

Social Issues in American Film
American Studies
Upper-level undergraduate course

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American films have always confronted and explored social, political, and cultural issues. Influenced by progressivism, the social problem films comprised a significant part of early American cinema's output. More recently, the success of Michael Moore's Oscar-winning documentaries has sparked renewed interest in the documentary tradition. But social issues are not the purview of non-fiction fares; fiction films often tackle, in more or less veiled ways, society's present and past struggles. Although we sometimes go to the cinema to *escape* reality, we also often watch films to *assess* the reality in which we live and to *explore* ways to live a better life.

The course is divided into six units of two weeks, each exploring a different social issue that shaped—and often still does—American society. Using both fiction and non-fiction film, our aim is twofold: to understand the various ways in which social issues are tackled in cinema and to come to a better understanding of American society.

Evaluations:

1. Attendance and class participation: 10%
 2. Exploratory writing (10% each): 30%
 3. Mid-term thesis-governed paper (4 pages): 20%
 4. Final response paper (8-10 pages): 40%
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1. **Attendance** to all classes is mandatory, even if you have already seen the film.
 2. Three short “**exploratory writing**” exercises will be required to practice different ways of writing about film and prepare you for longer writing assignments: a) a formal descriptive account, b) a film review and c) a reaction paper. All three will pertain to in-class screenings.
 3. Your **Mid-term**, a short thesis-governed paper, will ask you to defend a position using arguments and examples from films screened in class.
 4. Your **final assignment** is a response paper (8-10 pages). You will be asked to defend a position in response to a critical contemporary issue. In your answer, you have to use concepts seen in class and in your readings, as well as filmic examples of films screened in or outside of class.

Guidelines for each assignment will be distributed in class.

Required Readings:

- 📖 Hilliard, Robert L. *Hollywood Speaks Out: Pictures that Dared to Protest Real World Issues*. Malden: Blackwell, 2009. (Referred to as *Hollywood Speaks Out*).
- 📖 Andrew Light. *Reel Arguments: Film, Philosophy, and Social Criticism*. New York: Westview Press, 2003. (Referred to as *Reel Arguments*)
- 📖 Other reading assignments are available in coursepack.

CALENDAR

Week 1: Introduction—Thinking with Film

- 📖 *Reel Arguments*. “Introduction”, pp. 1-18.
- 🎬 *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967, 109 min. Fiction)

Optional:

- 📖 Linda A. Mooney, David Knox, and Caroline Schacht. *Understanding Social Problems*. Toronto: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004. “Thinking About Social Problems”, pp. 1-15 and 24-27.

Unit 1 Crime and Punishment

Week 2: Inner City Crime and Inequalities

- 📖 Lynn Weber. *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*. Introduction and Chapter 1, pp. 1-30.
- 🎬 *Brooklyn Castle* (Katie Dellamaggiore, 2012, 101 min. Doc)

Optional:

- 🎬 *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994, 170 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *Stevie* (Steve James, 2002, 140 min. doc)
- 🎬 *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002, 120 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *The Interrupters* (Steve James, 2011, 125 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *Let the Fire Burn* (Jason Osder, 2013, 88 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *The Homestretch* (Anne De Mare and Kristen Kelly, 2014, 90 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *Chi-Raq* (Spike Lee, 2015. Fiction)

Week 3: The Prison System and the Death Penalty

- 📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 4 “Prison and the Justice System”, pp. 63-81.
- 🎬 *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932, 73 min. Fiction)

Optional:

- 🎬 *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988, 103 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *The Farm: Angola, USA* (Garbus, Rideau & Stack, 1998, 88 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *Into the Abyss* (Werner Herzog, 2011, 107 min. Doc)
- 🎬 *The Central Park Five* (Burns & McMahon, 2012, 119 min. Doc)

Unit 2 The War at Home

Week 4: Returning Veterans

Discussed: The Vietnam War

📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 2 “War”, pp. 26-48.

🎬 *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978, 183 min. Fiction)

Optional:

🎬 *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946, 172 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Deathdream* (a.k.a. *Dead of Night*, Bob Clark, 1974, 98 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974, 112 min. Doc)

🎬 *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976, 113 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978, 127 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989, 145 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Dead Presidents* (The Hugues Brothers, 1995, 119 min. Fiction)

🎬 *The Fog of War* (Errol Morris, 2003, 107 min. Doc)

Week 5: Post 9/11 and Surveillance

📖 *Reel Arguments*. Chapter 2 “Enemies of the State?”, pp. 21-53.

