



ENG 591A: 1950s American Film
Spring 2007
Mondays 6:00-10:00, Caldwell G107

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Course Description and Expectations:

“America, as a social and political organization, is committed to a cheerful view of life... Modern equalitarian societies, [...] whether democratic or authoritarian in their political forms, always base themselves on the claims that they are making life happier... If an American or Russian is unhappy, it implies a certain reprobation of his society.”

Robert Warshow, “The Gangster As Tragic Hero,” 1948

Post-war American life is often imagined as a time of immense prosperity and national well-being. This version of 1950s America is set in a commercial and domestic wonderland inhabited by congenial young families living in suburban houses equipped with hi-tech kitchens and cheery housewives glad to be in them, big shiny cars driven by men with white collar office jobs, and innocent kids riding scintillating red bicycles in their safe cul-de-sacs. What elements of this mythic image of the 1950s are consistent with American films of this era? How was the tumultuous American political scene addressed (or ignored) in motion pictures? How did the changing nature of the Hollywood film industry impact the films made during the decade?

We will search for answers to these and other questions through an investigation of the decade’s diverse cinematic offerings, including select westerns, crime films, sci-fi, melodramas, social issue pictures, musicals, and comedies. We will pay special attention to the ways that the decade’s films addressed issues of gender, race, the family, and especially American nationalism and politics. Attendance and regular class participation are required. Students will complete a short paper, a final research paper and presentation, and a final oral examination.

Academic Integrity:

Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade in the course. Please see http://www.ncsu.edu/student_affairs/osc/AIpage/acaintegrity.html for an explanation of academic integrity and of the consequences for violating it.

Grades: Your final grade will be determined as follows:

Short Paper (5 pgs.) 20%

Final Paper Workshop Presentation: 10%

Final Research Paper (15-20 pgs.): 50%

Final Exam: 20%

All assignments will be graded with letter grades using a plus/minus scale, or on a point system with an equivalent scale.

Extracurricular Experiences: The more 1950s films you can see over the course of the semester the more confident you will feel about the decade as a whole, which will help you with our daily discussions and with your papers. The North Carolina Museum of Art will be screening several 1950s films this semester and I highly recommend that you try to attend these screenings: February 9, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957); February 16, *Champagne for Caesar* (1950); February 23, *A Face in the Crowd* (1957). \$3.50 students, 8:00 p.m.

Books:

- 1) Lev, Peter. *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen 1950-1959*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2003.
- 2) Navasky, Victor. *Naming Names*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003.

Articles:

The following readings will be available on “e-reserve”: <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/reserves/> under Eng591A. Print out all articles and bring them to class on the days we will be discussing them.

Amrine, Michael. “What the Atom Age Has Done to Us.” *New York Times*. August 6, 1950.

Biberman, Herbert & Paul Jarrico, & Rosaura Revueltas, & Juan Chacon. “*Salt of the Earth*” excerpts. *The California Quarterly*. 2:4 (Summer 1953): 60-72.

Heung, Marina. “‘What’s the Matter with Sara Jane?’: Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*.” *Cinema Journal*. 26: 3 (Spring 1987): 21-43.

Kael, Pauline. “The Glamour of Delinquency.” & “Propaganda—*Salt of the Earth*.” *I Lost it At the Movies: Film Writings 1954-1965*. New York: Marion Boyars, 2002 rpt.

Kinsey, Alfred. “Transvestism.” *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1953. 679-681.

Laurence, William. “Study of the Amount of Strontium 90 in Human Bones Points Up Atomic Problem.” *New York Times*. February 16, 1958: E9.

Mann, Katrina. “‘You’re Next’ Postwar Hegemony Besieged in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.” *Cinema Journal*. 44:1 (Fall 2004): 49-68.

McCoy, Beth. “Manager, Buddy, Delinquent: *Blackboard Jungle*’s Desegregating Triangle.” *Cinema Journal*. 38:1 (fall 1998): 25-39.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. “Sex Research at the Borders of Gender: Transvestites, Transsexuals, and Alfred C. Kinsey.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 75.1 (2001): 72-90.

---. “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958.” *The Journal of American History*. 79:4 (March 1993): 1455-1482.

Studlar, Gaylyn. “What Would Martha Want? Captivity, Purity, and Feminine Values in *The Searchers*.” *The Searchers*. Eds. Arthur Eckstein & Peter Lehman. Detroit: Wayne State, 2004. 171-196.

Wylie, Philip. “Common Women.” *Generation of Vipers*. New York: Farrar, 1942. 184-205.



