AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980S

Topic One:

Backlash Cinema

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Course Details

Structure: 6 2-hour sessions [**26.9; 03.10; 24.10; 07.11; 14.11; 5.12**]

Methods: Integrated seminar discussions and framing lecturettes

Preparation: 2 x screenings & 1 x reading with preparatory questions

Organization: All screenings and readings will be discussed in depth

Slides: Uploaded to MS TEAMS and SIS after each session

Assessment: 1 x 1500-2000-word essay (choice of six prompts)

Feedback: One-page grade explanation emailed soon after receipt

Topics and Goals

Topic: American Cinema of the 1980s (mainly "mainstream" Hollywood)

**Methods**: Conceptual, textual, industrial, and social

Aim: Reexamine the key topics constituting histories of 1980s Hollywood

Approach I: Spotlight the general understandings of these topics

Approach 2: Challenge these general understandings (in various ways)

Outcome: To garner new understandings of 1980s American cinema
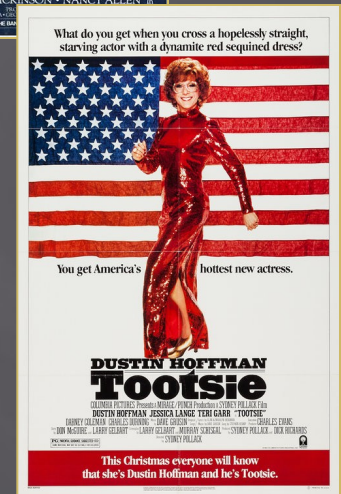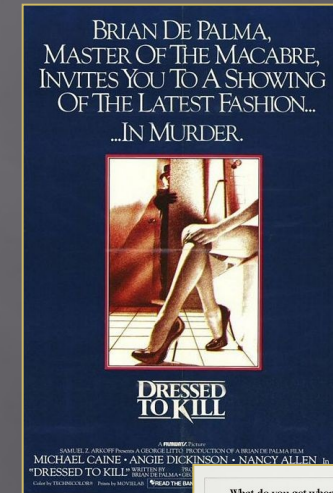
1. Backlash; 2. Cold War; 3. High Concept, 4. Family; 5. Yuppie; 6. LGBTQ+
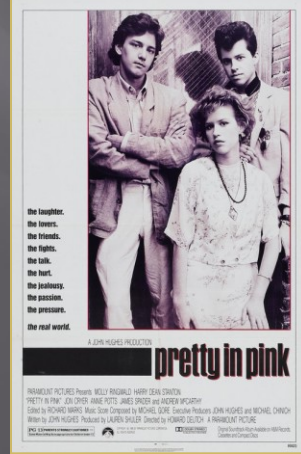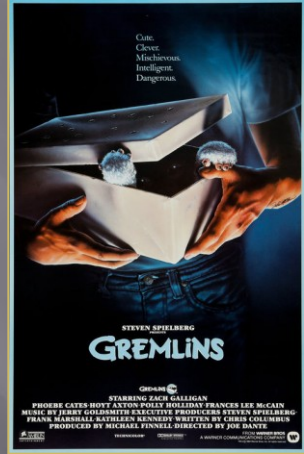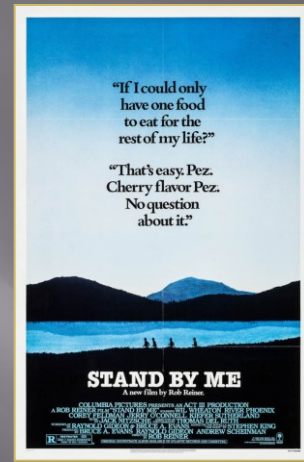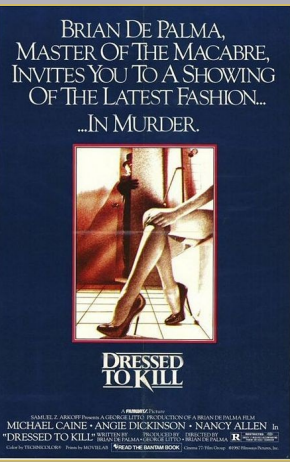
Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

