B Movies

FLMM 247.01
Dr. David Sterritt – djsterritt@gmail.com
Spring 2015 / Thursdays 1:00 - 3:45 pm
Brown 320
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Important note: To reach David always use the gmail address given above. Otherwise your message will probably never be seen. Thanks.

Course description:

The term “B movie” has numerous definitions – some equate the phrase with “camp,” some with “cult,” others with “inexpensive,” and others with “bad.” This course explores the evolution of the B movie as a film category characterized by a shifting set of historical, sociocultural, economic, and aesthetic criteria. Close critical and theoretical study will be given to films directed by Roger Corman, Ida Lupino, Samuel Fuller, William Castle, and others.

Course objectives:

• Students will sharpen their critical skills through intensive historical and theoretical study of economically subordinate cinematic texts that have worked alongside or against the discourses of the dominant America media, most notably but not exclusively in the decades immediately after World War II, cultivating niche audiences while pioneering novel forms of publicity, advertising, and marketing. By studying this variety of cinema from historical and economic as well as aesthetic and medium-specific perspectives, students will increase their understanding of the social, psychological, and political roles played by mass media in contemporary Western culture.
• Students will cultivate skills for discerning important themes, tropes, and stylistic traits of classical and independent mass-audience cinema through analysis of low-budget works by directors and producers who have successfully challenged hegemonic Hollywood practices by deploying tropes and techniques of mainstream film in inventive and unorthodox ways.
• Students will learn to integrate different modes of understanding related to modern artistic phenomena – historical, sociological, psychological – and
will acquire proficiency in bringing these to bear on works by noteworthy moving-image artists in the post-World War II era.

- Students will further their ability to communicate ideas and opinions cogently and effectively in both written and spoken form.

**Required books:**


(The required books are available at the MICA bookstore and are readily obtainable elsewhere. All other reading assignments will be posted on moodle.) *Note: Additional reading may be assigned during the semester.*

**Course schedule:**

In addition to the films listed below, we will view on a weekly basis a Republic Pictures serial comprising fifteen chapters: *Drums of Fu Manchu,* directed by William Witney and John English, USA, 1940.

**Part 1 – Introducing the B Movie**

Class 1 – January 22
Lecture and discussion: The consolidation of the American film industry.

The classical studio system. Precursors of the classic postwar B picture.

Viewing: *White Zombie* – Victor Halperin, USA, 1932
Reading: Davis, *The Battle for the Bs,* pp. 1-19

Class 2 – January 29
Lecture and discussion: Programmers, block booking, and double features.

Hollywood goes to war and propaganda scores a hit.

Viewing: *Hitler's Children* – Edward Dmytryk, USA, 1943
Reading: Davis, *The Battle for the Bs,* pp. 19-42

Class 3 – February 5
Lecture and discussion: Declining ticket sales and the looming challenge of
television. Science fiction. The launch of the modern space movie.
Viewing: *Destination Moon* – Irving Pichel, USA, 1950, USA, 1958
Reading: Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, pp. 43-66

Class 4 – February 12
Viewing: *The Fly* – Kurt Neumann, USA, 1958
Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, pp. 67-102

**Part 2 – Case studies**

Class 5 – February 19
Lecture and discussion: The high-end B picture. Stock footage and special effects. Ray Harryhausen’s contribution to fantasy filmmaking. Cold-war ideology, atomic-age fears, rampaging xenophobia.
Viewing: *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* – Fred F. Sears, USA, 1956
Reading: Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, pp. 164-177

Class 6 – February 26
Viewing: *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* – Gene Fowler Jr., USA, 1957
Reading: *The Battle for the Bs*, pp. 103-130, 178-190

Class 7 – March 5
Lecture and discussion: The bottom-drawer B budget. Poverty Row. An abominable movie about the abominable snowman?
Viewing: *Man Beast* – Jerry Warren, USA, 1956
Reading: *The Battle for the Bs*, pp. 190-200

**Part 3 – Film noir**

Class 8 – March 12 – Midterm journals due
Lecture and discussion: Rock’n’roll! Juvenile delinquency! Elvis Presley!
Viewing: *King Creole* – Michael Curtiz, USA, 1958
Reading: Gerald Peary, “*King Creole,*” in *Sterritt and Anderson, The B List,*
pp. 168-170

March 19 – Spring Break – No Class

Class 9 – March 26
Lecture and discussion: Urban evil shot on location in Los Angeles.
Viewing: Crime Wave – André De Toth, USA, 1954

Class 10 – April 2
Lecture and discussion: A tough-minded thriller by a female director with her own production company.
Viewing: The Hitch-Hiker – Ida Lupino, USA, 1953

Part 4 – Auteurs

Class 11 – April 9
Lecture and discussion: Castle – Showmanship! Ballyhoo! Gimmicks galore!
Viewing: Macabre – William Castle, USA, 1958

Class 12 – April 16
Lecture and discussion: Fuller – The western. The wide screen. Feminism?
Viewing: Forty Guns – Samuel Fuller, USA, 1957

Class 13 – April 23
Lecture and discussion: Corman – Quick, cheap, and under control.
Viewing: X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes – Roger Corman, USA, 1963
Class 14 – April 30
Viewing: The Terror – Roger Corman, USA, 1963
Reading: Phil Hall, “The Terror.” Film Threat (15 July 2011)
http://www.filmthreat.com/features/38280/
Richard Harland Smith, “The Terror.” TCM

Part 5 – Summing up and drawing conclusions

Class 15 – May 7 – Final journals due
Lecture and discussion: Toward the post-B indie scene.
Viewing: Targets – Peter Bogdanovich, USA, 1968
Reading: David Sterritt, “Targets,” in The B List, 205-209.

