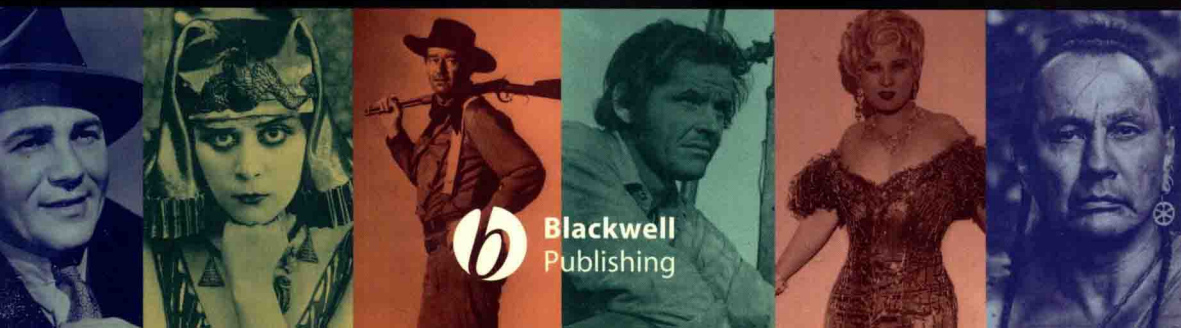




America on Film

Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies

Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin



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America on Film

Acknowledgments

The origins of this book can be traced back to a class we both taught at Antelope Valley Community College in Lancaster, California, when we were PhD students at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. We "inherited" the class from Jaime Bihlmeyer when he took another position. Jaime had created his own set of readings for the course, because, as we quickly discovered, there were very few published texts available that covered "diversity in American film" with the historical and theoretical consistency that we desired. Thus, our colleagues and students at Antelope Valley College are the first people we wish to thank.

Sean Griffin then taught revised versions of this class at California State University at Long Beach, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Florida Atlantic University, while Harry Benshoff developed individual courses in African American film and lesbian, gay, and queer media. Our colleagues and students throughout those years contributed to this project in myriad ways, and we especially want to thank Shelley Stamp and Michael Cowan at UCSC.

It was while we were living and working in Santa Cruz that Jayne Fargnoli, our soon-to-be editor at Blackwell, asked us what kind of textbooks were needed in film and media studies. We both immediately told her there was a need for a text like *America on Film*, and a few months later Jayne asked us if we wanted to write the book ourselves. Her support and feedback have been immeasurable, as have those

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This book is dedicated to our families and friends, the people who have taught us and instilled in us the values of diversity, understanding, education, and love – in both our professional and personal lives. Such acts of sharing can lead to greater understanding and compassion across families, across communities, and across the world. We hope this book encourages people to examine and understand the biases and shaping discourses of contemporary American culture, so that the future may not just promise but also deliver the goal of equality for all Americans, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality.

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How to Use This Book

America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies is a textbook designed to introduce undergraduate students to issues of diversity within American film. It is the first synthetic and historical text of its kind, and provides a comprehensive overview of the industrial, socio-cultural, and aesthetic factors that have shaped and continue to shape cinematic representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The book aims to chronicle the cinematic history of various cultural groups, stimulate discussion of human difference, examine forces and institutions of bias, and ultimately provoke thought about the relationship between film and American national culture.

This textbook can be used in a variety of classroom settings and at a variety of educational levels. Primarily, it is suited for a class on media culture and diversity issues, although we have also used it as a supplemental text in basic “Introduction to Film Studies” and “American Film History” classes. The book could also be used for courses in twentieth-century American history, cultural and American studies, and courses devoted to specific topics surrounding race, class, gender, and/or sexuality. In addition, courses in the sociology and/or psychology of human difference may also find the book useful.


The text was written with first and second year undergraduate students in mind, but would also be appropriate for advanced high school or college-prep students. The book can also be used in higher-level undergraduate or graduate student seminars, although such classes would ideally use *America on Film* in conjunction with more advanced materials and/or other primary readings. Because of its user-friendly style and general accessibility – (everyone loves movies!) – it may also be possible to use the text within certain types of corporate or social seminars designed to stimulate discussion of human diversity.

