

Course Title	American Cinema of the 1980s
Language	English Instruction and Assessment
Instructor	Richard Nowell Ph.D.
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Structure	Six Seminars (26.9; 03.10; 24: 10; 07.11; 14.11; 05.12)
Semester	Fall 2024
Time	Thursdays, 12:00–13:50
Location	Lecture Theater, C34
Office Hours	Online, by appointment, at a time of mutual convenience.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“American Cinema of the 1980s” introduces students to six of the most important Hollywood production trends of this decade, albeit with a spin. These trends include Backlash Cinema like *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Cold War Cinema like *Rocky IV* (1985), and High Concept like *Flashdance* (1983). As well as Family Films like *Big* (1987), Yuppie Cinema like *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), and LGBTQ+ Cinema like *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* (1985). The course invites students critically to reevaluate the industrial, social, and textual dimensions of these trends, and at times revise current understandings thereof. In so doing, they are invited to develop new ways of seeing one of the most industrially important, culturally significant, influential – and indeed misunderstood – chapters in western popular culture.

COURSE AIMS

This course uses the case of American Cinema of the 1980s to promote critical and revisionist understandings of Hollywood during this decade, considering its industrial, aesthetic, and socio-cultural dimensions. The course familiarizes students with transferable frameworks, approaches, and skills that promise to deepen their engagement with media formats on and beyond this course. By the end of the course, students will be expected to demonstrate a capacity to synthesize in argument-driven fashion their engagement of scholarly frameworks and textual and contextual analyses. Their proficiency in such areas shall be assessed with an original essay, one requiring direct engagement with one of the topics examined on this course. All of this requires students develop insights into the following areas:

- Hollywood & the Cold War
- Hollywood & the Yuppie
- Hollywood & Family Values
- Hollywood & the Battle of the Sexes
- Hollywood & LGBTQ+
- Hollywood & High Concept

For learning outcomes specific to each topic, please see individual session outlines below.

TEACHING METHODS

This course is built around six sessions combining elements of both traditional seminars and lectures, with student-focused discussions supported by brief framing, summarizing, and contextual “lecturettes”. As preparation, students are expected to study the provided scholarship and the home screenings in relation to questions included in the syllabus; these will form the basis of discussions, to which students are invited actively to contribute. Such an approach is intended to maximize students’ engagement and comprehension of the learning outcomes for each session.

ASSESSMENT

At the end of the course, students are to submit **one** circa. 1500–2000-word essay written in response to **one** of six prompts derived from the topics introduced on the course.

Value: 100% of Final Grade

Due Date: Midnight CET Sunday 19 January 2025

Note: Films screened on this course may **NOT** be used for final papers.

Advice and Learning Outcomes: Towards the end of the course, an advice sheet will be issued spotlighting the general qualities graded highly on this course. Time will also be set aside towards the end of the final session to discuss these matters.

All Essays are to be submitted in PDF or word format to MS TEAMS or to 516779@mail.muni.cz. **Please include your name and the course title in the name of the file.**

NB: Extensions can be arranged with the instructor in advance, based on health, humanitarian, and other grounds.

Prompt A

Feminist activists and scholars argued that a wave of films in the 1980s represented a backlash against the relative gains in power enjoyed by some American women. However, it is clear that many of these films might well have sought to articulate the same concerns as the feminists themselves; in short these were actually pro-feminist films. Accordingly, show how an example of “Backlash Cinema” takes up positions on the battle of the sexes.

Areas of Assessment/Learning Outcomes

1. “Backlash Cinema” as a misogynist cinema
2. “Backlash Cinema” as a pro-feminist cinema
3. An analysis of the gender politics of an American “backlash” film of the 1980s.

Prompt B

Scholars such as Stephen Prince have argued that Hollywood’s Cold War Cinema of the 1980s was Anti-Soviet, bellicose, and jingoistic. However, it is clear that some of the decade’s films about East-West relations were reconciliatory and offered criticism of America’s social, economic, and political systems. Accordingly, show how an example of Hollywood’s cinema of the 1980s takes up positions on the Cold War.

Areas of Assessment/Learning Outcomes

1. Cold War Cinema as Pro-US/Anti-Soviet cinema
2. Cold War Cinema as reconciliatory and critical of the US
3. An analysis of the Cold-War politics of an American film of the 1980s

Prompt C

The High Concept model is widely seen to epitomize the “New Hollywood” approach to film branding. And even though it was less widely used than generally thought, it was employed

by some important films of the 1980s. Accordingly, show how a Hollywood film of the 1980s uses simple stories, striking marketing hooks, and relations to other media and merchandise to position itself in the marketplace as an example of High Concept.