1. The feminist critique of Hollywood

2. The hallmarks of Backlash Cinema

3. Backlash Cinema as pro-feminist cinema

American Backlash Culture

As we will see across this course, 1980s American cinema has been reduced – sometimes unhelpfully – to a right-wing cinema

Depictions of gender relations on the screen have represented a key – albeit possibly misunderstood – instance of such practice

Critics and historians often see this decade's cinema as one that exemplified a broader cultural reaction against feminist

The feminist journalist Susan Faludi characterized this supposed epochal development in her bestselling book as "The Backlash"

She argued that the Backlash celebrated traditional gender roles, promoting stoic masculinity and critiquing female autonomy
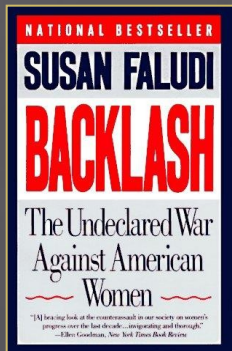
An All-too Familiar Brand of American Conservatism

Faludi's work cemented, mainstreamed, and ultimately shaped feminist understandings of the "postfeminist" cultural-politics of 1980s America

Central to her thesis was the notion that various stakeholders posited second-wave feminism of the 1970s was essentially over and done with

The Backlash suggested feminism was no longer needed, claiming feminists had achieved their goals, but had badly damaging US society

It critiqued working women, suggesting they made men, women, and children miserable; instead emphasizing motherhood and homemaking

It also promoted a traditional stoic masculinity harking back to a 1950s-vision of tough, bread-winning, head-of-the-table manhood

"Backlash Cinema"

Serial Killer Thrillers as Backlash Culture

The most intense US critical attention on Backlash Culture came in the early 1980s, focusing on films about maniacs harassing female targets
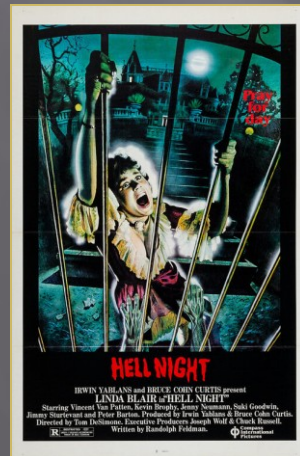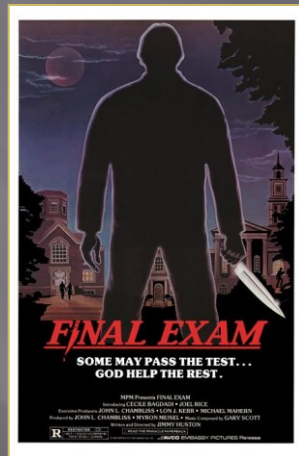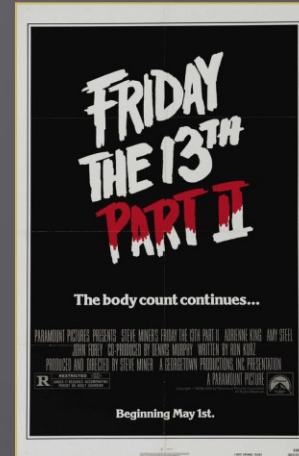
The reception of such films represented one of the most prominent controversies provoked by Hollywood output of the late-20th century

These films fell into two categories: teen slasher films for and about young people, and women-in-danger films for and about older adults

The charges levelled at both groups of films were quite similar however, resulting in them being routinely conflated with one another

Advanced by journalists, and then later by academics, condemnation of these films originated in feminist activist circles of the late 1970s

Hollywood's Teen Slasher Films, 1978-1981
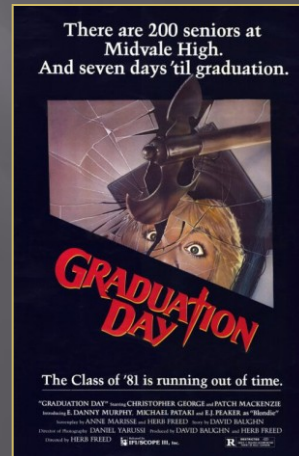
Hollywood's Women-in-danger Films, 1976-82

The *Dressed to Kill* Controversy

The most prominent controversy over women-in-danger films was directed at the big-budget, glossy thriller *Dressed to Kill* (1980)

It is perhaps best summarized by Lyons as part of the 1980s Culture Wars

What does Lyons suggest were the main concerns of the feminists protesting *Dressed to Kill* and others?

