

The Studio System

300 level course

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“I regret the passing of the studio system”, famously said Lucille Ball, “I was very appreciative of it because I had no talent”. The comedienne certainly exaggerated, but there’s no denying that at its height, the studio system was incredibly regimented and wonderfully productive—a marvel of American private enterprising not unlike Ford’s automobile factories. This course explores Hollywood’s studio era, a period spanning roughly between the early 1920s and the early 1960s. We will take into account film aesthetic and style, but also technological innovations, industrial organization and the socio-political and economic context.

The course is divided into three modules corresponding to distinct historical periods of studio-era Hollywood: the emergence of the studio system (1920s to mid 1930s), the golden era (mid 1930s to mid 1940s) and the studio system’s decline (mid 1940s to 1960s). Each module explores the era’s socio-political and economic context, its effect on the studio system and the studio’s operational structure. We will also examine each historical period through specific studios and signature outputs.

CALENDAR

Class 1: Introduction—American Cinema Before the Studio System

- 🎞️ *A Tour of the Thomas Ince Studios 1920* (Hunt Stromberg, 1924, 26 min)
- 🎞️ *The Blot* (Lois Weber, 1921, 80 min)

Optional:

- 🌐 If you need a quick refresher on the early days of American cinema, you might want to watch David Bordwell’s lesson on “How Motion Pictures Became the Movies, 1908-1920”, available for free at <https://vimeo.com/57245550>

MODULE I Emergence of the Studio System (1920 – mid 1930s)

Class 2: Defining and Understanding the Studio System

- 📖 Kristin Thompson. “The Continuity System”. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. 194-213.
- 📖 Thomas Schatz. “Introduction”. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. New York: Henry Holt and Cie. 1988. 3-12.
- 🎞️ *A Star Is Born* (William A. Wellman, Jack Conway, 1937, 111 min)

Class 3: Case Study—Universal and Assembly Line Productions

📖 Thomas Schatz. "Universal: the System Takes Shape". *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. New York: Henry Holt and Cie. 1988. 15-28.

🎞️ *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931, 70 min)

Optional:

🎞️ *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935, 75 min)

Class 4: The Production Code, Internal and External Censorship

📖 Richard Maltby. "The Production Code and the Hays Office". In Tino Balio. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. Berkeley: U of California P. 1993. 37-72.

🎞️ *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934, 65 min) OR *Baby Face* (Alfred E. Green, 1933, 75 min)

Optional:

📖 Lea Jacobs. "The Censorship of *Blonde Venus*: Textual Analysis and Historical Method". *Cinema Journal* 27:3 (1988), 21-31. Reprinted in Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (eds). *The American Film History Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 267-275.

📖 Thomas Doherty. "Classical Hollywood Cinema: The World According to Joseph I. Breen". *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. 319-346 Reprinted in Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (eds). *The American Film History Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 276-295.

Class 5: What about Other National Cinemas?

A Look at France, Japan and Britain

📖 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. Third Edition. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010. 219-234 and 260-265.

🎞️ *I Was Born, But...* (Japan, Yasujiro Ozu, 1932, 100 min)

MODULE II The Genius of the System (mid 1930s to WWII)

Class 6: Case Study—MGM and The Nuts and Bolts of the System

📖 "Portrait of a Vertically Integrated Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer". In Tino Balio (ed). *The American Film Industry*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P. 1976. 311-333.

🎞️ *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932, 112 min)

Class 7: Case Study—Warner Brothers and 'House Style'

📖 Thomas Schatz. "Warner Bros.: Power Plays and Prestige". *The Genius of the System*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 199-227.

🎞️ *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931, 83 min) OR *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (Mervyn Leroy, 1932, 92 min)

Optional:

📖 Steven Bingen. *Warner Bros.: Hollywood's Ultimate Backlot*. Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2014. 33-107.

Class 8: Independents, Poverty Row, B Studios and the Shift to Unit Production

- 📖 Taves. "The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half". In Tino Balio. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. 313-350.
- 🎞️ *The Thin Man* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1934, 91 min)

Class 9: The Star

- 📖 Richard DeCordova. "The Emergence of the Star System".
- 📖 Paul McDonald. *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities*. Wallflower Press. 2000. 39-66.
- 🎞️ *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946, 110 min) OR *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939, 133 min)

Optional:

- 📖 Tino Balio. "Selling Stars". *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. 143-177.

MODULE III A System in Decline (WWII to 1960s)

Class 10: After Radio, Television

- 📖 Sklar. "The Disappearing Audience and the Television Crisis".
- 🎞️ "One More Mile to Go". *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1957, 30 min)
- 🎞️ "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street". *The Twilight Zone* (1960, 25 min)

Class 11: Larger! Brighter! Louder! Scopes and Spectacles

- 📖 Belton. "Glorious Technicolor, Breathtaking CinemaScope, and Stereophonic Sound". In Stephen Neale. *The Classical Hollywood Reader*. 355-369.
- 🎞️ *Oklahoma!* (Fred Zinnemann, 1955, 145 min) OR *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954, 105 min)

Optional:

- 📖 David Bordwell. "CinemaScope: The Modern Miracle You See Without Glasses". *Poetics of Cinema*. 281-325.
- 📖 Charles Barr. "Cinemascope: Before and After". *Film Quarterly* 16:4 (Summer 1963), 4-24. Reprinted in Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (ed). *The American Film History Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 79-100.
- 🌐 Bordwell's lesson on Cinemascope is also available for free on line at <https://vimeo.com/64644113>

Class 12: Industrial Ramifications

- 📖 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. Third Edition. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010. 472-478.

- 📖 Ernest Borneman. "United States versus Hollywood: The Case Study of an Antitrust Suit". In Tino Balio (ed). *The American Film Industry*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P.1976. 449-462.

Class 13: Hollywood is Dead—Long Live the New Hollywood!

- 📖 Tino Balio (ed). *American Film Industry*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. 20-22.
- 📖 Thomas Schatz. *The Genius of the System*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Epilogue.
- 🎞️ *Faces* (John Cassavetes, 1968, 130 min)

Optional:

- 📖 David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson and Janet Staiger. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. 365-385.
- 📖 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. Third Edition. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010. 478-493.