

Section A: Hollywood 1930-1990 Comparative Study

Vertigo (Hitchcock, 1958) and Classical Hollywood - student guide

Introduction to Component 1 Section A:

Two Hollywood films will be studied for comparison, **one** chosen from **group 1** and **one** chosen from **group 2**:

Group 1: Classical Hollywood (1930-1960)

- Casablanca (Curtiz, 1942), U
- The Lady from Shanghai (Welles, 1947), PG
- Johnny Guitar (Ray, 1954), PG
- Vertigo (Hitchcock, 1958), PG
- Some Like It Hot (Wilder, 1959), 12

Group 2: New Hollywood (1961-1990)

- Bonnie and Clyde (Penn, 1967), 15
- One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (Forman, 1975), 15
- Apocalypse Now (Coppola, 1979), 15
- Blade Runner (Scott, 1982), 15*
- Do the Right Thing (Lee, 1989), 15.

*Learners study Blade Runner in the Director's Cut version, released 1992.

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Core Study Areas

Learners will study all of their chosen films (eleven films in total) in relation to the following core study areas.

- Area 1. The key elements of film form: cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, editing, sound and performance.
- Area 2. Meaning and response: how film functions as both a medium of representation and as an aesthetic medium.
- Area 3. The contexts of film: social, cultural, political, historical and institutional, including production.

The Specialist Study Area is Auteur Theory with a focus on Area 3 – Context.

This guide will focus on debates and examples of auteurs in Hollywood 1930-1990.

The idea of the auteur as a critical approach derives from an earlier period of Film Studies when critics aimed to demonstrate that films are 'authored' by individuals, most obviously the film's director, rather than being generic products. Today, the concept of the auteur can be applied to a film or group of films in order to identify and explain its distinctive characteristics, arguing that these derive from a principal creative individual (most commonly the director, but it may also include cinematographers, performers or institutions).

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Learners study the following:

- how auteurs determine the look and style of a film in relation to the collaborative approach to film production within Hollywood cinema
- how auteurs, through the imprint of their 'signature' features, can make a significant impact on a film's messages and values.

In relation to the idea of the auteur in Hollywood 1930 – 1990 will examine the work of filmmakers within the context of the Hollywood film institution. Learners should consider:

- To what extent it is possible to identify the distinctive contribution of creative individuals, most often directors, within a large industrial production process?
- How appropriate it is to talk about these individuals as auteurs?
- How it is more appropriate to consider filmmaking as a collaborative process.

What is 'Classical Hollywood'?

This guide will look at theories about cinema and the work of a range of directors - as well as activities to engage learners - to answer the questions:

- What do we mean by the term 'Classical Hollywood'?
- What are **stylistic traits** of Classical Hollywood?
- What was the 'Studio System' (**institutional contexts**)?
- To what extent is *Vertigo* a product of the Studio System?
- To what extent is *Vertigo* stylistically a Classical Hollywood film?

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What do we mean by the term 'Classical Hollywood'?

- period of US cinema production between the 1930s and 1960s
- dominated by five big studios who controlled film production and distribution
- 'realistic' film style, where style is subordinate to narrative (i.e. trying to tell a simple story)
- film actors marketed as 'stars' - contracted to studios
- emergence of directors as *auteurs* who became like stars themselves.

What are stylistic traits of Classical Hollywood?

Before cinema, the main visual narrative form for over a thousand years had been theatre. Early film tried to capture the power of live theatrical performance, so a film often felt like a play/musical etc. performed to camera, with few cuts or variation in camera angle/distance. This was known as the 'Tableau Style' - where the action was filmed in static long-shot, with all elements crammed into the frame, and staging to add depth and movement to the film. In the early 20th-century filmmakers like DW Griffith, influenced by Russian cinema, began to experiment with close-ups, and medium shots, and with adventurous editing techniques.

Classical Hollywood style continued to experiment with camera angle, distance and movement, but used 'continuity' editing to create an easy-to-understand, fluid narrative.

