

Dana Polan

Fall 2021

CORE-UA 750 EXPRESSIVE CULTURE: FILM

The Cinema of Howard Hawks

Wednesdays, 102 Cantor

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In the 1950s, a young film fan named Eugene Archer was awarded a Fulbright grant to go to France where he hoped to write a book on thematically ambitious, prestigious, Oscar-recognized directors like John Ford, George Stevens, Fred Zinnemann, Elia Kazan, and William Wyler. But when he got to Paris, he found out that all the French critics wanted to talk with him about was suspense director Alfred Hitchcock and action director Howard Hawks. As a famous anecdote has it, Archer quickly wrote back to a friend of his — another budding US film critic — Andrew Sarris with the anxious question, 'Who the hell is Howard Hawks?'

In the half-century since, film study has tried to come to grips with the cinema of Howard Hawks, and a plethora of scholarly studies has set out to answer Archer's blunt question. On the one hand, Hawks, these studies confirm, was indeed a consummate director of action: working in genres such as the western, the war film, the detective story, the adventure tale, and so on, Hawks crafted engaging narratives of men on a mission working together, their endeavor externalized into dramas of physicality, of bodies on the line, and rendered by Hawks through a clean, tight cinema focused on movement, men's corporeal craft, team-work, etc. Hawks's cinema here is a crisp, functional one (no disturbing flashbacks, for instance) that follows guys doing their thing.

On the other hand, as Peter Wollen's breakthrough study of Hawks in 1969 demonstrated, the emphasis in Hawks's cinema on the male group as an action collective is balanced, or perhaps even challenged, by a set of other Hawks films that focus on energetic, adventurous women who confront masculine supremacy and even show men to be veritably infantile in their assumptions around violence, rough play, machismo, and so on. A musical like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* shows weak men at the mercy of over-the-top powerful women (Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe) while a screwball comedy like *I Was a Male War Bride* centers on a demasculinized man (Cary Grant) who spends much of the film in drag.

This course will examine, then, the worlds within Howard Hawks's films: worlds of masculine action but also of feminine challenge to male empowerment, worlds of action, and worlds of critique of violence as simplistic solution. And the content of Hawks's films will be matched to issues of style and cinematic expression: what resources of crisp story-telling does he employ to convey tales of men in action and how are these undone his comedies and musicals (for example, the aggressive style of *Gentlemen* which is a veritable visual assault on masculine dominance)? The goal overall will be to examine Hawks's specific place within Hollywood studio system story-telling while thereby employing him as a case study to capture how American narrative film overall functioned thematically and stylistically as American popular art.

Beyond its focus on representative films from one director in Hollywood history, the course aims to provide students with the basic tools for the analysis of cinema as an artistic language. Early in the semester, for instance, we will study what we might term the basic grammar of film as a mode of expression – its stylistic resources, its techniques for producing meaning and emotion, its diversity of artistic possibilities, and so on. Tim Corrigan *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* will serve as the primary text for this broader introduction to film style and language, but we will also find that even texts focused more specifically on Hawks may also offer broader insight into film as expressive form. By moving between the concrete details of one director's Hollywood output and larger reflections on cinema's expressive powers, the course builds a firm basis for film study and might even serve as the foundation for a Cinema Studies minor.

In keeping with the Core Curriculum guidelines for an education that provides students with an understanding of the Foundations of Contemporary Culture, this course is driven by several goals:

- (1) to introduce students to a wide range of creative work in one medium (cinema, in this case) but with reference to other media (for example, literature in the context of the art of literary adaptation). Here, the course will introduce the students to notions of genre as both thematic and stylistic mode;
- (2) to provide students with formal approaches to the study and appreciation of works of cinema. Students will read texts that concentrate on the formal resources of film and that show these at work in the concrete operations of specific films. There will be a recurrent emphasis in the course – through readings, through lectures, through the work of teaching assistants in section – to examine the possibilities of close stylistic reading of film. Students will engage in exercises that break down film sequences into their expressive components;
- (3) through the focus on one key director, to push students to understand how stylistic analysis and close reading, and the interpretations that derive therefrom, need to be grounded in historical and social context;
- (4) to develop students' critical judgment and powers of interpretation through such mechanisms as weekly comments, close analysis of a film of their choice, small-group discussion and so on;
- (5) to stimulate students to pursue ongoing engagement with the arts by, among other things, constant reference in course lecture to the legacy of classic Hollywood cinema for more recent developments in the arts;
- (6) to encourage students to use such resources of New York City as the Performing Arts Library of Lincoln Center, the rich networks of art cinema, film festivals, and so on.

Your health and safety are a priority at NYU. If you experience any health or mental health issues during this course, we encourage you to utilize the support services of the 24/7 NYU Wellness Exchange [212-443-9999](tel:212-443-9999). Also, all students who may require an academic accommodation due to a qualified disability, physical or mental, please register with the Moses Center [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980). Please let your instructor know if you need help connecting to these resources.

Requirements:

There are a set of requirements for this course (see syllabus for due dates):

- (1) an in-class mid-term on October 26 - 10% of grade.
- (2) a final exam on December 17 - 20% of grade.
- (3) a two-page paper - 5% of grade. An explanation of this assignment plus the follow-up related writing assignments is below.
- (4) a three-page paper - 10% of grade.
- (5) a five-page paper - 15% of grade.
- (6) a ten-page paper - 20% of grade.
- (7) regular participation in section. This includes bringing in a one paragraph reflection on some aspect of the film screened the previous course session with Professor Polan every week.

Note: we are not looking for a mere evaluation (I liked it; I hated it!) but an observation that could provoke discussion - 20% of grade.