America on Film is divided into five parts. The first outlines the basic terms and issues of cultural theory and cinematic representation. Each of the following parts is devoted to a specific aspect of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and each begins with a helpful “What is . . . ?” introductory essay. Part II examines the cultural construction of whiteness as well as the complex historical lineages of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino representations. Part III explores issues of American capitalism and examines the cinematic representation of class struggle before and after the Great Depression. Part IV explores the changing images of both femininity and masculinity within American film, and includes a chapter on how Hollywood film form itself has been critiqued as having a male bias. The concluding chapters, in part V, explore how various forms of sexuality have (or have not) been figured on American movie screens. This organizational strategy also allows for the various intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality to be stressed throughout the text where appropriate.

The book is comprised of a total of 15 chapters, to allow for its easy insertion into a semester-long course of study. Each week of any given semester can be devoted to a single chapter of *America on Film* and a representative film screening, either shown in class or assigned as homework. (Many of the films suggested within the text for further screening are easily available from video stores and other commercial media outlets.) Depending on the preferences of the instructor, additional readings and/or screenings can be used in conjunction with *America on Film*. Chapters may also be assigned on a more concentrated basis or even used “out of order,” although we have provided a logical and easy-to-follow structure for the issues discussed.

Each chapter of *America on Film* is organized within a broad historical framework, with specific theoretical concepts – including film genre, auteur theory, cultural studies, Orientalism, the “male gaze,” feminism, queer theory, etc. – integrated throughout. Each chapter features a concise and accessible overview of the topic at hand, a discussion of representative films, figures, and movements, a “case study” (in-depth film analysis) of a single film, and key terms highlighted in bold. Each chapter concludes with questions for discussion and a short bibliography and filmography. *America on Film* also contains a glossary of key terms, a comprehensive index, and 101 photos and diagrams illustrating key points and figures.

Contents

Acknowledgments	x
How to Use This Book	xv
Part I	
Culture and American Film	1
	
1 Introduction to the Study of Film Form and Representation	3
Film Form	4
American Ideologies: Discrimination and Resistance	6
Culture and Cultural Studies	13
Case Study: <i>The Lion King</i> (1994)	18
Questions for Discussion	21
Further Reading	22
2 The Structure and History of Hollywood Filmmaking	23
Hollywood vs. Independent Film	24
The Style of Hollywood Cinema	26
The Business of Hollywood	31
The History of Hollywood: The Movies Begin	33
The Classical Hollywood Cinema	36
World War II and Postwar Film	39
“New” Hollywood and the Blockbuster Mentality	43
Questions for Discussion	46
Further Reading	46
Further Screening	46

Part II



Race and Ethnicity and American Film	47
Introduction to Part II: What is Race?	49
3 The Concept of Whiteness and American Film	53
Seeing White	54
Bleaching the Green: The Irish in American Cinema	58
Looking for Respect: Italians in American Cinema	63
A Special Case: Jews and Hollywood	67
Case Study: <i>The Jazz Singer</i> (1927)	72
Questions for Discussion	73
Further Reading	74
Further Screening	74
4 African Americans and American Film	75
African Americans in Early Film	76
Blacks in Classical Hollywood Cinema	80
World War II and the Postwar Social Problem Film	82
The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation Filmmaking	85
Box: Blacks on TV	87
Hollywood in the 1980s and the Arrival of Spike Lee	88
Black Independent Film vs. "Neo-Blaxploitation" Today	91
Case Study: <i>Bamboozled</i> (2000)	93
Questions for Discussion	95
Further Reading	95
Further Screening	95
5 Native Americans and American Film	96
The American "Indian" Before Film	97
Ethnographic Films and the Rise of the Hollywood Western	100
The Evolving Western	104
A Kinder, Gentler America?	109
Case Study: <i>Smoke Signals</i> (1998)	113
Questions for Discussion	114
Further Reading	114
Further Screening	115
6 Asian Americans and American Film	116
Silent Film and Asian Images	117
Asians in Classical Hollywood Cinema	119
World War II and After: War Films, Miscegenation Melodramas, and Kung Fu	124

