

HOLLYWOOD MOVIES FROM THE GOLDEN AGE:
AN IMPORTANT RESOURCE FOR THE CLASSROOM

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Hollywood movies are an important and relatively inexpensive classroom resource. During Hollywood's Golden Age of the thirties, forties, and fifties, 80 to 90 million Americans attended movies weekly (compare that figure to some 22 million weekly paid admissions in a nation of some 230+ million in the 1980s). Hollywood in the Golden Age offered a world rich in escapism and fantasy and also in values to a broad cross-section of America from north to south, east to west, young and old, and movies from those decades are a priceless historical resource.

Popular culture, the way a broad and largely undefinable mass lives and spends leisure time, has tremendous impact on society. Movies in the Golden Age served not only to divert the population; they also helped to determine American attitudes toward clothing styles, relations between the sexes, minorities, the role of women, and much more. As Frank Sinatra said in opening MGM's musical retrospective That's Entertainment (1974), "Musicals may not have told you where our minds were at, but they sure told you where our hearts were at." And that can help explain much about the past.

Here are some suggestions for films from this golden era to show in class and what they offer in terms of demonstrating mainstream, white, middle-class attitudes toward various issues and groups.

1) Duck Soup (Paramount, 1933), 70 minutes.

This is the Marx Brothers' most ambitious film. Made during the worst period of the Depression in 1933 before the New Deal measures of President Franklin D. Roosevelt took effect, Duck Soup reflects the extreme despair that many Americans felt. On the suggestion of Mrs. Teasdale (Margaret Dumont), the country of Freedonia selects Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho) as its new leader. The film becomes a concerted attack on government, leadership, patriotism, and war.

The movie reflects the prejudices of a white, male-dominated America. Blacks do not exist. The film's only obvious Hispanic is a sultry, sexy vamp in the employ of the Sylvania ambassador Trentino who wants to compromise Firefly. In many films made during Hollywood's Golden Age, Hispanics represented a somewhat disreputable, white-hot emotion, whether they were sultry women or vicious, untrustworthy men. Lastly, as Groucho's constant disparaging comments about Mrs. Teasdale indicate--"If you stand still any longer, they'll tear you down and erect a building where you're standing."--there is at best a condescending attitude toward women.

These values had to affect the movie-going audience, whether the movie in particular, or Hollywood in general, reflected, created, or ignored society. How would young black Americans feel about their life prospects looking at how they are excluded in the film? How about young Hispanics? And, for women, the film suggests they can be the sexy thing--a kind of prostitution--or the hefty dowager. Lastly, how easily could white males recognize the need for change when fed a constant diet of such films espousing similar values?

Duck Soup goes beyond reflecting society's view of minorities and women; it attacks the state and everything for which it stands. Government officials are incompetent: Groucho picks his brother Chico, a peanut

vendor, to be his minister of war to "scare my cabinet." Chico, after all, outsmarted Groucho at riddles. Groucho fires his competent ministers and, during the inaugural ceremony, he tries to play a silly game of cards with the Sylvania ambassador--the affairs of state! Then the Marx Brothers lead the crowd in a game of "Simon Says," suggesting that loyalty is following one's leaders no matter how stupid or senseless or demeaning the activity. When Groucho works himself up into a fury over an imagined insult from Trentino, the result is war. Thus the brothers destroy any remaining illusion about the nobility of war, which derives from personal pique and blundering. During the "war," which takes most of the film's running time, Groucho keeps changing uniforms from an American volunteer in the Revolutionary War to that of a Civil War officer, eventually to the uniform of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. Chico changes sides. Then Groucho, Chico, and Zeppo send Harpo out for reinforcements. Groucho tells him that "as you're risking life and limb out there, we'll be here thinking what a sucker you are." So much for the ultimate sacrifice.

Duck Soup can illustrate more than the thinking of the 1930s. Besides being popular when released--the Marx Brothers were among Paramount's most profitable stars--the movie also enjoyed a run of popularity during the 1960s on college campuses when a despair reflecting disillusionment over the Vietnam War afflicted millions of young Americans.

2) Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (Columbia, 1939), 130 minutes.

This movie, directed by Frank Capra, reflects a return to optimism brought about by the activity, though not the meager accomplishments, of the New Deal. Jefferson Smith (Jimmy Stewart), the head of the Boy Rangers in a corrupt, unnamed state, is appointed to succeed a deceased U.S. Senator because the political machine that runs the state needs a patsy to help push a graft-laden dam project through Congress.

Again, the film reflects view of a white male-dominated society. Black males appear in the movie only as porters and servants; black females are maids--both giving the impression of a natural, permanent underclass. Hispanics do not exist. Women mostly are playthings--distractions from real work--like Senator Joseph Payne's daughter, Susan. For example, when Jefferson Smith finally makes it to his Senate office, he meets his hard-boiled secretary, Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur). At one point in their conversation, she compliments him on elevating himself all the way to U.S. Senator; he returns the favor by complimenting her on becoming a secretary to a Senator. Do they serve as role models for impressionable moviegoers?

Along the way, Smith runs into the machine that now seeks to have him thrown out of the Senate. But he won't give in. Saunders helps him stage a spectacular, lonely filibuster. Gradually he wins over the elements of his--to Capra--shyster society: newspaper reporters in the press gallery, the Senate president, and finally many of the senators who try to wear him down as a favor to their old colleague (and key machine cog) Joe Payne (Claude Raines). Just as Smith collapses from the exhausting effort (but a Senate page signals Saunders that Smith is okay), Payne cracks and, after a botched attempt at suicide, rushes to the Senate floor to tell that Smith is right about the Willett Creek project. Truth, justice, and the good fight all triumph!

The film offers evidence that the American dream is reborn, that one good man--Smith--can make a difference. Perhaps Franklin Roosevelt? And, typical of Capra, who was a successful and popular director, the film shows

all the elements of the shyster city, frequently the source of trouble during the Depression according to Hollywood, being won over by the battling Smith. It is hokey and sometimes embarrassing, but few can watch the film without a tear in the eye and a tug at the heart. Compare a film as that to the more despairing or "realistic" films of the past few years; ask students about the differences, and what those differences indicate about people's attitudes.

3) Stagecoach (United Artists, 1939), 105 minutes.

Prior to Stagecoach the movie western was in decline, but director John Ford and a marvelous cast demonstrated its thematic possibilities leading to a golden age of westerns. Nine people set out to reach Lordsburg against the threat of an Indian attack: the sheriff and the driver, a drunken doctor, a corrupt banker, a whiskey salesman, a pregnant wife of a cavalry officer, a gambler, the "good" prostitute--Dallas, and the hero--the Ringo Kid, played by John Wayne in his first major role.

The movie is in six separate scenes--alternating character development and action. The characters are introduced; they set out on their journey and tension increases in the confines of the stagecoach; in a station house we learn more of them; there is the Indian attack; again we learn more about the characters; and finally the ride into Lordsburg leads to the climactic shootout between Ringo and the Plummer brothers.

Westerns are America's epic form, and this film offers a rich set of values reflecting director Ford's--and many Americans'--views of society. The banker, while a pillar of society, is corrupt and boards the stage to escape with the company payroll. The pregnant wife symbolizes the coming of civilization--a pejorative term--to the West--women and children. The drunken doctor, the prostitute, and the outlaw (Ringo) all find a kind of redemption. Society unfairly branded them as outcasts, but in the West a person's true spirit emerges: the doctor helps deliver the baby; the prostitute stands by her man; and after he kills the Plummers, Ringo rides off with Dallas to reform the family unit, in Mexico where presumably civilization has not yet labeled people unfairly. Lastly, in suggesting what true heroism is, Ford also provides a typical view of Hispanics--sneaky and untrustworthy or fat and comical; Indians--savages waiting over the next butte or mesa to kill white people; civilization--corrupting; and women--they sit aside while men fight and have adventures. The film clearly reinforces stereotypes of the time.

