

FACULTY OF ARTS, CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE
APPROACHES TO CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD HISTORY

Prof. Richard Maltby

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14., 15., 16. 11. 2017 / 12.30 – 15.45 / Room 429 (4th floor, Nám. Jana Palacha 2)



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Registration: by 8. 11. 2017 by email: jindriska.blahova@ff.cuni.cz

Student Requirements: Mandatory Attendance All 3 lectures / Reading Recommended Preliminary Readings in Preparation for the Module (texts available at <https://dl1.cuni.cz/course/view.php?id=5579>, password Maltby) / Participation in in-class discussion / Final Essay (1500 words) submitted to jindriska.blahova@ff.cuni.cz by Thursday 7th December (midnight).

MODULE DESCRIPTION

In the four decades between 1920 and 1960, the Classical Hollywood system integrated the production, distribution and exhibition of entertainment films on an industrial scale. This series of lectures will discuss several of the contrasting ways in which the history of this system has been understood. The lectures will concentrate on the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s, and will be illustrated with screenings of three Warner Bros. movies from that decade – *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy), *Bullets or Ballots* (1936. Dir. William Keighley), and *Jezebel* (1938. Dir. William Wyler).

Most Hollywood film history has concerned itself with the process of production, with intertextual relationships between films, or with the interpretation of film texts as symptomatic historical documents. These lectures will **discuss the limitations of these approaches, and present alternatives to them that offer views from the perspective of the audience's social experience of cinema.** These alternative approaches argue that a **cultural history of American cinema** must take account of both **Hollywood's actual audiences and the discursively-constructed audiences** that its movies addressed. A history of Hollywood's audiences must, by the same token, also be a history of its products and its institutions.

The lectures take as their starting point the ephemerality of individual movies in the Classical Hollywood system. Even a major production in the 1930s had a publicly advertised existence of perhaps one month during its first-run release, a first-run metropolitan life of one or two weeks, and a presence in most suburban or small-town communities of as little as two or three days, before it disappeared forever, having been replaced by products of similar function within the constant flow of distribution and exhibition. What mattered commercially to the industry that produced and circulated the movies was that their audiences developed the regular habit of cinemagoing, and that their attendance became, to a large extent, independent of any particular film on show.

From this perspective, film history's preoccupation with the individual film text as its primary object of study ignores the extent to which movies were commercially positioned and understood, by producers, exhibitors and audiences alike, as consumable goods: viewed once, disposed of and replaced by a substitute providing a comparable experience.

The lectures will examine how this perspective – **the perspective of cinema history rather than film history** – can reshape our understanding of the industrial and institutional history of Hollywood, and how such an approach addresses the place of individual movies within those histories. Each lecture will illustrate the historiographical issues raised by this perspective. The three film case studies will be used to **illustrate the role of production trends, cycles and star vehicles in Classical Hollywood's vertically integrated system**, and to explore the ways in which the reception of individual movies was influenced by their specific historical contexts.

Recommended Preliminary Reading

Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, eds Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2011, pp. 3-40.

Thomas Schatz, "Warner Bros.: Power Plays and Prestige," Chapter 12 of *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1988.

Tino Balio, "Selling Stars: The Economic Imperative," in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale. Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 209-22.

Richard Maltby, "The Production Code and the Mythologies of 'Pre-Code' Hollywood," in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale. Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 237-248.

Recommended Reading

Ruth Vasey, "'Let 'Em Have It': The Ironic Fate of the 1930s Hollywood Gangster," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, eds Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 179-201

Richard Maltby, "'As Close to Real Life as Hollywood Ever Gets': Headline Pictures, Topical Movies, Editorial Cinema, and Studio Realism in the 1930s," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, eds Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann and Art Simon. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA: 2011, pp. 46-111.

Mark Glancy and John Sedgwick, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s: A Study Based on the *Variety Dataset*," in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale. Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 179-208.

Cathy Klaprat, "The Star as Market Strategy: Bette Davis in Another Light," in *The American Film Industry*, Revised Edition, ed. Tino Balio. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1985, pp.351-76.

Patrick Keating, "Prologue: Emotional Curves and Linear Narratives," in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale. Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 6-20.