The Good Old Days: Fifties American Cinema
ENGL 381

Professor Rashna Richards
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Semester: Fall 2010
Class: MW 3:00-4:15  Room: 206 Palmer
Screening: M 7:00-9:30  Room: 34 Barret

Course Description

It was not the best of times and it was not the worst of times--but in many ways it seemed to be both.
--Murray Pomerance

Fifties America is often imagined as an era of general goodwill and increasing affluence, as a suburban wonderland inhabited by upright men in suits and hats and shiny cars and upbeat women in pretty dresses and pearls, cheerfully working in their hi-tech kitchens. Shaped by reruns of The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, the decade is pictured in black-and-white, as an orderly age filled with unwavering optimism and communal harmony. But the fifties was also the era of the Beats, Betty Friedan, and Brown v. Board of Education; Elvis, rock and roll, and the hula hoop; Cold War hysteria, nuclear fears, and anticommunist witch hunts. How did Hollywood respond to this ostensibly placid, often tumultuous, and ultimately conflicted decade?
This course will explore the range of American motion pictures from this period, especially within the context of shifts in the structure and status of Hollywood due to the studios' divorce from their theater chains, the rise of television, and the panic over the blacklist. In particular, we will examine how 1950s cinema addresses issues like generational conflict, as in Rebel without a Cause; Cold War politics, as in On the Waterfront; changing sexual attitudes, as in From Here to Eternity; and bourgeois entrapment, as in Rear Window. Toward the end of the semester, we will investigate how the "happy days" notion of the fifties continues to be nostalgized, contested, and reimagined in contemporary American culture.

**Standard of Work:** This is an advanced film studies course and is not recommended for students who are unfamiliar with rigorous film analysis. The readings are intellectually challenging, as are the films. Some films are black-and-white, and some are subtitled. You will need to take careful notes on the films, readings, and in-class discussions. In addition, assignments will expect you to engage critically with complex issues in film history and criticism and employ them in your writing. Therefore, you are encouraged to think seriously about your commitment to the course.

**Course Policies**

**Attendance:** You are required to attend all classes and screenings. You should not email me about your absences. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to get information and/or handouts from a classmate. You are allowed two absences over the course of the semester, no questions asked, for extracurricular activities or medical/personal emergencies. After the second absence, each subsequent absence will result in a deduction of 20 points from your final course grade. After six absences, you will fail the course.

**Tardiness:** You are required to be on time. Habitual tardiness, even if it's only a couple of minutes, will hurt your participation/professionalism grade.

**Late Work:** I do not accept late work. If you do not plan on being here when an assignment is due, it must be in my mailbox before the deadline. You will receive a zero on an assignment if it is not turned in when it is due. Please note that you are required to complete all assignments in order to receive a passing grade.

**Class Participation:** You are required to come to class prepared with the assigned reading for that day. I expect constructive verbal contribution to each class meeting. A student who disrupts class, interrupts another student's presentation, or in any way creates a hostile environment will be subject to disciplinary action. A student who reads the newspaper, chats with a neighbor, or simply dozes off should expect a low participation grade even if they have contributed to class discussions on other occasions. I will likely say nothing at the time of the incident, but disruptive behavior will adversely affect your participation/professionalism grade.

**Screenings:** We will view a wide variety of films in class. You may find these films intellectually challenging or troubling. Learning how to watch and analyze them critically will be an important part of our discussions and assignments.
**Electronic Devices:** You should turn off all electronic devices before class begins. Do not allow cell phones, pagers, or any type of beepers to go off in class. You are expected to refrain from sending or receiving calls as well as text messaging. A laptop may be used for taking notes. However, instant messaging, gaming, or surfing the web is prohibited.

**Food or Drink:** I don't mind if you bring something to drink, but please avoid bringing any food into the classroom.

**Consultation:** I'll be happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you have about the class. Feel free to stop by during my office hours. If those times don't work, I can make an appointment to meet with you at a time that is mutually convenient. If you have questions about an assignment, do not wait until the last minute. Remember, I want you to do well in the class and am always willing to work with you.

**Email:** It is always preferable to meet in person to discuss any questions or concerns, since the impersonal medium of electronic communication is a poor substitute for a genuine face-to-face conversation. However, I'm available by email for simple queries (expect a response during business hours: 9am-5pm Monday-Friday). Please regard email correspondence as formal communication. It is always best to ask specific rather than general questions in an email and abide by rules of professional etiquette. It is not advisable to email me the evening before an assignment is due asking for help because there is very little I can do at that point; besides, last-minute emails are very unprofessional. Email is absolutely not the medium for negotiating special requests, addressing grade concerns, or discussing ideas for assignments; those issues must be handled in person.