Areas of Assessment/Learning Outcomes

1. The facets of high concept
2. The economics of high concept
3. The use of high concept in an American film of the 1980s.

Prompt D

1980s America is often remembered for the promotion of family values; something typically assumed to have shaped the content of Hollywood's Family Films. However, it is clear that it was actually in Hollywood's interests to show the family as a site of pain and turmoil so that it could offer its films as solutions to inter-generational issues. Accordingly, show how a Hollywood film of the 1980s positions itself as a form of family therapy for children and their adult caregivers.

Areas of Assessment/Learning Outcomes

1. The conditions driving the institutionalization of family films in 1980s Hollywood
2. The ways the Family Film model is used to speak to children and caregivers
3. An analysis of how an American Family Film of the 1980s is positioned as therapeutic

Prompt E

Hollywood cinema of the 1980s is often remembered for participating in a general cultural glorification of the Yuppy – whether as success-stories or as Grant suggests as victims of others. However, it is clear that many depictions of this character-type presented the Yuppy as a figure of revulsion. Accordingly, show how an American Yuppie film of the 1980s depicts young, urban professionals.

Areas of Assessment/Learning Outcomes

1. The Yuppy as a figure of admiration and vulnerability
2. The Yuppy as monster
3. An analysis of the class politics of an American Yuppie film of the 1980s.

Prompt F

1980s Hollywood cinema is widely considered have been profoundly homophobic. However, it is clear that – although rare – some Hollywood films offered more sympathetic and uplifting portrayals of non-heteronormative people. Accordingly, show how a Hollywood film of the 1980s depicts LGBTQ+ folks.

Areas of Assessment/Learning Outcomes

1. 1980s Hollywood and homophobia
2. 1980s Hollywood and more positive depictions of LGBTQ+ people.
3. An analysis of the LGBTQ+ politics of an American film of the 1980s

Tutorials

Students may arrange one-on-one tutorials to discuss any issues arising from the course, including the assessment. Meetings can be arranged by email and will take place online at a time of mutual convenience or after a teaching session.

Feedback

Each student will be emailed individually with detailed personal feedback on their paper. This feedback is designed to be constructive, so will spotlight strengths, shortcomings, and suggestions on how the paper might have been elevated.

Plagiarism Information

It is the duty of every student to ensure that s/he has familiarized him- or herself with the following details pertaining to plagiarism.

(A) Any use of quoted texts in seminar papers and theses must be acknowledged. Such use must meet the following conditions: (1) the beginning and end of the quoted passage must be shown with quotation marks; (2) when quoting from periodicals or books, the name(s) of author(s), book or article titles, the year of publication, and page from which the passage is quoted must all be stated in footnotes or endnotes; (3) internet sourcing must include a full web address where the text can be found as well as the date the web page was visited by the author.

(B) In case the use of any texts other than those written by the author is established without proper acknowledgement as defined in (A), the paper or thesis will be deemed plagiarized and handed over to the Head of School.

General Evaluation: Grades from A-F will be awarded based on the following general criteria. Please see above for the specific areas of assessment for each prompt. Please note that appropriate leeway will be afforded to students using a second language.

	Argumentation/Understanding	Sources/Evidence	Communication
A 90<	Insightful, vigorous, and demonstrating considerable depth of understanding and a significant amount of original thought; addressing prompt directly through a wholly coherent synthesis of ideas; demonstrating a degree of mastery over subject; demonstrating a deep and thorough understanding of key concepts.	Full range of set resources consulted; sources employed with significant discrimination and sound judgment; thorough assessment of evidence; use of a broad range of examples.	Near-Faultless typography and layout; near-flawless turns of phrase and expression; sophisticated and precise vocabulary; clear structure; exemplary citation and bibliography.
B 80 – 89.99	Perceptive and insightful; some evidence of original thought; for the most part addressing prompt directly; mainly coherent synthesis of ideas; thorough and somewhat critical understanding of key concepts.	A fairly wide range of set resources consulted; solid assessment of evidence; sophisticated use of a fairly broad range of examples.	Very Solid typography and layout; few errors in grammar; mainly sophisticated turns of phrase and expression; mostly clear structure; strong citation and bibliography.
C 70 – 79.99	Solid understanding addressed, for the most part, to the prompt; good synthesis of ideas; reasonably solid understanding of key concepts; evidence of gaps in	Some sources consulted; evidence of some assessment of evidence; use of	Good typography and layout; comprehensible and largely error-free grammar, turns of phrase, and expression;