4) Casablanca (Warner Brothers, 1942), 102 minutes.

Casablanca may well be the most popular movie booked on television, always playing on one station or another. For history class purposes, it reflects much about the attitudes Americans held on the eve of the Second World War. The film is set in early December 1941. "Sam, if it's December 1941 in Casablanca, what time is it in New York?" Rick asks his loyal piano player and longtime servant/colleague. Before Sam (Dooley Wilson) can answer, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) injects that "They're asleep in New York; they're always asleep in America"--on the eve of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

Richard Blaine, owner of Rick's Cafe Americain in Casablanca in French Morocco, represents American males. He is an isolationist. "What are your politics?" asks German Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt). "I'm a drunkard," says Rick. At least three times he states that "I stick my neck out for

nobody." He dismisses speculation about how he regards the Nazis by stating that "I'm just a saloonkeeper." (But what a saloon!)

Then Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) arrives in Casablanca. "Of all the gin joints in all the world, she had to walk into mine," Rick says with a look of such pain that that image of Bogart burned into the consciousness of the American people. They had met in Paris in 1940 on the eve of the German conquest of France; as he readied to flee he received a note from Ilsa that she cannot go with him. That pain caused him to turn his back on women until that moment when she reappears in his life in Casablanca. Ilsa arrives accompanying Victor Lazlo (Paul Henreid), leader of all the anti-German resistance in Europe.

Now that the fight has become personal--the German and Vichy French authorities are preventing Victor and Ilsa from leaving Casablanca for New York and freedom, Rick--and America--join the battle. Their entry is a gradual paralleling of Roosevelt's cautious efforts to aid Britain, to help defend the North Atlantic, and, then after Pearl Harbor, to wage an allout effort against Germany. Rick permits his orchestra to strike up the French anthem, "The Marseillaise," to help drown out German soldiers singing a Nazi song. Then he decides to give Victor and Ilsa two "letters of transit" that somehow guarantee the holders free movement throughout Vichy-occupied North Africa. Finally, he holds a gun on the Prefect of Police, Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains, again!), and shoots Major Strasser. In the last scene, he tells Ilsa with false nobility that she has to go with Victor for where "I'm going you can't come; we've all got a job to do in this fight." Men have adventures; women wait on the sidelines. Then Rick and Louis walk off together into the fog-shrouded evening to join the Free French garrison at Brazzaville.

Casablanca offers much for discussion: the seeming unrequited love dissolving into cynicism and then to passion again; isolationism crumbling when the conflict becomes personal rather than abstract; the world needing America to defeat the enemy. The movie obviously is offering to the audience an explanation of events. Certainly one can contrast this movie version with the real reasons for entering World War II and then, later recalling the movie, contrast it with America's gradual entry into the conflict in Indochina. As with other films, minorities exist to illustrate certain aspects of the major, white, mostly male leads. Again, what sort of role models does this offer to impressionable movie goers?

5) Gung Ho (Warner Brothers, 1943), 88 minutes.

Gung Ho, a typical film about World War II made during the war, can help students recapture the way many Americans regarded the enemy--especially the Japanese. The film opens with newsreel footage of Pearl Harbor shortly after the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. Then the film moves along to the U.S. Marines recruiting men to "pay Japan back." One after another, young men walk up to the recruiting office to give their reasons for wanting to join the marines: "To kill Japs," "My brother was on the USS Arizona," "It's my duty," and the like. As one recruit after another steps forward, the process dehumanizes the Japanese and prepares the audience for the orgy of death and destruction that Carlson's Raiders will undertake once they complete training. Of course, there is the obligatory battle between several recruits for a young woman, complaints about the discipline--it's not natural for Americans to kill, the film implies--biased explanation of their job, and scenes of young men toughening their bodies for the tasks ahead. Finally the raiders attack a Japanese-held island in

the Southwest Pacific; they kill virtually every Japanese they encounter, destroy their facilities, and suffer a few heroic deaths.