**Format of Assignments:** All written assignments need to be typed and double spaced, in 12 pt. font, using Times New Roman, with one-inch margins on all sides. The format and citations must conform to MLA specifications, or the assignment may not be accepted. You do not need a title page; instead, include your name, my name, course name/number, and date in the top left corner of the first page. Be sure to number and staple your pages; also, proofread your work before printing up the final draft. I do not accept any assignments via email. A paper copy is expected at the beginning of class on the day the assignment is due.

**Intellectual Honesty:** All work is assumed to be the student's own and produced exclusively for the course in which it is submitted. Papers written for one course, even if revised, are not to be submitted in another without prior approval. Borrowing of ideas or language from other sources (including published material, other student papers, the internet or other electronic resources, etc.) must be carefully documented. You are advised against posting your work on the internet, since doing so may lead to suspicion of plagiarism. You are also advised to save drafts of your work to verify its originality. Cases of suspected plagiarism will be referred to the Honor Council, and, if convicted, the student will receive an F in the course in addition to sanctions assigned by the Council. Carelessness in documenting sources, even if not technically plagiarism, will be penalized as appropriate. If you are uncertain about how or whether to document sources, please consult me.
Disability Issues: Students with documented disabilities may be entitled to specific accommodations. Please contact the office of Student Disability Services for more information. In every case, it is your responsibility to provide me with an official letter from SDS.

Course Evaluation

Grade Distribution

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation/Professionalism</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viewing Responses</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay #1</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>Essay #2</td>
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Assignments (Additional guidelines will be provided when each assignment is introduced.)

Participation/Professionalism: You are required to contribute comments and questions that further class discussion. Simply agreeing or disagreeing with your classmates and/or the readings is not enough. You are expected to add thoughtful ideas to the debate by engaging with the texts in a sophisticated manner. Participation will be evaluated in terms of quantity and quality. Failure to follow any course policies or guidelines will hurt your professionalism grade.

Viewing Responses (1 page x 5): Over the course of the semester, you will write five responses to the screenings. Prompts will be provided.

Essay #1 (4-5 pages): For the first essay, you will be given several critical statements about the 1950s. You will choose one of those statements to write an analytical essay about how cinema reflects the concerns of postwar America. No research is expected for this paper.

Essay #2 (4-5 pages): For the second paper, you will assess whether films change over the course of the decade. You will pick a single theme and evaluate how American films are transformed in light of cultural events. Ideally, your essay will offer a comparative analysis of two films made at least five years apart. Research guidelines will be provided.

Research Paper (12-15 pages): The final project for the class will be an experimental research paper. Instead of the traditional essay, you will write a paper drawing on the approach we will define as cinephiliac historiography. You will be required to research your topic comprehensively. Your paper will be evaluated on the originality of your approach, the rigor of your analysis, and the thoroughness of your research.

Grading Guidelines

A = 100-94; A- = 93-90; B+ = 89-87; B = 86-84; B- = 83-80
C+ = 79-77; C = 76-74; C- = 73-70; D+ = 69-67; D = 66-64; D- = 63-60; F < 60
A range (100-90): Excellent work; exemplary in argument and organization; professionally presented; free of mechanical errors.
B range (89-80): Good, solid work; substantive in argument and organization; meets all requirements, but needs some revisions; no more than five mechanical errors.
C range (79-70): Satisfactory work; addresses the assignment adequately, but requires some significant revisions of content and/or mechanics.
D range (69-60): Below average work; misses one or more central aspects of the assignment; inadequate focus and/or development; awkwardly written; requires extensive rewriting.
F range (< 60): Unacceptable work; fails to meet the requirements of the assignment; incomplete or irrelevant material; lack of focus or development.

Course Materials

- Additional articles on film history and theory--provided as handouts (*)

Course Schedule (subject to change)

**Week 1**
Wed., Aug. 25 No Class: Opening Convocation

**Week 2: Two Versions of the Fifties**
Mon., Aug. 30 Introduction to the course
Screening Ray, Rebel without a Cause (1955)
Wed., Sep. 1 Excerpts from Dick and Jane books*
Alves, "Some Enchanted Evening"*
Clips: Minnelli, Father of the Bride (1950)

**Week 3: The Forties and Film Noir**
Mon., Sep. 6 No Classes: Labor Day
No Screening
Wed., Sep. 8 Haralovich, "Movies and Landscapes" (21-42)
Introduction to Viewing Responses
Clips: Tourneur, Out of the Past (1947); Wilder, Sunset Boulevard (1950);
Ray, In a Lonely Place (1950)

**Week 4: The Fifties Man: "A Poet's Face and a Gladiator's Build"**
Mon., Sep. 13 Gilbert, "A Feeling of Crisis"*
Introduction to Essay #1
Clips: Capra, It Happened One Night (1934); Huston, The Maltese Falcon
(1941); Kazan, A Streetcar Named Desire (1951)
Screening Stevens, A Place in the Sun (1951)
Wed., Sep. 15  Viewing Response #1 due
Hatch, "Movies and the New Faces of Masculinity" (43-64)
Clips: Hitchcock, Strangers on a Train (1951); Minnelli, An American in Paris (1951); Benedek, The Wild One (1953)

