

HUM 225-05 || Values in American Life

Dr. Robert C. Thomas

Spring 2016

Tuesday/Thursday 3:35 PM – 4:50 PM || in HUM 217

Office: HUM 416, Office Hour: Thursday 2:35 PM – 3:35 PM

Office Phone: 415-338-1154 (no voice mail)

Course Website: <http://americangenres.com/>

Put simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films, which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. Popular cinema is mostly comprised of genre movies—the kind most of us see—Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre*

Genre

This course explores genres in American popular culture. What do genre films and literature have to teach us about American life? Since the 1970's, genre theory has focused on the conventions and tropes of narrative films, including: film production and the studio system, the relation of specific films and genres to social conventions, norms and context, and theories of authorship. In this course, we will study the basics of genre theory and look at how genre films make use of cinematic conventions—those scenes you have seen so many times before, in so many different ways, that you expect to see them again and again depending on the type or genre of film (western, zombie, porn, action, etc.). Genre films reflect, and sometimes critique, social conventions, norms, and values. In its broadest sense, and perhaps taking our lead from film noir, this course will ask how genre films and literature have exposed what it means to live in the historical present (broadly conceived as the period since WW2).

Mise-en-scène

In addition to genre theory, students will be introduced to the concept of mise-en-scène. Mise-en-scène is a French term, borrowed from the theater, that literally means “putting into the scene.” It refers to all of the visual elements the director places in the film frame—e.g. setting, costumes and make-up, lighting, staging (movement and acting)—in order to affect the viewer. Studying mise-en-scène will enable students to begin to learn the unique visual language of film, which is completely different from how narrative meaning is made. (The latter is likely the only way you've ever learned to think about and read films.) How do films affect us? What is the relation between how they affect us and their unique forms? How have genre film directors used mise-en-scène to critically expose the limits of race, gender, and sex in American culture?

Melodrama, Noir, Women's film

A large portion of this course is devoted to the study and analysis of what is known as the women's film. (This has nothing to do with contemporary “chick flicks.”) We will carefully analyze the films of Douglas Sirk and Todd Haynes, paying particular attention to issues of race, gender, and sex, and compare and think melodrama (and the women's film) in relation to film noir, literature, and social theory. Students will be introduced to noir and its critical reception, its foundations in other forms, and its influence on other film genres, including zombie films.

The first half of the course provides students with foundations for the critical analysis of film. The second half gives students the opportunity to use that knowledge to analyze (mostly recent) films. For example, John Carpenter's science fiction film *They Live* will be studied in relation to the Occupy movement, and Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* will be analyzed in relation to gender and social norms, as well

as film genres. The course will culminate with a reading of James M. Cain's novel *Mildred Pierce* together with Todd Haynes' multilayered adaptation.

Cross-cultural comparisons will be made through the use of European interpretations of American culture in the writings of Fassbinder and Borde/Chaumeton. Students will be introduced to critical terms such as *mise-en-scene*, genre studies, and auteur theory placed in the context of genre literature, philosophy, and social theory.

Please note: this is a Humanities course that brings together philosophy, literature and film. Our study and analysis of these forms of expression is meant to provide examples for thinking complex issues in American life. The focus on genre theory and *mise-en-scene*—typically taught in film courses—is included to provide the necessary structure for students to learn to think critically about the formal properties of film/media, so that they can more adequately address the larger issues surrounding these works, including the social contexts in which they have been made. I believe passionately that American students need foundations for thinking about the critical language of film. That said, this is not a cinema studies course. It is a Humanities course in its scope, aims, content and context.

This is a difficult and challenging course. If you are not up to the challenge of learning a new language for the interpretation of film, do not take this course. Please note that we are not watching films so that you can be “entertained” by them, but in order to critically study and analyze them. This means that we will look at a variety of films from the history of American cinema. While we are doing some really cool things in this course, the purpose is to challenge you. I know from experience that showing a lot of older films can be challenging to students. It’s worth remembering that this is a University course and it’s supposed to be challenging. **If you do not do the course readings, you will be completely lost in this class. And you will fail the final exam.** The exam consists of 10 basic questions. It tests whether you have done the required readings or not throughout the semester.