David Bordwell identified two main areas of Classical Hollywood style: devices and systems. These create an 'invisible style' that creates a sense of realism.

Classical Hollywood 'Devices':

- continuity editing - use of match-on-action, shot reverse-shot and 180 degree rule to make action 'flow' between shots
- cross-cutting between action in different locations to expand 'cinema space' beyond the two dimensional screen

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- 'objective' cinematography. Use of establishing and master shots to establish space; lots of medium shots; over-the-shoulder POV. Functional rather than expressionistic cinematography
- composition places human facial expressions and gestures at centre of frame
- synchronous sound to convey info through dialogue, realism through foley sound; dramatic, incidental music to convey characters emotions.

Classical Hollywood Systems

- linear, chronological narrative structure of plot - time moves in a uniform way (except for clearly indicated flashbacks)
- clear and simple narrative logic: beginning, middle and end, with events obeying cause and effect
- goal-oriented characters with clear (realistic) psychological motivations, actions creating narrative progress
- cinematic space is created through composition that places human facial expressions and gestures at the core of the story through: centring (characters in centre of frame), balancing (symmetry between characters on screen), depth (foreground and background), directed as if they are addressing the spectator (like in theatre).

Task: Watch a 3-5 minute clip from a Classical Hollywood film like *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), *King Kong* (Cooper and Shoedsack, 1933) or *Gilda* (Vidor, 1946).

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Classical Hollywood Style	Example
Match-on-action, shot reverse-shot, '180-degree rule' - fluid transition between shots	
Cross-cutting between location to 'unite time and space'	
'Objective' cinematography: Long 'establishing' and 'master' shots; medium shots; fewer CU	
Synchronous sound: foley effects create 'realism'	
Dramatic score heightens emotion	
Linear cause and effect; time is chronological and uniform	
Composition: characters in centre of frame; balanced; movement between fore- and background; action clear to spectator	

Discussion: "Narrative is delivered so effortlessly and efficiently to the audience that it appears to have no source. It comes magically off the screen" - John Belton. *How does the Classical Hollywood style achieve this effect?*

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'Studio System' (institutional contexts)

At the start of the 1930s, Hollywood (and US film production and distribution) was dominated by 'The Big Five' film studios.

- 20th-Century Fox
- MGM
- Paramount
- Warner Bros
- RKO Radio

Research task: *What were the biggest films for each of the studios? Who were their main stars?*

Which films by each studio won Oscars?

Studio	Hit/Award- winning Films	Stars
20th-Century Fox		
MGM		
Paramount		
Warner Brothers		
RKO		

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The Studio System was structured around a Studio Head - a producer who would make the key story decisions - and a roster of directors, cast and crew who engaged in long term contracts which meant the studio 'owned' them.

Certain actors were elevated beyond simply performing and were made into 'stars': hugely popular celebrities whose image and personal lives went beyond the roles and films they were cast in. Richard Dyer said that 'stars' are manufactured by institutions to represent certain social values and beliefs, and can use their image to market not just films but fashion, music and other products.

Research task: *Choose a contemporary film star - they should play a similar role in more than one film, be associated with a particular genre, and have a personal/showbiz life that continues 'off-screen'.*

Now choose a star of films 1930-60 (e.g. Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis).

For each example:

What similarities are there between their individual film roles?

What other information about their lives does the audience know? How do their off-screen personas link to on-screen roles?

What social values do they represent?

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Further institutional context:

Production Code (AKA The Hays Code)

The Motion Picture Production Code (nicknamed the Hays Code after its creator William H Hays) was created in 1930 and, though voluntary, most Hollywood studio films until the late 1960s adhered to it. The Code's guiding principle was that "if motion pictures present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind."

The Code had three main rules:

- no picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin
- correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented
- law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

This obviously led to a different kind of film content and theme from pre-Code cinema, with an emphasis on morality, virtually banning anything too sexual (including 'provocative dancing'!) or violent, as well as enshrining the moral authority of the police, government, priesthood etc.