Asian American Actors and Filmmakers Today	128
Case Study: <i>Eat a Bowl of Tea</i> (1989)	131
Questions for Discussion	133
Further Reading	134
Further Screening	134

7	Latinos and American Film	135
	The Greaser and the Latin Lover: Alternating Stereotypes	137
	World War II and After: The Good Neighbor Policy	140
	The 1950s to the 1970s: Back to Business as Usual?	146
	Expanding Opportunities in Recent Decades	148
	Case Study: <i>My Family/Mi Familia</i> (1995)	152
	Questions for Discussion	153
	Further Reading	154
	Further Screening	154

Part III

Class and American Film	155
-------------------------	-----



Introduction to Part III: What is Class?	157
--	-----

8	Classical Hollywood Cinema and Class	161
	Setting the Stage: The Industrial Revolution	162
	Early Cinema: The Rise of the Horatio Alger Myth	163
	Hollywood and Unionization	168
	Class in the Classical Hollywood Cinema	171
	Case Study: <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (1940)	174
	Conclusion: Recloaking Class Consciousness	176
	Questions for Discussion	177
	Further Reading	177
	Further Screening	177

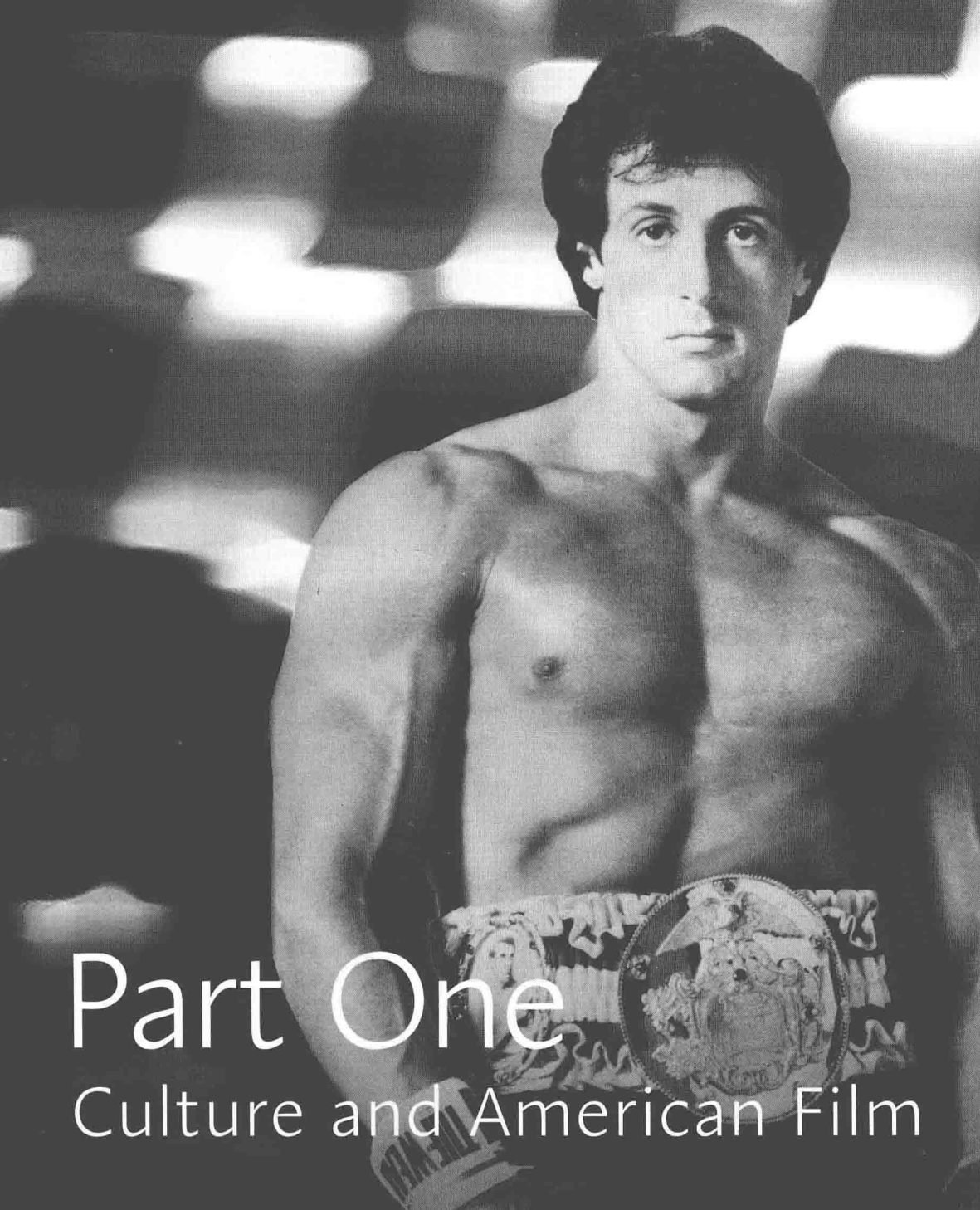
9	Cinematic Class Struggle After the Depression	178
	From World War II to the Red Scare	179
	From Opulence to Counterculture	182
	Box: Class on Television	185
	New Hollywood and the Resurrection of the Horatio Alger Myth	189
	Case Study: <i>Bulworth</i> (1998)	195
	Conclusion: Corporate Hollywood and Labor Today	197
	Questions for Discussion	198
	Further Reading	199
	Further Screening	199