**American Film in the 1950s
Syllabus for Spring 2007**

Assessing The American Way

- Mon Jan 22 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), Dir. Robert Wise (Fox)
 Read: *The Fifties*, Intro & Chapter 1 (1-32)
Naming Names, “Foreword”-“The Informer as Patriot” (vii-70)
 “What the Atom Age Has Done to Us,” *NYT* Aug. 6, 1950 (e)
 “Study of the Amount of Strontium 90 in Human Bones Points Up Atomic
 Problem,” *NYT* February 16, 1958 (e)
- Mon Jan 29 *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), Dir. Richard Brooks (MGM)
 Clip: *The Wild One* (1953), Dir. Laszlo Benedek
Rebel Without a Cause (1955), Dir. Nicholas Ray
 Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 3 (65-86)
Naming Names, “Naming Names”-“HUAC in Hollywood” (71-96)
 Beth McCoy, “Manager, Buddy, Delinquent: *BJ*’s Triangle” (e)

Post-War/Cold War Morality Tales: Two Hollywood Independents

- Mon Feb 5 *The Bigamist* (1953), Dir. Ida Lupino (The Filmakers)
 Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 2 (33-64)
Naming Names, “The Collaborators”-“Guilty Bystanders” (97-143)
 Philip Wylie, “Common Women” from *Generation of Vipers* (e)
- Mon Feb 12 *Pickup on South Street* (1953), Dir. Sam Fuller (Fox)
 Clip: *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), Dir. Robert Aldrich
High Noon (1952), Dir. Fred Zinnemann
 Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 4 (87-106)
Naming Names, “Guilty Bystanders” (144-196)

Confrontational Politics

- Mon Feb 19 *On The Waterfront* (1954), Dir. Elia Kazan (Columbia)
 Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 9 (197-216)
Naming Names, “Stars, Stripes, Stigmas” (197-278)
 Pauline Kael, “The Glamour of Delinquency” (e)
- Mon Feb 26 *Salt of the Earth* (1954), Dir. Herbert Biberman (Independent Production Co.)
 Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 11 (257-279)
Naming Names, “The Reasons Considered”-“Victims” (279-339)
 Biberman, Jarrico, Revultas, Chacon, “*Salt of the Earth*” excerpts (e)
 Pauline Kael, “Propaganda—*Salt of the Earth*” (e)

Short Papers Due

Sexual Behavior

Mon Mar 5 *SPRING BREAK—NO CLASSES*

Mon Mar 12 *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), Dir. Frank Tashlin (Fox)
Clip: *Swooner Crooner* (1944, WB Cartoon), Dir. Frank Tashlin
Born Yesterday (1950), Dir. George Cukor
Read: *The Fifties*, Chapters 5 & 6 (107-146)
Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique" (e)

Mon Mar 19 *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Dir. Billy Wilder (United Artists)
Clip: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), Dir. Howard Hawks
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953), Dir. Howard Hawks
Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 10 (217-256)
Alfred Kinsey, "Transvestism." *Sexual Behavior in the Female* (e)
Joanne Meyerowitz, "Sex Research at the Borders of Gender" (e)

Community Values

Mon Mar 26 *The Searchers* (1956), Dir. John Ford (Warner Bros.)
Clip: *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Dir. Cecil B. DeMille
Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 7 (147-168)
Naming Names, "Intended Victim"- "Informer as Victim" (340-384)
Gaylyn Studlar, "What Would Martha Want?" (e)

Paper Proposals Due

Mon Apr 2 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Dir. Don Siegel (Walter Wanger/Allied)
Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 8 (169-196)
Naming Names, "Lessons" (385-428)
Katrina Mann, "'You're Next' ... *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*" (e)

Generations, Gender, Genre

Mon Apr 9 *Imitation of Life* (1959), Dir. Douglas Sirk (Universal)
Clip: *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), Dir. Douglas Sirk
Read: *Naming Names*, "Afterword" (429-440)
Marina Heung, "'What's the Matter With Sarah Jane?'" (e)

Final Paper Presentations/Annotated Bibliographies Due

Mon Apr 16 *Giant* (1956), Dir. George Stevens (Warner Bros.)

Into the Sixties

Mon Apr 23 *Shadows* (1959), Dir. John Cassavetes (Lion International)
Clip: *Psycho* (1960), Dir. Alfred Hitchcock
Read: *The Fifties*, Chapter 12 (279-302)

Final Papers Due

Mon Apr 30 **Final Examination**, 6:00-9:00