NOTE: using electronic devices to text, play games, OR surfing the web will not be permitted in class and will be an occasion for failure in the course. Your laptops are not permitted in the classroom so please leave them home.

For the writing assignments (requirements 3-6), we will ask you to build a critical analysis of a Howard Hawks film from 1931 on that was not shown in its entirety in class. In other words, you can pick a film that we looked at select clips of, but not a film we viewed as the main screening for a class session. Below are the breakdown of assignments and some possible questions to address for each one.

1. For the first assignment (due in section – see syllabus), do some broad research (on the web, for instance) on Hawks films and choose one that you feel you'd like to work on. Write a two-page paper: What film have you chosen? Why does it attract you (note: it doesn't have to be a "positive" attraction? (You can work on a film that you sense is aesthetically or politically or morally not to your liking). What seems to generally have been written about this film and from what angle? How do you guess you'll approach the film critically?

Please attach to your first paper the plot summary and production history for the film that is available on-line at the AFI (American Film Institute) Catalogue's site (available through Bobcat).

2. For the second assignment (due in section – see syllabus), please have screened the film you wrote about for the first assignment and write a three-page paper: select a sequence from your chosen film that you think is particularly significant in terms of how it uses cinematic resources to tell its story or make its thematic points, and analyze that sequence in depth.

3. For the third assignment (due in section – see syllabus), write up a five-page paper: Why is your film worth writing about? What does one learn about Hawks's role in cinema production by studying it? Are there particularly significant uses of cinematic form in your film? Are there particularly significant ways the film seems to confirm, expand upon, or revise Hawksian themes? Are there any web or printed analyses of the film that you find useful – either to build or disagree with?

4. For the fourth assignment (due in section – see syllabus), please rewrite the previous two assignments and work them into a full and coherent ten-page analysis of your chosen film. What is significant thematically or stylistically about your film? How does it fit into the Hawksian corpus and what role does it have there? Is it typical or atypical of Hawks – and how?

There are 7 required books for this course, plus a reader's packet (available through Brightspace for the course). Items in the latter are indicated on the syllabus with an *. Several of the books are themselves available at Bobcat and several will be available through the Brightspace site:

Timothy Corrigan, *Short Guide to Writing about Films*

Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks*

Scott Breivold, *Howard Hawks: Interviews*

Peter Swaab, *Bringing Up Baby*

David Thomson, *The Big Sleep*

Ernest Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not*

Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

Schedule (subject to change):

Week 1 (September 8): Introduction
screening: *Rio Bravo* (1959)

Week 2 (September 15): Hawks in the Studio System
Adventure screening: *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939)
readings: Peter Bogdanovich, *Howard Hawks* *
Peter Wollen, "Who the Hell is Howard Hawks?" *
Corrigan, *Short Guide*, Chapter 1

Week 3 (Sept. 22): Hawks in the Studio System:
Screwball Comedy screening: *Bringing up Baby* (1939)
readings: Rick Jewell, "How Howard Hawks Brought *Baby* Up: An
Apologia for the Studio System" *
Graham Greene, "*Barbary Coast* and *Only Angels Have Wings*," *

Week 4 (Sept. 29): Hawks and Sound
screening: *His Girl Friday* (1940)
readings: Lea Jacobs on Rhythm and Howard Hawks from *Film Rhythm
After Sound* *
David Bordwell on *His Girl Friday* at
<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2017/01/16/my-girl-friday-and-his-and-yours/>
Corrigan, Chapter 2

Week 5 (October 6): Hawks and the War Film
Team Versus Individual screening: *Air Force* (1943)
reading: Corrigan, Chapter 3

FIRST PAPER DUE IN SECTION ON OCTOBER 8

Week 6 (October 13): Hawks and John Ford
Adventure Versus Tradition
screening: *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941)
readings: Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks*
Peter Wollen, "The Auteur Theory"*

Week 7 (Oct. 20): Hawks and the Individual Versus the Team

Screening: *To Have and Have Not* (1944)

Readings: Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not*

James Agee, "To Have and Have Not" *

Week 8 (Oct. 27)

IN-CLASS MIDTERM

Screening: *The Big Sleep* (1946)

readings: Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

Manny Farber, "Howard Hawks" *

Andrew Sarris, "The World of Howard Hawks"*

Week 9 (November 3): Hawks and the Western

screening: *Red River* (1948)

readings: Tom Ryall, "Hawks and the Western," in *Howard Hawks: New Perspectives*

Kathryn Kalinak, "Dimitri Tiomkin and Howard Hawks: Scoring the West," in *Howard Hawks: New Perspectives*

Corrigan, Chapter 4

PAPER 2 DUE IN SECTION ON NOVEMBER 5

Week 10 (November 10): Hawks and Anarchic Comedy

screening: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953)

[IF POSSIBLE, SCREEN *MONKEY BUSINESS* (1952) ON YOUR OWN

readings: Jacques Rivette, "The Genius of Howard Hawks"*

Laura Mulvey, "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*"*

Corrigan, Chapter 5

Week 12 (November 17): Late Hawks 1

screening: *Hatari* (1962)

reading: Corrigan, Chapter 6

PAPER 3 DUE IN SECTION ON NOVEMBER 19

Week 13 (November 24): Late Hawks 2

screening: *Man's Favorite Sport* (1964)

readings: *Howard Hawks, Interviews*

Molly Haskell, "*Man's Favorite Sport*" *

Corrigan, Chapter 7

Week 14 (December 1): Conclusion
screening: *El Dorado* (1967)
Corrigan,

FOURTH PAPER DUE IN SECTION ON DECEMBER 3

FINAL EXAM: December 17, 12-1:50.