



# SCRN 119

## History of US Film Until 1960

**SPRING 2024**

**CLASS:** TUESDAYS & THURSDAYS, 10:25-11:40 OR 4:15-5:30, TC 111

**SCREENINGS:** TUESDAYS, 7:00-9:45PM, RAZZO HALL, OR  
WEDNESDAYS 7:00-9:45PM, THE MASH (2<sup>ND</sup> FLOOR TRAINA)

**PROF. JED SAMER**

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

OFFICE: 311 TRAINA CENTER

OFFICE HOURS: TUESDAYS, 11:45AM-1:45PM PM BY APPOINTMENT

### **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 Black filmmakers, 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  
Production Assignment 1: 10%  
Production Assignment 2: 20%  
Archival Annotations: 20%  
Essay Exams: 40%

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. To earn a high participation grade, students should contribute to class discussion each week.

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.

Students are asked to refrain from using laptops, phones or other devices for any other purpose than taking notes and accessing course materials, as activities like texting and messaging can be distracting for one's classmates and professor alike.

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 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.

For more information on attendance and participation expectations, please see the Screen Studies program-wide policies on course screenings and late work on Canvas.

## **PRODUCTION ASSIGNMENTS**

During the semester you will complete two production assignments. They are designed to help you learn key concepts by putting them into practice using the digital media tools you have ready access to. They will not be graded according to technical ability.

The first of these two production assignments will be a group assignment. You will work in groups of 3 or 4 students to make a modern-day cinema of attractions film. The second production assignment will be a solo film project in which you make a short avant-garde film, following the philosophy and cinematic example of either Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage. You will receive prompts for these assignments in class.

## **ARCHIVAL ANNOTATIONS**

During the semester, you will conduct research on a Classical Hollywood star via the digital archives of the [media history digital library](#), an online resource featuring books and magazines from film history. You will receive prompts for annotations in class, and we will begin our research as a class together. You are expected to complete these over the course of many weeks; do not reserve working on them till the last minute.

## **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**

During the semester, I will announce events 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-).

***Please complete all readings and screenings ahead of dates on the left (see below).***

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **UNIT I: THE SILENT ERA**

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

- Jan. 16 Read: Greg Smith, "It's Just a Movie"
- Jan. 18 Screen: *Building Up and Demolishing the Star Theatre* (Armitage, 1901); *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903); *Down the Hudson* (Armitage & Weed, 1903); *Coney Island at Night* (Porter, 1905); *Impossible Convicts* (Bitzer, 1905); *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (Porter, 1906); *Mixed Pets* (Guy Blaché, 1911); *Making an American Citizen* (Guy Blaché, 1912); & *Suspense* (Weber, 1913)
- Read: Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde"

#### **Not So Silent Genders**

- Jan. 23 Screen (on your own—12 mins total): *The Dairy Maid's Revenge* (Armitage, 1899); *How Bridget Served the Salad Undressed* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1898); *How Bridget Made the Fire* (Marvin, 1900); *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Porter, 1903) & *Laughing Gas* (Porter, 1907)
- Read: Maggie Hennefeld, "Laughter Unleashed: Hysterical Women at the Movies" excerpt & Charlene Regester, "Bertha Regustus and the Black Women of Silent Comedy"
- Jan. 25 Screen: *Pranks* (Griffith, 1909); *A Florida Enchantment* (Drew, 1914); & *What's the World Coming To* (Wallace, 1926)
- Read: Laura Horak, "Cultural Hierarchy and the Detection of Sexual Deviance in *A Florida Enchantment*"

#### **The Birth of the Studio System & Its Others**

- Jan. 30 Read: Clyde Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema," & Richard Dyer, *White* excerpt
- Feb. 1 Screen: *Within Our Gates* (Micheaux, 1920)

Read: Jacqueline Stewart, "'We Were Never Immigrants': Oscar Micheaux and the Reconstruction of Black American Identity"

Feb. 4                    ***Production Assignment 1 due at 5pm via email***

### **Slapstick, Violence & the Body of Modernity**

Feb. 6                    No Class: Prof. Samer away at research talk (should be back just in the nick of time for the screening!)

Feb. 8                    Screen: Class-made COA films; *The Adventurer* (Chaplin, 1917)—on film; & *City Lights* (Chaplin, 1931)

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

## **UNIT II: CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD**

### **The Motion Picture Production Code**

Feb. 13                  Read: "The Production Code" & "Special Regulations on Crime in Motion Pictures"

Feb. 15                  Screen: *Baby Face* (Green, 1933)

Read: Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash"

Feb. 20                  ***In-Class Essay Exam***

Feb. 22                  Screen: *Christopher Strong* (Arzner, 1933)

Read: Jane Gaines, "Dorothy Arzner's Trousers"

### **Sound, Stars, Sex & Suspense**

Feb. 27                  Read: Patricia White, *Rebecca* excerpts

Feb. 29                  Screen: *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940)

