

Los Angeles and Cinema



Drive (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011)

Instructor: Dr. John Trafton

FILM 3910
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TTH 3:45-5:40
Admin 326

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Description

It is impossible to talk about the City of Angels without talking about its movie business. The history of American cinema is so intertwined with Los Angeles that the term “Hollywood” is used interchangeably with “American film” worldwide. The earliest film pioneers migrated to Southern California in the early twentieth century to take advantage of ideal shooting conditions—over 300 days of sunshine a year—and to evade patent enforcement from the Edison Studios. One of the first Hollywood studios, The Nestor Film Company, was established at a tavern, ironically placed in the eastern part of a town that was founded as a dry community: Hollywood. Slapstick comedy filmmaker Mack Sennett set up his Keystone Studios in the appropriately named Edendale, a now defunct city situated south of the Los Angeles Dodgers’ Stadium. Later, a group of German-Austrian immigrants would establish a community in Pacific Palisades (now the home of Steven Spielberg) where they would critique what they saw as “the culture industry.” The indecipherable nature of the city would give rise to a series of crime films and psychological thrillers that French film critics would later dub “Film Noir.” By the end of the century, natural disasters, punk rock music, ethnic enclaves, and star culture would contribute to what today we can call “Los Angeles Cinema.”

This course will look at the history of Los Angeles Cinema and the complex relationship that American film has had with its host city throughout film history. We will look at the mythical allure of the region that enticed film showmen to leave the East Coast for the land of sunshine, what Carey McWilliams called “An Island on Land.” We will consider the ways that Los Angeles is depicted by native “Angelenos” and by outsiders. This course will also look at the so-called “hood films,” the city’s penchant for destroying itself on film, and how the late 70s/early 80s Los Angeles hardcore scene fueled a punk aesthetic in independent films. Lastly, we will explore Los Angeles neo-realist cinema and how it contrasts sharply with the glittering image of the city in mainstream American film and television.

Readings:

The readings for the course are available on Canvas and through the Lemieux library.

It is **highly recommend** that you view Thom Anderson’s documentary *Los Angeles Plays Itself* at some point during the course.

Assessments:

This course has two essay assessments, one due at the beginning of week six, and the other in the final week. **Lecture and screening attendance is mandatory.** You will have extreme difficulty completing the assessments if you do not attend the screenings. It is also **highly recommended** that you watch at least one of the additional screening films each week.

Attendance and Participation 20%

Essay #1 35%

Essay #2 45%

It is also **highly recommended** that you consult the Student Handbook and familiarize yourself with the guidelines on how your work will be evaluated and the penalties for late submission or academic misconduct.

Participation – 20%

From weeks 2-10, each class will begin with a brief presentation from a select group of students. The presentation will be in the form of a short paper response (around 1000 words) to the screening film from the previous week. In week 1, you will be assigned the week during which you will give your presentation. The aim of these presentations is to stimulate discussion and to provoke an independent analysis of the films and readings.

Essay one – 35%

In an essay of about 3,000 words answer the following question:

Carey McWilliams' describes Southern California thusly:

“A nearly perfect physical environment, Southern California is a great laboratory of experimentation. Here, under ideal testing conditions, one can discover what will work in houses, clothes, furniture, etc. It is a great tribal burial ground for antique customs and incongruous styles. The fancy eclectic importations soon cancel out here and something new is then substituted.”

Los Angeles is a strong character in each film on this course, though each film responds to the city differently. It is a space where ideas die and are reborn. Chose one of the additional viewing films from weeks 1-5 and discuss how the film portrays Los Angeles. If the city is a character in the film, what type of character is L.A.? Draw upon the readings and use specific scenes from the film to support your argument.

This essay is due by 5 p.m. Friday May 5th

Essay #2 – 45%

Answer the one of the following questions in an essay of 4,000 words:

- 1) The L.A.P.D. is an essential component of Los Angeles cinema, from the stoic cops of the *Dragnet* television series to the crooked cops of *Training Day*. Select two films, each from different weeks (either a screening film or recommended viewing), and contrast their portrayals of the L.A.P.D. What do these films also have to say about Los Angeles and the historical moments that produced them? Use specific moments from each film to bolster your arguments.
- 2) Select two films, one from from week 6 and one from week 8. Analyze both films, highlighting their common themes and presentation of Los Angeles. In what ways are they different and similar? Draw on the readings and use specific scenes from the film to support your argument.

- 3) Select one film from week 4 and one film from week 5 and contrast the ways that Los Angeles is portrayed by natives and by outsiders. Use specific scenes from the films and draw on the readings to support your argument.
- 4) Beneath the glittering image of Los Angeles in mainstream film and television lies another L.A., one captured by independent and neo-realist cinema. Chose two films, from weeks 7 and/or 10, and contrast them with other presentations of Los Angeles that we have seen in other weeks. Pay close attention to the ways that the filmmakers use the cinematic form to engage critically with the city.

This essay is due by 5 p.m. Friday, June 8th

Disabilities:

The Dean's Council has requested that this paragraph be included in all syllabi: If you have, or think you may have, a disability (including an 'invisible disability' such as a learning disability, a chronic health problem, or a mental health problem) that interferes with your performance as a student in this class, you are encouraged to arrange for support services and/or accommodations through Disabilities Services staff in the Learning Center, Loyola 100, (206) 296-5470. Disability-based adjustments to course expectations can be arranged only through this process.