Cornerstones & Logics of Feminist Outrage

Feminist activists saw films like *DTK* as masculinist call-to-arms promoting violent suppression of female autonomy

They felt these films **trivialized** violence-against-women, as Hollywood had a long history of misogyny (Haskell)

They felt the films **commodified** violence-against-women, by seeking to profit from their violent misogyny (Haskell)

They felt the films **sexualized** violence-against-women, as part of a broader blurring of porno and violence (Williams)

And they felt the films **promoted** violence-against-women, as the FBI framed serial murder as "femicide" (Jenkins)
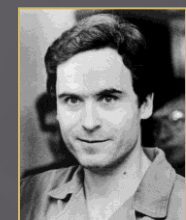
Two Crystallizing Controversies

In 1976, these discourses converged in a very public way around cinema, due to controversies about film marketing

That year, two films were marketed in ways that overtly implicated the media industries in violence against women

1. A female distributor mis-marketed *Snuff* as featuring filmmakers actually murdering an actress on the screen

2. Paramount promoted its glossy revenge thriller *Lipstick* was as a film about a photographer raping a model

They aligned media industries to sadistic misogynists, not their female targets, without folks needing to see the films

What assumptions underpin the feminists denunciation of *Dressed to Kill*?

Key Assumptions Underpinning the Trend

Such conditions made feminist outrage understandable, but as critical analysts we should note it also hinged on several dubious assumptions:

1. **About the Film's Intended and Actual Audiences:**
   That the films were primarily made for and then consumed by men

2. **About the Characters With Whom Male Viewers Sympathized**
   That men were hostile, rather than sympathetic, to the female targets

3. **About How Male Viewers Evaluated the Conduct of the Killer**
   That men rooted for the killers, rather than being outraged by them

4. **About the Agenda of the Films' Makers**
   That the films promoted rather than condemned the violence therein

Robin Wood on *Eyes of a Stranger* (1981)

An exception was the critic and scholar Robin Wood, who argued this film critiqued misogyny

He argued it invited **identification** with women, by depicting its female characters sympathetically

He argued it **condemned** a misogynistic culture, wherein the killer was an extreme manifestation

Regardless, Wood upheld the received wisdom that this trend as a whole was deeply misogynistic

He did this by casting EOAS as the exception that made the rule. The question is: was it really?

Dressed to Kill (1980)