BOOKS (Available At The Bookstore)

- Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton – *A Panorama of American Film Noir*
- Barry Keith Grant – *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*
- James M. Cain – *Mildred Pierce*

ESSAYS (Available at the course website. You Must Print or Download, Read, and Bring to Class)

- Ranier Werner Fassbinder – “Imitation of Life” from *Anarchy of the Imagination* (Articles)
- Ben Hervey, *Night of the Living Dead* (selections) (Articles)
- Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury”
- Todd Haynes – “Something That is Dangerous and Arousing and Transgressive”
- Todd Haynes – “Movies are Nothing Until We Bring Emotional Life to Them”
- Todd Haynes/Douglas Lim – “Heaven Sent” (Interview with Douglas Lim)
- Todd Haynes – “Intro” & “Director’s Statement” from *Three Screenplays* (Articles)
- John Gibbs – *Mise-en-Scene: Film Style and Interpretation* (selections)
- Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (selections)
- Steve Shaviro – “Splice”

- Jane Stern/Michael Stern, “Two Weeks In Another Town: An Interview with Douglas Sirk”
- Evan Calder Williams “Plague in the Gears” from *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*

FILMS (Shown in Class)

- Robert Aldrich – *Kiss Me Deadly* (USA, 1955)
- Todd Haynes – *Far From Heaven* (USA, 2002)
- Todd Haynes – *Mildred Pierce* (USA, 2011)
- Vincenzo Natali – *Splice* (USA, 2010)
- Dan O' Bannon – *Return of the Living Dead* (USA, 1985)
- George Romero – *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1968)
- George Romero – *Diary of the Dead* (USA, 2007)
- Douglas Sirk – *All That Heaven Allows* (USA, 1955)
- Douglas Sirk – *Imitation of Life* (USA, 1957)

ASSIGNMENTS

Students are responsible for completing all the assigned course work and are expected to regularly attend and participate in course discussions. Students are expected to come to class **prepared**. Prepared means that you have done the assigned reading, have thought about it, and have something relevant to say. Always bring the assigned reading material (for each particular day) to class. **Always take notes**. My lectures, comments, and rants constitute an important “text” for the course. Be aware that my style is casual and approachable—this should not detract from the seriousness of the work we do together (this style of presentation is meant to make it easier for you to grasp the material). There will be two essays required (detailed in the schedule). There will be prompts for each paper. Your essays must demonstrate *mastery of the reading material and course lectures* for the assignments (your grade will be based on this). *All essays must be critical. No grade will be awarded for non-critical writing.* (A separate handout on critical writing will be posted to the course website.) No papers will be accepted via e-mail (no exceptions). No rewrites of written work. No late papers. *Plagiarism in any of the course assignments, in any form, will be dealt with harshly and will be forwarded to the Dean's Office for appropriate action.* Plagiarism on any assignment will also result in a grade of F for the assignment. (Please note that Wikipedia is NOT a critical source and cannot be used for college writing. The same is true of IMDB.) There will be a short midterm, as well as a final exam that will cover the whole semester. The final exam will be 10 “answer” style questions. Students are responsible for all of the course content and materials even if they are absent (absences of more than one class session can result in your final grade being substantially lowered). No incompletes will be given, no exceptions.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

ALL ELECTRONIC DEVICES ARE TO BE TURNED OFF IN CLASS. If you are caught text messaging in class, surfing the web, or playing video games, or engaging in any other non-course related activity, you will be **required** to leave the classroom. No eating in class (unless you bring enough to share with everyone). No electronic recording in the classroom.

STATEMENT ON DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email: dprc@sfsu.edu, <http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/facultyfaq.html#1>

STATEMENT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Dean of Students. To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact: The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/ Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208; <http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/> For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>

STUDENT DROPS

Students who do not attend the first class meeting will be dropped. It is the students' responsibility to drop the course after the first class session. Students who stop attending but do not drop will be given a WU grade. Please be aware that a WU grade is counted as an F for GPA purposes.

