and cultural patterns, or critical issues of contemporary society, as well as anxieties about the future. Attendant to this investigation we will encounter distinct regional identities and institutions. We will also explore why and how certain movies become cultural icons or iconic culture products with an impact beyond catering to a particular American audience.

Format and Requirements: class participation, response notes, term paper.

Response notes: partly to demonstrate your familiarity with the movie (to show that you have indeed watched it) you are to write a short (cca 250 words) informal 'reaction' via Unipoll before class. (What you liked/disliked, found interesting/difficult, in what way you found the movie instructive/informative/distressing/funny; in other words, your personal reaction as audience. No research required! It is purely viewer response. Be yourself.). **Response notes are due Thursday evening** (Unipoll questionnaire closes) before class.

Home Paper: Choose a theme to explore (in a formal essay of cca 2,000 words) how two movies of your choice reflect on a key component of American identity, a national myth, critical social issues, or an institution. The paper can include commentaries on other films you have seen that address the same questions. **Deadline** for submission is **May 15**.

Themes: Origin Myth, The Frontier, Melting Pot, Suburbia, Family and Gender norms, Foreign intervention/American Exceptionalism, Race and Class Divisions, Apocalyptic visions and anxieties.

You will find the preliminary schedule below. Compulsory texts/movies are set in bold.

DATE	DISCUSSION TOPIC / ASSIGNMENT FOR CLASS
February 15	Reflections on the present: social issues and ideals. If you have seen the movie recently (have vivid recollection) it is okay to tell me what/how you remember, especially details that correspond to these themes below. Cosmopolitan dreams; LA scenes. Valentine's Day (Feb14:) critical notes despite the rosy pic, Race, class and equal opportunity, youth culture and inner-city school, Freedom Writers , or racial stereotypes and representation in Crash ; David v Goliath; Environment; rural California. Erin Brockovich ; Gown v Town. Irish and working class. Boston scenes Good Will Hunting ; Native American Dreams, contemporary West Smoke Signals
March 8	Reflections on the past (assuming you have seen <i>Forrest Gump</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i> , make time for the four other movies in this slot, each with a 2+hours running time) Origin myth in Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915), Conquest of Paradise (Scott 1992); Nostalgia for the West/The Frontier Dances with Wolves (Costner, 1990), <i>Lone Ranger</i> (Verbinski 2013); American v Immigrant/Melting Pot Gangs of New York (Scorsese, 2002); The Peculiar Institution/Lost Cause Narrative <i>Gone with the Wind</i> (Fleming, 1939), 12 Years a Slave (McQueen, 2013); Enduring racial and class divides, idea of post-racial US Hidden Figures (Melfi, 2016) Recent history and dilemmas of foreign interventions Forrest Gump (Silvestri, 1994), <i>American Sniper</i> (Eastwood, 2014)
April 11	Reflections on the future: alternative presents, apocalyptic visions of the collapse of society, post-apocalyptic dystopias, the future in young adult films Suburbs, family, gender norms in near-future/sci-fi dystopia The Stepford Wives (Oz, 2004) <i>Epidemics, climate change, and our place in the universe</i> <i>Contagion</i> (Soderbergh 2011) you have surely seen in post-Covid; Interstellar (Nolan 2014). post-apocalyptic US government and society <i>The Hunger Games</i> , <i>Divergent</i> , <i>Maze Runner</i> – reflect on any of these
April 11	Review and summary (present your idea for the home essay: themes, and contrastive points)

Attendance, class work, and evaluation:

1. You should prepare for each class. Watch the movies and read the assigned text before the class discussions.
2. Please make your priority to attend in-person discussions. You can miss no more than 5*45 minutes or 1 occasion, otherwise your course will be marked "incomplete". Response notes should be turned in notwithstanding.
3. Responses are to be written in the Unipoll task panel. The system encourages spontaneous, informal feedback on the movies, but does not allow for late responses. Non-authentic responses (loaned film reviews, AI-generated texts are scored down)

4. **Evaluation:** Your final grade will be based on the following components. Class work: meaningful participation in class discussions (active participation in all three sessions makes a 5 on this component, two sessions can yield a 4), authentic response notes (scored), Compare & Contrast paper.

Useful literature:

- Slotkin, Richard. "Prologue to a Study of Myth and Genre in American Movies" *Prospects*. Volume 9. October 1984. pp 407-432. online 30 July 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0361233300003975>.
- Smithers, Gregory D. "The Enduring Legacy of the Pocahontas Myth" *The Atlantic*. March 21, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/the-enduring-legacy-of-the-pocahontas-myth/520260/>
- "Conservatism and the American Dream in Forrest Gump" (Student essay, March 2, 2015) <https://einblogvonvielen.wordpress.com/2015/03/02/conservatism-and-the-american-dream-in-forrest-gump/>
- Kedong Liu & Hui Zhang. "Self- and Counter-Representations of Native Americans: Stereotypical Images of and New Images by Native Americans in Popular Media" *Intercultural Communication Studies* XX: 2 (2011). <https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09KedongLiuHuiZhang.pdf>
- Boyd, Julia. "An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers". *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, Vol. 6, No. 1. Spring 2015. <https://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/academics/communications/research/vol6no1/10BoydEJSpring15.pdf>
- Beltrán, Mary C. "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (And Multiracial) Will Survive." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2005, pp. 50–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3661094>.
- St. Clair Bourne. "THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGE IN AMERICAN CINEMA." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 21, no. 2, Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1990, pp. 12–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41067680>.
- Walkowitz, Daniel J. "'The Gangs of New York': The Mean Streets in History." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 56, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 204–09, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289866>.
- Deutsche Welle. DW.com. 'What Hollywood movies do to perpetuate racial stereotypes' Data Analysis. <https://www.dw.com/en/hollywood-movies-stereotypes-prejudice-data-analysis/a-47561660>
- Schmidt, Christopher. "Why are Dystopian Films on the Rise Again?" *JSTOR Daily*. November 19, 2014. <https://daily.jstor.org/why-are-dystopian-films-on-the-rise-again/>
- Mark Fisher. "Precarious Dystopias: The Hunger Games, in Time, and Never Let Me Go." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 4, University of California Press, 2012, pp. 27–33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.65.4.27>.
- Daniel Bernardi and Michael Green: *Race in American Film: Voices and Visions That Shaped a Nation*,
J. Emmett Winn: *The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*
Leonard Quart and Albert Auster: *American Film and Society since 1945*
Pat Breerton: *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*
The Columbia Companion to American History on Film, ed. Peter C. Rollins
Norman K. Denzin: *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*