1. How does this film depict women?

2. How does it depict men?

3. Is this movie misogynistic?
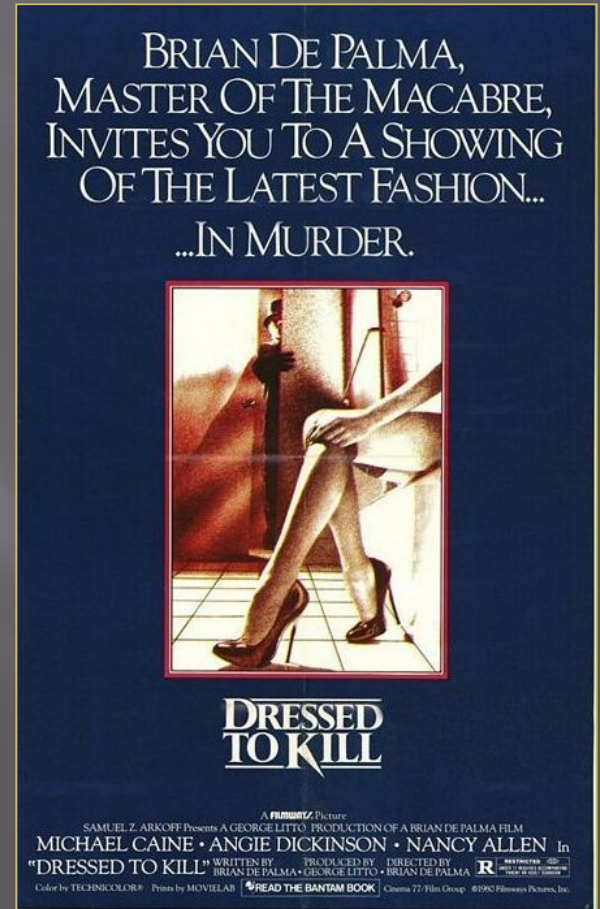
In Defense of A Women's Film Par Excellence

Focusing on women's emotions, frustrations, and fears, the film marks them as identification figures

By contrast, it casts men as bullish, violent, and untrustworthy; misogyny as a pervasive problem

It does suggest hope may exist for males albeit in the next generation, as represented by Kate's son

It even uses this character to position filmmaking as a way of countering violence-against-women

The final scenes even suggest only the insane could sadistically enjoy male-on-female violence

Beyond Serial Killer Thrillers

Hollywood's women-in-danger films fitted into broader industrial and cultural patterns of making films about gender relations in the 1980s

While other films did not provoke activist protests, they were also seen to exemplify and advance the right-wing Backlash culture of the decade

Such positions echoed those progressives levelled at the women-in-danger films: of putting women firmly back in their (domestic) place

As they were entwined with women-in-danger films, we should also focus on these non-horror films better to understand Backlash Culture

Such films may also have been more nuanced in their depictions of the sexes; more sensitive to women, and critical of men than we may think

Tootsie (1982)

1. How does this film depict women?

2. How does it depict men?

3. Is this movie misogynistic?
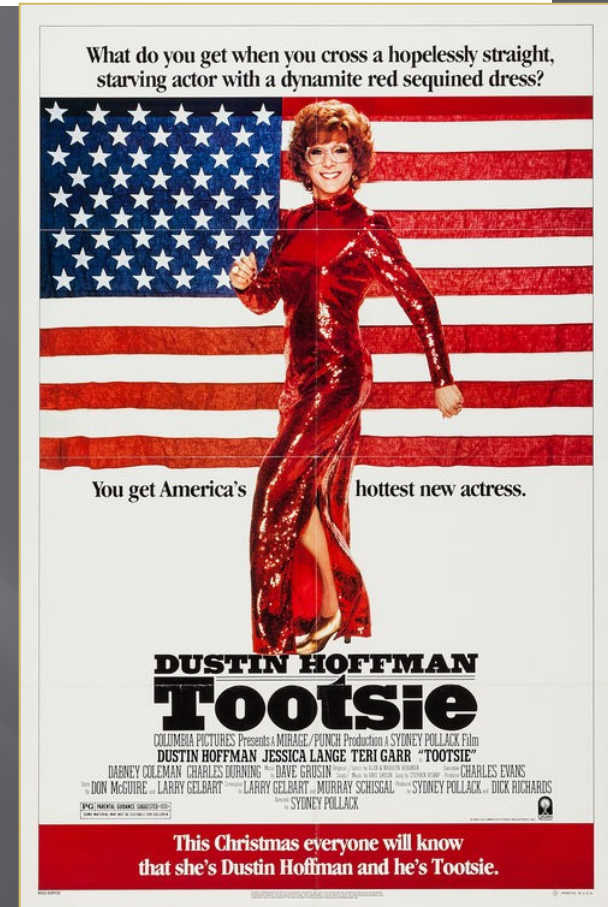
"I just got to learn to do it without the dress!"

Some feminists saw *Tootsie* exemplifying backlash culture, arguing it posited there was no role men could not fill

Yet, this is perhaps a superficial understanding of a film that offers a more progressive stance on misogynistic culture

It literally places a man in a women's shoes; he learns of the challenges women face in their private and professional lives

He (and the mixed-sex audience) are invited to consider how women must endure discrimination, infantilization, and abuse

Setting this story in the media industry producing the film itself highlighted Hollywood sexism on and behind the screen

Why alienate half of the movie-going public?