Read: Patricia White, *Rebecca* excerpts

Mar. 5 & 7              NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK

## Sound, Stars, Sex & Screwball

- Mar. 12 Screen (on own): *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks, 1938)  
Read: Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* excerpt & Sara Bakerman, "Too Good for the Fan Rags: The Argument for Agency in the Stardom of Katharine Hepburn"
- Mar. 14 No Class: Prof. Samer away at SCMS conference; work independently on archival research annotations

## Hollywood Goes to War

- Mar. 19 Screen: *Winning Your Wings* (Huston, 1942) & *Prelude to the War* (Capra, 1942)—Tuesday or Wednesday week before  
Read: Thomas Doherty, "Documenting the 1940s"  
Class out early to attend: Susan Stryker, "What Transpires Now: Trans History in the Present," 5-6:30pm, Jefferson 320
- Mar. 21 Screen: *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942)—on film!  
Read: Umberto Eco, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage"
- Mar. 24 **Archival Annotations due at 5pm via email**

## UNIT III: AN AVANT-GARDE INTERLUDE

### The American Avant-Garde

- Mar. 26 Screen (on your own—21 mins total): *Manhatta* (Sheeler & Strand, 1921) & *The Life and Death of 9413: a Hollywood Extra* (Florey & Vorkapić, 1928)  
Read: Maya Deren, "Amateur Versus Professional" & Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Doc: Eight Intersections"
- Mar. 28 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); *Loving* (Brakhage, 1956); *Window Water Baby Moving* (Brakhage, 1959); & *Sirius Remembered* (Brakhage, 1959)—all on film!

Read; Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision* excerpt; & Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality"

### **Avant-Garde Workshop**

Apr. 2 & 4 No Reading This Week; Working on own Avant-Garde Films

Apr. 7 **Three screenshots from AG Film due at 6pm via email**

## **UNIT IV: HOLLYWOOD IN CRISIS**

### **The Red Scare, The Lavender Scare & the Blacklist, pt. 1**

Apr. 9 No Class: Spree Day

Apr. 11 Screen: *A Star Is Born* (Cukor, 1954)—Tuesday or Wednesday week before

Read: Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men"

Apr. 14 **Avant-Garde Film & Artist Statement due at 6pm via email**

### **The Red Scare, The Lavender Scare & the Blacklist, pt. 2**

Apr. 16 No Reading

Apr. 18 Screen: *The Defiant Ones* (Kramer, 1958)

Read: James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* excerpt, & Racquel Gates, "Lena Horne's Side-Eye"

### **New Hollywood On the Horizon**

Apr. 23 No Reading

Apr. 25 Screen: *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960)

Read: Hitchcock interview with François Truffaut excerpt & Robin Wood, "Psycho"

May 3 **Take-Home Essay Exam due at 5pm via email**

## 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 Canvas and/or distributed to students.

## 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. You are invited to share your concerns without needing to divulge the precise reasons why you have them.

In my 12+ years of 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. You know yourself far better than I ever can. 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 BIPOC 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, and their email address is [counseling@clarku.edu](mailto:counseling@clarku.edu). 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 [accessibilityservices@clarku.edu](mailto:accessibilityservices@clarku.edu) or 508-798-4368.

## 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; quoting published material without proper citation of references or sources; or using AI tools like Chat GBT. 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.

See the full Clark University Academic Integrity Policy in Clark's catalog:  
<https://catalog.clarku.edu/content.php?catoid=32&navoid=2735#academic-integrity>

## **TITLE IX**

Clark University and its faculty are committed to creating a safe and open learning environment for all students. Clark University encourages all members of the community to seek support and report incidents of sexual harassment to the Title IX office ([titleix@clarku.edu](mailto:titleix@clarku.edu)). If you or someone you know has experienced any sexual harassment, including sexual assault, dating or domestic violence, or stalking, help and support are available.

Please be aware that all Clark University faculty and teaching assistants are considered responsible employees, which means that if you tell me about a situation involving the aforementioned offenses, I must share that information with the Title IX Coordinator, Brittany Brickman ([titleix@clarku.edu](mailto:titleix@clarku.edu)). Although I have to make that notification, you will, for the most part, control how your case will be handled, including whether or not you wish to pursue a formal complaint. Our goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and have access to the resources you need.

If you wish to speak to a confidential resource who does not have this reporting responsibility, you can contact Clark's Center for Counseling and Professional Growth (508-793-7678), Clark's Health Center (508-793-7467), or confidential resource providers on campus: Prof. Stewart ([als.confidential@clarku.edu](mailto:als.confidential@clarku.edu)), Prof. Palm Reed ([kpr.confidential@clarku.edu](mailto:kpr.confidential@clarku.edu)), and Prof. Cordova ([jvc.confidential@clarku.edu](mailto:jvc.confidential@clarku.edu)).