

## **Society and Culture in the American Film**

Társadalom és kultúra az amerikai film tükrében BBAN24300 D2

**Lecturer:** Balogh, Beatrix  
**Time and place:** Wednesday 12.30-14.00 D 204  
 All mandatory-item movies are viewed at home. The movies must be watched by the time indicated in the syllabus.  
**Availability:** Tuesday 16.00-17.00 (Office Hours) in Rm 102 or by appointment  
 email: balogh.beatrix@btk.ppke.hu

**Purpose** of the course is to investigate how American myths; social and cultural patterns are manifest or are reflected upon in American movies and to gain further insight into issues of American society through these culture products. We will watch a selection of iconic American movies and will gain insight into the ideas and ideals of US past, present and future. Literal and theatrical traditions, genres, narratives, literary theories will be discussed only as attendant to telling a “story” or exploring deep-seated notions of society with cinematic techniques. Instead, we will choose a few important themes and 1, discuss how these are present and presented in cinema 2, and what particular insight we can gain about American identity and American society through these representations. 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, presentation, term paper (end-term test).

**Response notes:** partly to demonstrate your familiarity with the movie (to show that you have indeed watched it) you are to write a short (1-2 paragraphs) 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). Add to it one or two questions you would like to raise in class. You are to watch the movie even if you cannot come to class (see below at “attendance and grading policy”) **Response notes are normally due Monday evening** (Unipoll questionnaire closes) before the Wednesday class.

**Presentation/Discussion Leading and Home Paper:** Choose a movie/theme and prepare a short talk (ppt and/or handout aided) in which you explore how the movie reflects on a key component of American identity, a national myth, or an institution. Attendant to this question is how the genre, the particular form of telling the story is typical or peculiar to the myth.

You must sign up for a presentation at the beginning of the term.

**End-term test:** short essay questions (list of possible questions will be distributed) to be answered in 3-5 sentences in which you will give account of your familiarity with class discussions.

Themes: Origin Myth, The Frontier, Melting Pot, Suburbia, Family and Gender norms, Vietnam, Race and Class Divisions, Apocalyptic visions and anxieties

**Compulsory films:** *Birth of a Nation*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Gangs of New York*, *Gone with the Wind*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Godfather*, *Hidden Figures*, *Crash*, *Deer Hunter*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Stepford Wives*, *Interstellar* and one of the other recommended movies that we will select in class by the Fall Break. Compulsory texts are also highlighted below. You will be watching one or two films at home for each week. Also be familiar with the other movies and their representation of the discussion theme of the week. You will find the preliminary schedule below.

DATE	DISCUSSION TOPIC	READING ASSIGNMENT FOR CLASS
Sept 11	<b>Introduction</b> , goal orientation. Cinema and society, Origin Myths	<b>“Prologue”</b> Origin v Creation myth in Disney’s <i>Pocahontas</i> and <i>Moana</i> (Vaiana), <i>1492: Conquest of Paradise</i> (Scott, 1992),
Sept 18	Origin myth	<b><i>Birth of a Nation</i></b> (D. W. Griffith, 1915),
Sept 25	The Frontier	<b><i>Dances with Wolves</i></b> (Costner, 1990)
Oct 2	American v Immigrant	<b><i>Gangs of New York</i></b> (Scorsese, 2002)
Oct 9	The Peculiar Institution/Lost Cause Narrative	<b><i>Gone with the Wind</i></b> (Fleming, 1939), <b><i>12 Years a Slave</i></b> (McQueen, 2013)
Nov 6	Law and Order and the film noir	<b><i>Godfather</i></b> (Coppola, 1972), <b><i>The Irishman</i></b> (Scorsese, 2019)
Nov 13	Enduring racial and class divides	<b><i>Hidden Figures</i></b> (Melfi, 2016), <b><i>Crash</i></b> (Haggis, 2004)
Nov 20	The trauma of the Vietnam War and dilemmas of foreign interventions	<b><i>The Deer Hunter</i></b> (Cimino, 1978), <b><i>Forrest Gump</i></b> (Silvestri, 1994), <b><i>American Sniper</i></b> (Eastwood, 2014)
Nov 27	Family ideals and gender norms, Suburbia	<b><i>The Stepford Wives</i></b> (Oz, 2004), <b><i>Kramer v Kramer</i></b> (Benton 1979)

Dec 4	<i>Apocalyptic visions of the collapse of society, post-apocalyptic dystopias, the future in young adult films</i> , <b>Interstellar</b> (Nolan 2014), <i>Blade Runner 2049</i> , <i>The Hunger Games</i> sequel
Dec 11	<i>Review and summary</i> (End-term test)

Attendance, class work, and evaluation:

1. You should prepare for each class. Watch the movie and read the assigned text before the class discussions. **Missing a class does not exempt you from watching the movie assigned for that week** or preparing for the next.
2. Please make your priority to attend in-person discussions. If you are bound to miss classes due to illness (or symptoms make you cautious), let the instructor know immediately. Response notes should be turned in notwithstanding. Do not miss a class for an alluring alternative activity. If you miss more than 3 classes without permission, your course may be marked "incomplete".
3. Responses are to be written in the Unipoll task panel. The system does not allow for late responses. If you miss more than 3 responses, your course may be marked "incomplete".
4. Evaluation: Your final grade will be based on the following components. Class work: meaningful participation in class discussions, authentic response notes, presentation, Compare & Contrast paper/End-term test.

Set texts See compulsory and recommended movies above.

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>. **Excerpt provided in class.**

Recommended readings:

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/>

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>.

Scruggs, Charles. "'The Power of Blackness': Film Noir and Its Critics." *American Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 675–87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567983>.

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/>

Williams, Douglas E. "Ideology as Dystopia: An Interpretation of 'Blade Runner.'" *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1988, pp. 381–94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1600763>.

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 Brereton: *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*