The notion of Backlash Cinema as a topical women's cinema therefore reflects industry trends of the period

Hollywood courted women audiences with films about their interpersonal, emotional, and professional lives
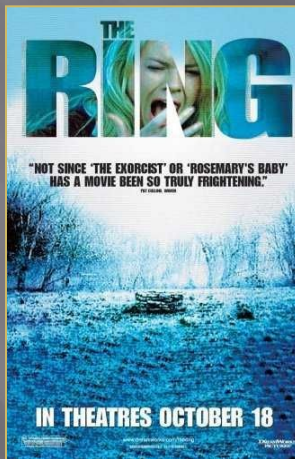
These films usually assumed viewers who were familiar with feminism, so pictured men as a problem to women

In such films, Hollywood often sought to brand itself as pro-feminist by featuring heroines as media workers

This approach also updated the longstanding practice of aiming adult-centered horror and thrillers at women …

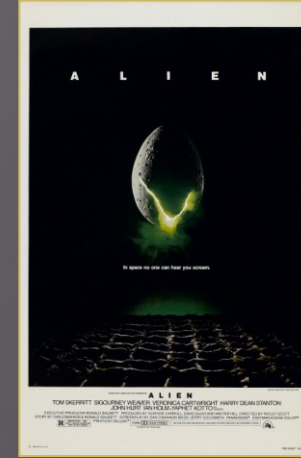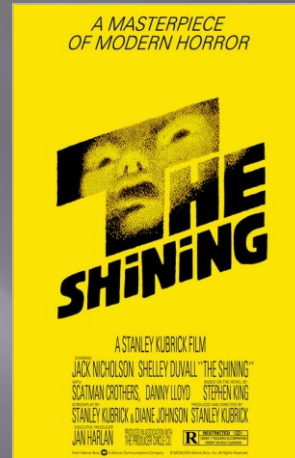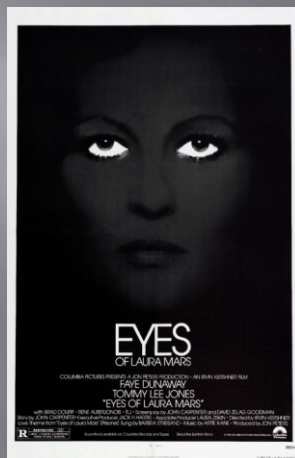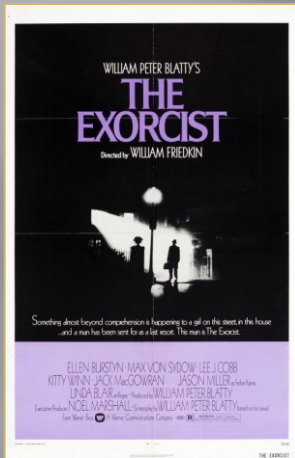# Female-Oriented Horror
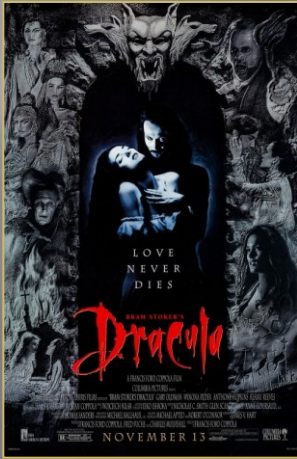
In Sum

American cinema of the 1980s is said to be a masculinist cinema that reacted against second-wave feminism and self-determining women

This position suggested output often promoted traditional gender roles, by demonizing independent women and celebrating hypermasculinity

This purported "backlash" was said to manifest across a series of films that engaged with the supposed consequences of feminist politics

Women-in-danger films were seen as an extreme manifestation thereof, due to trivializing, sexualizing, and promoting male-on-female violence

But such films can be seen to critique misogyny, commodifying the very female-oriented concerns spotlighted by the feminists themselves

Next Time …

We will reconsider Hollywood's most sustained engagement with geopolitics of the 1980s …

Topic 2: Cold War Cinema

Reading: Prince "Brave Homelands & Evil Empires"

Home Screenings: *Rocky IV* (1985)
                              Russkies (1987)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 03 October