POSSIBLE STRIKE

The California Faculty Association is in the midst of a difficult contract dispute with management. It is possible that the faculty union will call a strike or other work stoppage this term. I will inform the class as soon as possible of any disruption to our class schedule.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Identify and describe the formal features of a range of cultural forms including (but not limited to) texts, images and films.
2. Place an expressive work in its cultural context through close reading of its formal details.
3. Perceive and articulate – both in discussion and in writing – formal aesthetic and historical relationships among written texts and other expressive forms.

GRADING

- Attendance 5%
- First Essay 40%
- Second Essay 40%
- Midterm Exam 5%
- Final Exam 10%

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE SPRING 2016
(Instructor Reserves the Right to Modify)

Wk 1.	JAN 28	Introduction and handout of course material
Wk 2.	FEB 2 FEB 4	Film – <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> Read: Ben Hervey, <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> 7-30, 116-121
Wk. 3	FEB 9 FEB 11	<i>Film Genre</i> 1-55 Film – <i>Birth of the Living Dead</i> Continued (bring the <i>Film Genre</i> reading)
Wk. 4.	FEB 16 FEB 18	Evan Calder Williams “Plague in the Gears” 72 - 81 and 118-133 Film <i>Return of the Living Dead</i> Continued (bring the Williams readings)
Wk. 5	FEB 23 FEB 25	Introduction to mise-en-scene and melodrama Film – <i>Far From Heaven</i> Read: Todd Haynes – “Movies are Nothing Until We Bring Emotional Life to Them” Todd Haynes/Douglas Lim – “Heaven Sent” (Interview with Douglas Lim) Todd Haynes – “Intro” & “Director’s Statement” from <i>Three Screenplays</i> Continued (bring all readings to class)
Wk 6.	MAR 1 MAR 3	Midterm Essay Prompt Handed Out (In class only) Film – <i>All That Heaven Allows</i> Read: Fassbinder – “Imitation of Life,” Sirk, “Two Weeks in Another Town: An Interview with Douglas Sirk” http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/48/sirkinterview.php Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” Continued (bring all readings to class)
Wk. 7.	MAR 8 MAR 10	Read: Mercer and Shingler, “Genre” in <i>Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility</i> <i>Film Genre</i> 56-79; <i>Mise-en-Scene: Film Style and Interpretation</i> 83-96 Film – <i>Imitation of Life</i> Continued (bring all readings to class)
Wk. 8.	MAR 15 MAR 17	Midterm Review Read: Mercer and Shingler, “Style” from <i>Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility</i> Bring all the previous readings to class NO CLASS
Wk. 9.	MAR 22 – 24	SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS

Wk. 10.	MAR 29	Midterm Paper Due Midterm Exam
	MAR 31	CESAR CHAVEZ DAY – NO CLASS
Wk.11.	APR 5	Shaviro, “Splice” Film <i>Splice</i>
	APR 7	Continued (bring reading to class)
Wk 12.	APR 12	<i>Panorama of American Film Noir</i> , vii-51 Film <i>Kiss Me Deadly</i>
	APR 14	Continued (bring reading to class)
Wk 13.	APR 19	Guy Debord – “Separation Perfected” from <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> Film – <i>Diary of the Dead</i>
	APR 21	Continued (bring reading to class)
Wk. 14.	APR 26	Read: “Something that is Dangerous and Arousing and Transgressive: An Interview with Todd Haynes” Start reading James M. Cain, <i>Mildred Pierce</i> Begin watching (at home) <i>Mildred Pierce: Inside the Episode</i> AFTER each section of the series has been viewed (You can watch these on the blog) Film <i>Mildred Pierce (part one and two)</i>
	APR 28	Continued (bring reading to class)
WK. 15	MAY 3	Final Essay Assignment Handed Out (In class only) Film <i>Mildred Pierce (part three and four)</i>
	MAY 5	Continued (bring reading to class)
Wk. 16.	MAY 10	Film <i>Mildred Pierce (part five)</i> Cain, <i>Mildred Pierce</i>
	MAY 12	Continued (bring reading to class)
Wk 17.	MAY 19	Final Paper Due @ 1:30 PM Final Exam @ 1:35 PM