**Week 5: The Fifties Woman: "Too Many Fantasies To Be a Housewife"
**
Mon., Sep. 20  Higashi, "Movies and the Paradox of Female Stardom" (65-88)
Clips: Donen, Singin’ in the Rain (1952); Douglas, Young at Heart (1954)
Screening  Lupino, The Bigamist (1953)
Wed., Sep. 22  Viewing Response #2 due
Orgeron, "Redirecting Reputation"*
Clips: Minnelli, The Bad and the Beautiful (1952)

**Week 6: Private Secrets and Domestic Tranquility
**
Mon., Sep. 27  Bell-Metereau, "Movies and Our Secret Lives" (89-110)
Clips: Stevens, Shane (1953)
Screening  Zinnemann, From Here to Eternity (1953)
Wed., Sep. 29  Essay #1 due
Introduction to Essay #2

**Week 7: Public Secrets and the Politics of Surveillance
**
Mon., Oct. 4  DeAngelis, "Movies and the Walls of Privacy" (111-33)
Clips: Kazan, On the Waterfront (1954); Sirk, Magnificent Obsession (1954)
Screening  Hitchcock, Rear Window (1954)
Wed., Oct. 6  Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"*
Clips: Hawks, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953)

**Week 8: Marilyn Monroe: "It's All Make Believe, Isn't It?"
**
Mon., Oct. 11  Cohen, "The Horizontal Walk"*
Clips: Lang, Clash by Night (1952); Negulesco, How to Marry a Millionaire (1953)
Screening  Wilder, The Seven Year Itch (1955)
Wed., Oct. 13  Viewing Response #3 due
Lewis, "Movies and Growing Up . . . Absurd" (134-54)
Clips: Aldrich, Kiss Me Deadly (1955)

**Week 9: The Age of Anxiety
**
Mon., Oct. 18  No Classes: Fall Recess
No Screening
Wed., Oct. 20  Grant, "Movies and the Crack of Doom" (155-76)
Clips: Ford, The Searchers (1956); Wilcox, Forbidden Planet (1956)
Week 10: Threatening the Status Quo
Mon., Oct. 25  Mann, "'You're Next!'"*
Clips: Douglas, Them! (1954); Siegel, Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

Screening
Mackendrick, The Sweet Smell of Success (1957)

Wed., Oct. 27  Pomerance, "Movies and the Search for Proportion" (177-200)
Clips: Arnold, The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957)

Week 11: Alfred Hitchcock: The Man Who Knew Too Much
Mon., Nov. 1  McLean, "Movies and Allegories of Ambivalence" (201-21)
Clips: Welles, Touch of Evil (1958)

Screening
Hitchcock, Vertigo (1958)

Wed., Nov. 3  Freedman, "From Spellbound to Vertigo"*
Cohen, "Hitchcock's Revised American Vision"*

Week 12: Race and Justice
Mon., Nov. 8  Essay #2 due
Knight, "Movies and the Racial Divide" (222-43)
Clips: MacDougall, The World, the Flesh, and the Devil (1959); Sirk, Imitation of Life (1959)

No Screening

Wed., Nov. 10  Keathley, "The Cinephiliac Moment and Panoramic Perception"*
Richards, "Apocalyptic Antennae"*
Introduction to Research Paper
Clips: Cukor, A Star Is Born (1954); Hitchcock, North by Northwest (1959)

Week 13: Looking Back on the Fifties
Mon., Nov. 15  Marcus, "The Fifties in the 1970s"*

Screening
Lynch, Blue Velvet (1986)

Wed., Nov. 17  Viewing Response #4 due
Caughlin, "Blue Velvet"*
Clips: Tarantino, Pulp Fiction (1994)

Week 14: Going Back to the Fifties
Mon., Nov. 22  Gordon, "Back to the Future"*
Clips: Zemeckis, Back to the Future (1985); Coppola, Peggy Sue Got Married (1986)

Screening
Ross, Pleasantville (1998)

Wed., Nov. 24  No Classes: Thanksgiving Recess
Week 15: Re-Viewing the Decade
Mon., Nov. 29  Dickinson, "The Pleasantville Effect"*
Screening    Haynes, Far from Heaven (2002)
Wed., Dec. 1  Viewing Response #5 due
              McGowan, "Relocating Our Enjoyment of the 1950s"*
              Clips: Mendes, Revolutionary Road (2008)

Week 16: Into the Sixties
Mon., Dec. 6  TBA
Screening    Episodes from Weiner, Mad Men
Wed., Dec. 8  Taylor, "The Past Isn't What It Used to Be"*
Fri., Dec. 10 Research Paper due by noon (leave in box on my office door--308A Palmer)