Plagiarism:

Any instance of plagiarism—the unacknowledged use of someone else's written materials as one's own—will result in a failing grade for the assignment at the bare minimum. If a person plagiarizes all or part of the essay assessments, the failing grade will result in failing the course. I will adhere to the academic honesty policies outlined by the University's Academic Integrity Policy:

<http://www.seattleu.edu/registrar/page.aspx?>

If you are unsure about what constitutes plagiarism, I urge you to speak with me as soon as possible.

Additional Viewing:

Additional viewing films can be obtained through the University library, Netflix or Amazon Prime. If neither of these outlets have the film you are looking for, each film featured on the syllabus can be obtained from Scarecrow Video in the University District on Roosevelt Way NE (between 50th and 52nd Ave).

Week One: From the "Mission Legend" to Edendale

Screenings:

Shorts from Mack Sennett.

Readings:

- Cary McWilliams, “The Island of Hollywood”
- W. Wallace Clendenin, “Hollywood Studios of the Early Days” (online link provided on canvas);
- Nicola Balkind, “California Slapstick: On-Location Filmmaking Gets Rolling” in *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*

Recommended viewing

A Day's Pleasure (Charles Chaplin, 1919--available on youtube.com), *Ramona* (1936 version or 1928 version)

Week Two: Weimar on the Pacific

Screening

The Blue Gardenia (Fritz Lang, 1953)

Required reading

Ehrhard Bahr, “Introduction” in *Weimar on the Pacific*

Recommended viewing

Dead Again (Kenneth Branagh, 1991), *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman* (Eric Bricker, 2008).

Week Three: Noir – From Classic to Neo

Screening:

To Live and Die in L.A. (William Friedkin, 1985)

Readings:

- Mike Davis, “Sunshine or Noir?” in *City of Quartz*
- Vincent Brook, “Neo-Noir” in *Land of Smoke and Mirrors* (available online through Lemieux library).

Recommended viewing

Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), *Drive* (Nicholas Winding Refn, 2011).

Week Four: New Hollywood

Screening:

The Long Goodbye (Robert Altman, 1973)

Required readings:

Mimi White, "Movies and the Movement" in *American Cinema of the 1970s* (available online through Lemieux library)

Recommended viewing:

The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967), *The Trip* (Roger Corman, 1967), *A Woman Under the Influence* (John Cassavetes, 1974), *Shampoo* (Hal Ashby, 1975).

Week Five: The Outsiders

Screening:

Zabriske Point (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970)

Required reading:

- Michael S. Duffy, "Eurovisions: Alternative Views of the Hollywood Landscape" in *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*
- Catherine Russell, "The Life and Death of Authorship in Wim Wenders' *State of Things*" in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*

Recommended viewing:

Point Blank (John Boorman, 1967), *The Outside Man* (Jacques Deray, 1972), *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997), *The State of Things* (Wim Wenders, 1982).

Week Six: Disasters

Essay #1 due by 5 p.m. Friday May 5th

Screening:

The Omega Man (Boris Sagal, 1971)

Required reading:

- Mike Davis, "How Eden Lost Its Garden" in *Ecology of Fear*
- Peter Lev, "Disasters and Conspiracy" in *American Films of the 70s* (available online through Lemieux Library).

Recommended viewing

Earthquake (Mark Robson, 1974), *Predator 2* (Stephen Hopkins, 1990), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982).

Week Seven: The Rise of African-American and Chicano Cinema

Screening

A Killer of Sheep (Charles Burnett, 1978)

Required readings

- Chuck Kleinhaus, "The L.A. Rebellion in Retrospect and in Motion" in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (available online through Lemieux Library)

- Rosa Linda Fregosa, “Actos of ‘Imaginative Re-Discovery’” in *Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (available online through Lemieux Library)
- Paula Massood, “Out of the Ghetto, into the Hood: Changes in Construction of Black City Cinema” in *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (available online through Lemieux Library).

Recommended viewing

Menace II Society (The Hughes Brothers, 1993), *The Exiles* (Kent MacKenzie, 1961), *American Me* (Edward James Olmos, 1992), *Boyz in the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991)

Week Eight: Punk

Screening:

Repo Man (Alex Cox, 1984)

Required readings

Stacy Thompson, “Punk Cinema” in *Cinema Journal*;

Recommended viewing

Suburbia (Penelope Spheeris, 1984), *The Decline of Western Civilization* (Penelope Spheeris, 1981), *What We Do Is Secret* (Rodger Grossman, 2007).

Week Nine: The End of an L.A. Century

Screening:

Inherent Vice (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2014)

Required readings

- John Trafton “Paul Thomas Anderson’s Los Angeles: *Inherent Vice* and History Through Cinematic Citation.”
- Wael Khairy, “Living in a Mann’s World: Michael Mann’s L.A.” in *World Film Locations: Los Angeles*

Recommended Viewing

Heat (Michael Mann, 1995), *Training Day* (Antoine Fuqua, 2001), *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998), *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), *The Limey* (Steven Soderbergh, 1999)

Week Ten: L.A. Neorealist Cinema

Screening:

A Better Life (Chris Weitz, 2011)

Required readings

David E. James, “Avant-Garde Cinema in Los Angeles” in *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*

Recommended Viewing

Bush Mama (Haile Gerima, 1979), *Bless Their Little Hearts* (Billy Woodberry, 1983),
El Norte (Gregory Nava, 1983), *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015).

Essay # 2 due by 5 p.m. Friday, June 8th