Though the Code had definite ideological dimensions, its adoption for the studios was mainly an economic issue. The Catholic 'Legion of Decency' and other religious groups had a great deal of power in early 20th-century USA. If they decided a film had 'immoral' elements, they could organise protests in the form of boycotts or even picket-lines outside theatres. This could spell complete financial failure for the film in question, and a real threat to the studio's business (especially during 'vertical integration' when studios owned the theatres). A list of rules for what constituted

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a 'decent' film - one suitable for all the family - was very useful to create a formal compromise between the Legion and the studios, and a guarantee that films could be distributed without protest.

The Code was abandoned in 1966 and replaced by a BBFC-style ratings system where films could explore adult content and morally-complex themes... and paved the way for the more challenging and ambiguous movies of the 'New Hollywood' movement.

Task: *A good example of the Hays Code in action is Singin' In The Rain. Watch the famous 'Good Morning' sequence and the eponymous dance sequence. Consider that it has already been established that Don and Kathy are in an adult romantic (and we assume a sexual) relationship and are dealing with a crisis in their careers. What is odd about their behaviour?*

Task: *Look at some of the trailers and plot outlines for some of Hitchcock's most famous films - why would he have a problem with following the Hays Code?*

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Task: After viewing the film, watch the 'alternate ending' that the studio wanted to add at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJBSSkn0Ldw>. How does this end the film on a more 'moral' note? (Hitchcock refused!)

Threat of television

In 1945 there were less than 10,000 TV sets in the US. By 1950 there were 6 million and by 1960 there were nearly 60 million. The low cost of TV, and the move of many urban Americans to suburbs or rural areas, meant the new medium created the first real competition to cinema. Hollywood had to modulate its products to try to tempt audiences out of their homes and to the cinema.

- new formats to offer a bigger, more intense audio-visual experience than TV: Technicolor (most TVs were black and white until the 60s), widescreen, 3D
- films that offered sense of spectacle beyond the scope and budget of TV: big musicals (e.g. *Singin' in the Rain*), Biblical epics (e.g. *Ben Hur*), exotic locations and adventures (Bond franchise) offered escapism and 'traditional' values that would attract families
- stars under contract with studios were forbidden from acting on TV
- rising youth market - teenagers with cars etc. who didn't want to stay at home with parents. Drive-in cinemas very popular (4,000 in US in 1958).

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What is the main competition with cinema today? What do they offer that cinema can't provide? How is cinema trying to 'fight back' and attract audiences?

To what extent is *Vertigo* stylistically a Classical Hollywood film?

Many consider *Vertigo* to be a perfect blend of auteur filmmaking (incorporating Hitchcock's 'signature' style and themes) and Classical Hollywood style.

Choose a focus scene from the film. You could use the two examples from *Vertigo*'s factsheet, or the **Focus Sequence** section of this Study Guide.

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Classical Hollywood Style	Example from <i>Vertigo</i>
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'Objective' cinematography: Long 'establishing' and 'master' shots; medium shots; fewer CU	
Synchronous sound: foley effects create 'realism'	
Dramatic score heightens emotion	
Linear cause and effect; time is chronological and uniform	
Composition: characters in centre of frame; balanced; movement between fore- and background; action clear to spectator	
Shot on sound stages / constructed sets (bulky cameras and lights meant location shooting difficult)	

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What elements are not in the Classical Hollywood style?

Example	Why is this not typical of Classical Hollywood

Independent research task

Read about the production of *Vertigo*. To what extent could you say it was the product of the studio system?

Some things to consider...

- Hitchcock had to struggle to keep the plot and characters as he wished. Producers, wary of the Hays Code, wanted to cut the scene with Scottie looking at the bras amongst others, as well as forcing the shooting of an alternative ending
- Kim Novak was on loan from a rival studio, they had to pay extra to 'borrow' her from where she was contracted
- much of the film's exterior scenes are actually shot on backlots and sound stages e.g. when 'Madeline' falls into the Bay rather than on location, with wonderful backdrops being projected onto back-curtains. This lends the film a strange artificiality.