Course requirements:
Students must attend all class sessions, complete all reading assignments in a timely way, and participate actively in class discussions.

In addition, each student must keep a journal during the course, comprising one to two pages per week. This is the equivalent of a short paper each week, in which you respond to that week’s course material: the reading, the film, the lecture, and the class discussion. Journals must be printed by computer, not written by hand. Additional rules and guidelines for the journal are given below.

Grading schedule: Journals are due in two installments. Entries for the first seven weeks must be submitted on March 12. Entries for the remaining weeks are due in class on May 7. No journal entry is required for our last class on May 7, since journals are due on that day.

Attendance and Participation:
Attendance will be taken. It is your responsibility to get to class on time. Unexcused absences or excessive lateness will result in a lower final grade. If you know you will be absent on a future date, let me know in advance. Absences will be excused only if you provide verification (documentation of a legitimate reason: illness, family emergency, etc.) as to why the class was missed. You must catch up with work missed due to absences, excused or otherwise. This includes all films that have been screened in class; if you miss something, you must watch it on your own. (All film material for this course is on reserve in the Media Resources Collection for re-viewing or catching
up.) You should participate fully in class discussions, since part of your final grade will reflect class participation.

Journals must be submitted on the dates given above unless a later date is arranged because of special circumstances. Handing in a journal late because of unforeseen circumstances requires verification (documentation of a legitimate reason: illness, family emergency, etc.) as to why the due date was missed.

Journal rules and guidelines:

The journal must contain one to two pages on each week’s subject matter, demonstrating knowledge of the pertinent film material, topics considered in class discussions, and subjects covered in the reading assignments. You are encouraged to view additional relevant films outside class and include references to them in your journal entries. This is not a diary – it is an academic journal, meant to record what you are learning and thinking with regard to the course on a weekly basis. You are welcome to include material suggested by reading and film viewing outside class, but such material must be relevant to this course.

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Additional information

Academic integrity:

Academic integrity -- the pursuit of scholarly activity free from fraud and deception -- is an educational objective of this institution. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication of information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, submitting work of another person or submitting work previously used without informing the instructor, and tampering with the academic work of other students.

A student charged with academic dishonesty will be given oral or written notice of the charge by the instructor. If students believe they have been falsely accused, they should seek redress through informal discussions with the instructor, department head, dean, or campus executive officer. If the instructor believes the infraction is sufficiently serious to warrant the referral of the case to the Office of Conduct Standards, or if the instructor decides to give a final grade of F in the course because of the infraction, the student and faculty will be afforded formal due-process procedures.
Plagiarism

Plagiarism is using someone else’s words or ideas without acknowledgment. Submitting work containing plagiarism is grounds for failure of an assignment or failure of the course. Repeat offenses will be brought to the attention of the department chair. To be responsible when summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting, include a citation like:

*** I read in yesterday’s New York Times that…
*** As Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 34).
*** My roommate Pete noticed that…
*** If it’s common knowledge and your own idea, you do not need quotations. The yellow of the Lance Armstrong bracelet suggests bravery.

Document your citations in a bibliography or “works cited” page at the end of your paper and follow standard guidelines such as MLA or Chicago manual style. Familiarize yourself with these guidelines in Diana Hacker’s A Pocket Style Manual, and always check with your instructor before turning in questionable work. You may also check on these and other language-related issues with one of the helpful tutors in the Writing Center, (410) 225-2418. The Writing Center has copies of the Hacker manual as well.

ADA Compliance Statement

Classroom: Health and Safety Guidelines

Health and Safety
It is the responsibility of faculty and students to practice health and safety guidelines relevant to their individual activities, processes, and to review MICA’s Emergency Action Plan and attend EHS training. It is each faculty member’s responsibility to coordinate with the EHS Office to ensure that all risks associated with their class activities are identified and to assure that their respective classroom procedures mirror the EHS and Academic Department guidelines. Each of these policies and procedures must be followed by all students and faculty. Most importantly, faculty are to act in accordance with all safety compliance, state and federal, as employees of this college and are expected to act as examples of how to create art in a way to minimize risk, and reduce harm to themselves and the environment. Faculty must identify, within each art making process, and require personal
protection equipment use, by each student for each class, when applicable. Students are required to purchase personal protection equipment appropriate to their major. Those students who do not have the proper personal protection equipment will not be permitted to attend class until safe measures and personal protection is in place.

**Classroom: ADA Compliance**

**Learning Resource Center ADA Compliance Statement**

Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss specific needs. Please contact the Learning Resource Center at 410-225-2416, in Bunting 458, to establish eligibility and coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: http://www.mica.edu/LRC