	knowledge and some minor misunderstandings of key concepts.	mostly workable examples.	reasonable clearly structured; some attempt to provide citation and bibliography.
D 60 – 69.99	Indirectly addressed to prompt; no real synthesis of ideas; mainly descriptive rather than analytical; patchy understanding of key concepts; significant gaps in knowledge.	Restricted range of sources consulted; superficial understanding of evidence; limited range of examples, many of which are inappropriate.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; weak or missing citations and bibliography.
E 50 – 59.99	Barely addressed to the prompt; largely disconnected series of points; poor understanding of key concepts; major gaps in knowledge.	No sources consulted; poor understanding of evidence; few useful examples.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; no citations or bibliography.
F <50	Not addressed to the prompt; largely incoherent; little evidence of an understanding of key concepts; demonstrating little knowledge of subject.	No sources consulted; poor understanding of evidence; no useful examples.	Poor typography and layout; numerous errors of grammar; limited vocabulary; ambiguous or inaccurate turns of phrase; no citations or bibliography.
ZERO	No paper submitted; Plagiarized submissions; or paper showing little or no effort to respond to the prompt.		

COURSE OUTLINE

SESSION 1

BACKLASH CINEMA

26 SEPTEMBER

Hollywood cinema of the 1980s was at the center of a series of culture wars. So much so, that it is often characterized as a masculinist cinema whose most extreme manifestations represented a backlash against the feminist movements of the period. Students will consider the terms under which this backlash was said to have been played out on the screen, while asking whether some of these films might have actually offered more constructive perspectives on gender relations of the day

Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

- The feminist critique of Hollywood
- The hallmarks of Backlash Cinema
- Backlash Cinema as pro-feminist cinema

Preparation

Reading: Lyons, 53-80.

Questions:

1. Why did feminist groups protest against *Dressed to Kill* and similar films?
2. What did they assume about the film's audiences and how they consumed the films?

Home Screening I: *Dressed to Kill* (1980)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-dressed-to-kill-1980-245005.html>

Home Screening II: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-tootsie-1982-7034.html>

Available at: *Tootsie* (1982)

Questions:

- How does these films depict women?
- How do they depict men?
- Are these movies misogynistic?

Cold War Cinema represented Hollywood's most prominent geopolitical cinema of the 1980s. These tales of US-Soviet relations are generally seen as jingoistic, Anti-Soviet, warmongering. Students will consider whether such claims really hold up to scrutiny, or whether some of them actually promoted East-West reconciliation through among other things critiques of politicized entertainment.

Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

- Hollywood and the Cold War
- 1980s Cold War Cinema as hawkish entertainment
- 1980s Cold War Cinema as Glasnost Cinema

Preparation

Reading: Prince, 49–80.

1. What themes and positions does Prince argue distinguishes 1980s Cold-War Cinema?
2. What does he argue about Rocky IV?

Home Screening I: *Russkies* (1987)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-russkies-1987-223775.html>

Home Screening II: *Rocky IV* (1985)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-rocky-iv-1985-1611.html>

Questions:

1. How do these films depict Soviets?
2. How do these films depict Americans?
3. How do these films depict the American entertainment media?

1980s America is oftentimes associated with a flash and glitzy but ultimately superficial lifestyle afforded by a combination of optimism, socio-economic upward mobility, and even the recreational drugs of the period: much like its cinema in fact. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the model of media branding dubbed “High Concept”. Students will consider the nature of the core facets of this approach and how different films used it.

Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

- Hollywood and film production
- High Concept and film circulation
- High Concept as branding ideal rather than reality

Preparation

Reading: Wyatt, 1-22.

Questions:

1. What are the main facets of High Concept (“the look, the hook, and the book”)?
2. How did High Concept advance Hollywood’s economic interests?

Home Screening I: *Flashdance* (1983)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-flashdance-1983-5814.html>

Home Screening II: *Gremlins* (1985)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-gremlins-1984-5703.html>

Questions:

- How do these films use the High Concept look?
- How do these films lend themselves to spin-offs and merchandise?
- Do these films have something critical to say about High Concept?

