Society and Culture in the American Film

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| *Társadalom és kultúra az amerikai film tükrében* | BBNAN24300 |

**Lecturer**: Balogh Beatrix

**Time and place**: Thursdays 10.15-11.45 Z Rm 316

All mandatory-item movies are viewed at home. The movies must be watched by the time indicated in the syllabus. Should we move online, real-time group discussions will be conducted via MS Teams.

**Availability**: Thursdays 11.45-12:30 (Office Hours) in Rm 110/111 by appointment

or via email: trixiebalogh@yahoo.com

**Purpose** of the course is to investigate how American myths, social and cultural patters 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, home 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”)

**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 particular movie reflects on a key component of American identity, a national myth, or an institution. You have to sign up for a presentation at the beginning of the term. Your home paper analysing one of the assigned movies or comparing two along the same analytical frame (cca 1200 words, formal academic essay, employs min 3 relevant secondary literature) is due December 5.

**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, Good Will Hunting, Forrest Gump, The Stepford Wives, Contagion*

You will be watching one or two films at home for each week. Also be familiar with the other moves and their representation of the discussion theme of the week.

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| date |  | Discussion topic | reading assignment for class |
| Sept 16 | | **Introduction**, goal orientation. Cinema and society | “Prologue” |
| Sept 23 | | Origin myths | *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Scott, 1992), ***Birth of a Nation*** (D. W. Griffith, 1915), Origin v Creation myth in Disney’s *Pocahontas* and *Moana* (Vaiana), |
| Sept 30 | | The Frontier | ***Dances with Wolves*** (Costner, 1990) |
| Oct 07 | | American v Immigrant | ***Gangs of New York*** (Scorsese, 2002) |
| Oct 21 | | *The Peculiar Institution* | ***Gone with the Wind***(Fleming, 1939),***12 Years a Slave***(McQueen, 2013) |
|  |  | Fall Break |  |
| Nov 04 | | Law and Order and the film noir | ***Godfather*** (Coppola, 1972), *The Irishman* (Scorsese, 2019) |
| Nov 11 | | Enduring racial and class divides | ***Hidden Figures*** (Melfi, 2016),***Good Will Hunting*** (Van Sant, 1999) |
| Nov 18 | | The trauma of the Vietnam War and dilemmas of foreign interventions | *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978), ***Forrest Gump*** (Silvestri, 1994), *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014) |
| Nov 25 | | Family ideals and gender norms, Suburbia | ***The Stepford Wives*** (Oz, 2004), *Kramer v Kramer* (Benton 1979) |
| Dec 09 | | *Apocalyptic visions of pandemics and the collapse of society, post-apocalyptic dystopias,* the future in young adult films | ***Contagion*** (Soderbergh 2011), *Interstellar, Blade Runner 2049, The Hunger Games* sequel |
| Dec 16 | | **End-term test** | paper format (in person) / unipoll (online) |

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. Wearing a mask is compulsory at all times while on PPCU premises. You can only enter the classroom with your mask on (and hands sanitized); if the size (distanced seating arrangements) and ventilation of the room permits, you may remove your mask when not speaking. Make sure your mask provides safe covering when engaged in small-group discussions (masks with folds are more likely to remain in place while speaking).
3. Please make your priority to attend in person discussions while we can. 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”.
4. Should we move online, your weekly participation in the online discussion forum is required. End-term test then will be administered via Unipoll.
5. Responses are to be written in the Unipoll task panel, the home paper is in word document format.

Evaluation: Your final grade will be based on the following components. Class work: meaningful participation in class discussions/online forum, 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*