The movies presents a patriotic, all-male world. Women are ancillary--again, playthings--while men engage in the real work, in this case fighting and killing. In recognizing how the movie dehumanizes the Japanese as vicious killers and sneaky fighters who deserve whatever fate befalls them, one can understand, though not justify or defend, how America accepted the unethical and likely illegal transfer of Japanese and Japanese-Americans from the American west coast to internment camps hundreds of miles away. Popular culture, as Marxist scholars like to point out, helps to anesthetize the audience to accept the status quo. Gung Ho and hundreds of other films just like it produced during the war painted a simplistic view of America and the conflict it entered. Compare that view and the view of many Americans during the war with a film like Apocalypse Now and the view of many Americans about the issues in Vietnam.

6) Force of Evil (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1948), 78 minutes.

The period from World War II to the Korean conflict witnessed two conflicting trends in American society and in Hollywood films. Of course, there was the general euphoria about having won the war. Films like Sands of Iwo Jima (1949) celebrated that victory and the heroic Americans--like John Wayne's Sergeant Stryker--who helped win it. And musicals, which attained their technical peak, celebrated romantic love as boy saw girl, chased girl, and won her in such films as On the Town and Easter Parade. But there also were doubts about society. Millions of women had entered the work force and attained a degree of economic independence during the war; after the war, persuasion and force, at least in part, caused them to leave their jobs and become housewives and mothers of the "baby boom" generation. White America had to face its mistreatment of its racial minorities. And Hollywood, as hesitant as mainstream society, began to admit that America was not perfect. Some movies investigated such problems as alcoholism, racism, anti-Semitism, and the problems of veterans seeking to readjust. Others, named film noir by French critics, portrayed a dark, deadly side of life where an investigator of sorts--a policeman, private detective, insurance investigator, lawyer--is driven to understand what is occurring about him. Action is reflected, not seen; sounds are heard; cars screech in the night; people are found dead.

One film that shows this side of life that always seems to take place at night or in dark rooms or in rain is Force of Evil. Actor John Garfield compromises his ethics to serve not only as lawyer to a gangland figure but as one helping him to take control over numbers rackets in New York City. Garfield is so power-driven that his brother, played by actor Thomas Gomez, who himself runs a small numbers operation, wants nothing to do with him. Eventually, the brother is killed in a dispute between the gangland figure and his former partner. Then Garfield seeks the truth and, in possibly killing the two gangsters in a gun battle in a darkened office, he discovers something about himself and his capacity for evil. He corrupts a nice young woman, actress Beatrice Pearson, brings about his brother's death, and hurts many others. The movie is moody, melodramatic, and powerful.

Of course, besides showing a dark side of life reflecting the doubts of the period, the film also places women in the home or as secretaries and offers few encouraging prospects for minorities.

7) Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Allied Artists, 1956), 80 minutes.

Many Americans during the 1950s, spurred by anticommunist hysteria and fear of atomic attack, worried about an invasion or nuclear war. Thus the 1950s witnessed a great many science fiction films that depicted a meeting of worlds and subsequent invasion (War of the World, When Worlds Collide, Destination Mars) or the after-effects of a nuclear accident (Amazing Colossal Man, It Came from Beneath the Sea, Them!). One film representative of the period is Invasion of the Body Snatchers. The movie seemingly tells the story of a town in California taken over by mysterious giant pods that transform into the people they overtake, leaving those people without emotions--no love, no pain, no joy, no sorrow. They exist in a dulled state going through the motions of life. Many viewers then (and now among those who see the movie on late night television) believed that the movie was critical of communism for robbing people of their ability to emote and think. But in fact director Don Siegel was attacking the mind-numbing conformity that gripped American life and that dismayed such perceptive critics as William Whyte (The Organization Man) and David Reisman (The Lonely Crowd). This film can help students understand the tradeoffs of the Eisenhower Presidency, during which there was a veneer of calm and civil rights progress, while beneath that surface there were deep problems that would explode in the 1960s.

8) Woman's World (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954), 94 minutes.