SESSION 4

FAMILY FILMS

7 NOVEMBER

During the 1980s, the family was both a central facet of American public discourse and the country's cinema. It is generally assumed that a fairly conservative Hollywood invariably depicts the nuclear family in idealized terms. However, in this session, students will consider how Hollywood's Family Films at this time typically involved portraying the family as a site of vulnerability and crisis, one in need of the supportive hand of multigenerational entertainment; entertainment like Hollywood's family films themselves.

Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

- The institutionalization of the Family Film
- The ways they address challenges facing children and caregivers
- How the films promote themselves as family therapy

Preparation

Reading: Allen, 109-134.

1. What conditions led Hollywood to embrace family films in the 1980s?
2. How are these films positioned within the everyday lives of families?

Home Screening I: *Stand by Me* (1986)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-stand-by-me-1986-318.html>

Home Screening II: *Big* (1988)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-big-1988-5719.html>

Questions:

- How do these films depict the challenges facing children?
- How do these films depict challenges facing caregivers?
- How do these films suggest watching films like themselves can help families?

SESSION 5

YUPPIE CINEMA

14 NOVEMBER

Perhaps more than any other social type, the figure of the yuppie is associated with 1980s America. Hollywood cinema of the decade is widely seen to have celebrated these young upwardly-mobile professionals on the screen. However, in this session students will consider how films of the decade actually demonized this figure.

Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

1. The figure of the Yuppie
2. Yuppies-in-Peril
3. Die Yuppie Scum

Preparation

Reading: Grant, 4-16.

Questions:

1. What was the Yuppie?
2. What were the yuppies-in-peril films?

Home Screening I: *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1984)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-desperately-seeking-susan-1985-14518.html>

Home Screening II: *Pretty in Pink* (1986)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-pretty-in-pink-1986-2633.html>

Questions:

- How do these films depict yuppies?
- To what extent do they celebrate them?
- To what extent do they critique them?

SESSION 6

LGBTQ+ CINEMA

5 DECEMBER

1980s America was not especially kind to what we might now call LGBTQ+ folks. And the Hollywood cinema of the decade is widely seen to have contributed to such issues.

Accordingly, students will consider whether the charges of homophobia levelled at Hollywood during this period are fair, while also considering the extent to which it also handled more uplifting, kind-hearted depictions of Queer life.

Learning Outcomes

A sound understanding of:

1. 1980s Hollywood and charges of homophobia
2. 1980s Hollywood and Queer-friendly Output
3. 1980s Hollywood and Queer-coding

Preparation

Reading: Doty, 81-95.

Questions:

1. How does Doty read Pee-Wee as “queer”?
2. Do you find any aspects of his interpretation less-than-credible?

Home Screening I: *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* (1985)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-peewees-big-adventure-1985-21957.html>

Home Screening II: *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (1985)

Available at: <https://ww1.m4uhd.tv/watch-movie-a-nightmare-on-elm-street-2-1985-366.html>

Questions:

- How do these films depict queer characters?
- How do these films depict the straight world?
- To what extent are these films homophobic?

READINGS:

Allen Robert C. “Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the ‘Family Film’.” *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*. Eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby. London: BFI, 1999: 109-134.

Doty, Alexander. "The Sissy Boy, The Fat Ladies, and the Dykes: Queer and/as Gender in Pee-Wee's World", in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Grant, Barry Keith. "Rich and Strange: The Yuppie Horror Film", *Journal of Film and Video*, 48.1/2 (1996), pp. 4-16.

Lyons, Charles. "Murder of Women in Not Erotic: Feminists against *Dressed to Kill* (1980)", in *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 53-80.

Prince, Stephen. "Brave Homelands and Evil Empires", in *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992), pp. 49-80.

Wyatt, Justin. "A Critical Redefinition: The Concept of High Concept", in *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 1-22.

SCREENINGS:

A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge (Jack Sholder, 1985)

Big (Penny Marshall, 1988)

Desperately Seeking Susan (Susan Seidelman, 1984)

Dressed to Kill (Brian De Palma, 1980)

Flashdance (Adrian Lynne, 1983)

Gremlins (Joe Dante, 1984)

Pee-Wee's Big Adventure (Tim Burton, 1985)

Pretty in Pink (John Hughes, 1986)

Rocky IV (Sylvester Stallone, 1985)

Russkies (Rick Rosenthal, 1987)

Stand by Me (Rob Reiner, 1986)

Tootsie (Sydney Pollack, 1982)