🎬 *Citizenfour* (Laura Poitras, 2014, 1814 min. Doc)

Optional:

🎬 *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998, 132 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004, 122 min. Doc)

🎬 *No End in Sight* (Charles Ferguson, 2007, 102 min. Doc)

🎬 *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008, 118 min. Doc)

🎬 *The Unknown Known* (Errol Morris, 2013, 103 min. Doc)

🎬 *Good Kill* (Andrew Niccol, 2014, 102 min. Fiction)

🎬 *(T)Error* (Lyric Cabral and David Felix Sutcliffe, 2015, 93 min. Doc)

Unit 3 Sex and Gender

Week 6: Gender Violence

📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 11 “Sexism”, pp. 219-233.

🎬 *The Invisible War* (Kirby Dick, 2012, 93 min. Doc)

Optional:

🎬 *Private Violence* (Cynthia Hill, 2014, 80 min. Doc)

Week 7: Homophobia and Gay Rights

📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 9 “Homophobia”, pp. 183-204.

🎬 *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999, 118 min. Fiction)

Optional:

🎬 *The Boys in the Band* (William Friedkin, 1970, 118 min. Fiction)

🎬 *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993, 106 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005, 134 min. Fiction)

🎬 *For the Bible Tells me So* (Daniel Karlslake, 2007, 95 min. Doc)

🎬 *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008, 128 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Vito* (Jeffrey Schwartz, 2011, 93 min. Doc)

🎬 *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012, 110 min. Doc)

Unit 4 Poverty

Week 8: The Great Depression and Unbridled Capitalism

📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 6 “Poverty”, pp. 102-123.

Ⓜ *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940, 108 min. Fiction)

Optional:

Ⓜ *Man's Castle* (Frank Borzage, 1933, 75 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941, 90 min, Fiction)

Ⓜ *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995, 102 min. Fiction)

Week 9: Neo-Liberalism and The Working Poor

📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 5 “Labor-Management”, pp. 82-102.

Ⓜ *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1987, 135 min. Doc)

Optional:

Ⓜ *Harlan County U.S.A.* (Barbara Kopple, 1976, 103 min. Doc)

Ⓜ *Norma Rae* (Martin Ritt, 1979, 114 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *Roger & Me* (Michael Moore, 1989, 91 min. Doc)

Ⓜ *North County* (Niki Caro, 2005, 126 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *Akeelah & The Bee* (Doug Atchison, 2006, 112 min. Doc)

Ⓜ *Sicko* (Michael Moore, 2007, 123 min. Doc)

Ⓜ *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006, 117 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *Homeless: The Motel Kids of Orange County* (A. Pelosi, 2010, 60 min. Doc)

Unit 5 Racial Segregation and Prejudice

Week 10: Racial Segregation and Prejudice

📖 Steven J. Ross. *Movies and American Society*. New York: Blackwell, 2002. Chapter 9 “Black and White in Color: Race and Film in the 1960s and 1970s”, pp. 249-279.

Ⓜ *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (Stanley Kramer, 1967, 108 min. Fiction)

Optional:

📖 David Platt, “The Defiance in the Defiant Ones”. In Gordon Mitchell (Ed). *Celluloid Power*. New York: Scarecrow, 1992, pp. 519-523.

Ⓜ *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1958, 96 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *A Raisin in the Sun* (Daniel Petrie, 1961, 128 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962, 129 min. Fiction)

Week 11: Racial Segregation and Prejudice—The Retrospective

Discussed: A country divided: the North and the South

📖 *Hollywood Speaks Out*. Chapter 7 “Racism”, pp. 124-151.

Ⓜ *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988, 128 min, Fiction)

Optional:

Ⓜ *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985, 154 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992, 202 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *4 Little Girls* (Spike Lee, 1997, 102 min. Doc)

Ⓜ *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, 2000, 120 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013, 134 min. Fiction)

Ⓜ *Selma* (Ava Duvernay, 2014, 128 min. Fiction)

Unit 6 Racism and Race Relations after the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965)

Week 12: Race Relations in the 1990s

📖 *Reel Arguments*. Chapter 4 “Boyz in the Woods: LA as Urban Wilderness”, pp. 79-108.

🎬 *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989, 120 min. Fiction)

Optional:

🎬 *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998, 119 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991, 132 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991, 112 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Menace II Society* (The Hugues Brothers, 1993, 97 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Straight Outta Compton* (F. Gary Gray, 2015, 147 min. Fiction)

Week 13: A Post-Racial Society?

🎬 *Dear White People* (Justin Simien, 2014, 108 min. Fiction)

Optional:

🎬 *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000, 135 min. Fiction)

🎬 *What's Cooking?* (Gurinder Chadha, 2000, 109 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004, 112 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Top Five* (Chris Rock, 2014, 102 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013, 85 min. Fiction)

🎬 *Little White Lie* (Lacey Schwartz & James Adlophus, 2014, 65 min. Doc)