The 1950s was an era that glorified business. Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson, noted that "What's good for America is good for General Motors and vice versa." Men entered sales and marketing; they obtained engineering degrees and entered manufacturing. They conformed; they lived in suburban, look-alike housing; kept critical thoughts to themselves; and sought to "get ahead." There was pressure on wives to support their husbands and further their husbands' careers. Women's magazines of the period offered advice on how to hold the proper cocktail party, join the right clubs, and generally be an asset to a husband's business progress.

Nowhere is that drive for conformity and success so clear as in the movie Woman's World. Actor Clifton Webb wishes to appoint a new company head; he knows the strengths and weaknesses of his top managers but he does not know which one has the right wife. So he invites his top managers and their wives to join him and his sister, actress Ethel Barrymore, for a weekend in the country where the examination will occur. Cornell Wilde, a wonderful engineer from a company plant in the midwest, loses out because his wife, June Allyson, is too nice, too corny, too much of a homemaker to be the wife of a corporate head. And so it goes. Finally Webb chooses the manager who decides to cast off his wife; actually none of the women measured up; the one without a wife is best. Again, imagine the images this film offers moviegoers. Women exist only as a reflection of their men--Adam's Rib, so to speak. Their lot in life is to master the tasks of wife and helpmate. The drudgery is theirs, the excitement their husbands. Certainly this world view mirrored the suburban ideal, but, in reinforcing that ideal, it made deviation that much more difficult. I have found it easy to use this film to create class discussion about woman's lot then and now. Many students have gone home to ask their mothers about the choices they had and the choices they made.

Those eight films offer a selection of easily-obtainable, reasonably-priced movies that can help make American society during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s come alive for students.² Hollywood movies from the Golden Age not only will entertain students but also help the instructor make telling points about American social and cultural history.

NOTES

¹Popular films from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s are readily available and reasonably inexpensive. There are several outlets with literally hundreds of movies to rent; charges tend to average around \$50 a film. For two or three films for a year shown to several classes in a typical department, the \$100-\$150 can be funds well expended. (You may wish to obtain catalogs from Budget Films [4590 Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90029] and Kit Parker Films [1245 Tenth Street, Monterey, California 93940].) The boom in videotapes, videotape machines, and videotape outlets offers a less expensive alternative: usually one can rent a videotape for less than \$10 or purchase videotapes for prices not much greater than the cost of renting a 16 mm. film.

²Many other films are described in film catalogues, reviews, and monographs. A few suggestions for further reading would include a general monograph like Stephen Earley's An Introduction to American Movies (1978) or Robert Sklar's Movie-Made America (1975). Each of these books offers a survey of Hollywood, its movies, and the sorts of images they offered to the movie-going audience.

More specific works include a series titled Hollywood in the . . ., with entries for the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Andrew Bergman authored a wonderful book, We're in the Money: Depression America and the Movies (1973), that examines the relationship between the audience, the despair of the times, and the movies Hollywood offered. Works that describe the true Golden Age, 1942-1954, include Michael Wood's America at the Movies . . . Or . . . Santa Maria It Slipped My Mind (1975) and David Thomson's America in the Dark (1977). Both look at the images that Hollywood offered; they include discussions of heroes, isolationism, the role of women, and love of country. For the 1950s there is Andrew Dowdy, Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind (1973). He recounts the good, the bad, and the ugly about Hollywood's films in the decade of its decline, including the anticommunist films, the so-called "tit culture" (actresses who were well-endowed, not necessarily with acting talent), science fiction, epic spectaculars, and more. For descriptions of specific films from the era, there are such works as Tony Thomas, The Films of the Forties (1975) and Douglas Brode, The Films of the Fifties (1976). Each author offers a brief description of more than fifty films from each decade.

For more information on the relationship between images of women in film and the social position of women, see Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (1973) and Gaye Tuchman, et al. (eds.), Hearth & Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media (1978). For more on movies, civil rights, and black Americans, see Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942 (1977) and Lindsay Patterson (ed.), Black Films and Film-makers (1975).