Part IV	Gender and American Film	201
	Introduction to Part IV: What is Gender?	203
	10 Women in Classical Hollywood Filmmaking	207
	Images of Women in Early Cinema	208
	Early Female Filmmakers	213
	Images of Women in 1930s Classical Hollywood	217
	World War II and After	221
	Case Study: <i>All that Heaven Allows</i> (1955)	225
	Questions for Discussion	228
	Further Reading	228
	Further Screening	228
	11 Exploring the Visual Parameters of Women in Film	229
	Ways of Seeing	230
	“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”	233
	Case Study: <i>Gilda</i> (1946)	242
	Conclusion: Complicating Mulvey’s Arguments	244
	Questions for Discussion	247
	Further Reading	247
	Further Screening	248
	12 Masculinity in Classical Hollywood Filmmaking	249
	Masculinity and Early Cinema	252
	Masculinity and the Male Movie Star	254
	World War II and Film Noir	260
	Case Study: <i>Dead Reckoning</i> (1947)	265
	Conclusion: Masculinity in 1950s American Film	267
	Questions for Discussion	270
	Further Reading	270
	Further Screening	270
	13 Gender in American Film Since the 1960s	271
	Second Wave Feminism and Hollywood	272
	Into the 1980s: A Backlash against Women?	277
	A New Generation of Female Filmmakers	281
	Case Study: <i>The Ballad of Little Jo</i> (1993)	285
	Conclusion: Gender at the Turn of the Millennium	288
	Questions for Discussion	289
	Further Reading	290
	Further Screening	290



Part V	Sexuality and American Film	291
	Introduction to Part V: What is Sexuality?	293
	14 Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, and Classical Hollywood	297
	(Hetero)Sexuality on Screen	298
	(Homo)Sexuality in Early Film	300
	Censoring Sexuality during the Classical Hollywood Era	302
	Postwar Sexualities and the Weakening of the Production Code	307
	Camp and the Underground Cinema	313
	Case Study: <i>The Celluloid Closet</i> (1995)	315
	Questions for Discussion	317
	Further Reading	317
	Further Screening	317
	15 Sexualities on Film Since the Sexual Revolution	318
	Hollywood and the Sexual Revolution	319
	Film and Gay Culture from Stonewall to AIDS	320
	The AIDS Crisis	325
	Queer Theory and New Queer Cinema	328
	Case Study: <i>Go Fish</i> (1995)	335
	Conclusion: Hollywood Today	335
	Questions for Discussion	337
	Further Reading	337
	Further Screening	338
	Glossary	339
	Index	356





Part One

Culture and American Film

