

21L.011, The Film Experience  
Prof. David Thorburn  
Lecture Notes

## **Lecture 1 - Introduction**

### I. What is Film?

- Chemistry
- Novelty
- Manufactured object
- Social formation

### II. Think Away iPods

- The novelty of movement
- Early films and early audiences

### III. The Fred Ott Principle

### IV. Three Phases of Media Evolution

- Imitation
- Technical Advance
- Maturity

### V. "And there was Charlie" - Film as a cultural form

Reference: James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (1957)

## **Lecture 2 - Keaton**

### I. The Fred Ott Principle, continued

- The myth of technological determinism
- A paradox: capitalism and the movies

### II. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)

### III. *The Lonedale Operator* (1911)

Reference: Tom Gunning, "Systematizing the Electronic Message: Narrative Form, Gender and Modernity in *The Lonedale Operator*." In *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp. Univ of California Press, 1994, pp. 15-50.

### IV. Buster Keaton

- Acrobat / actor
- Technician / director
- Metaphysician / artist

### V. The multiplicity principle: entertainment vs. art

### VI. *The General* (1927)

- "A culminating text"
- Structure
- The Keaton hero: steadfast, muddling

*Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term. Four lecture sessions covered introductions, the Fred Ott Principle and Buster Keaton. These topics were covered in two lecture sessions for Fall 2007 term.*

- You should be open to new forms of aesthetic experience in this class
  - You should gain a new kind of aesthetic discrimination and aesthetic pleasure
  - You should develop a much enhanced vocabulary and better standards for all humanistic disciplines
- This class should be hard work, but not overwhelming
- Each week of this course has required reading and required film(s) (with a couple exceptions)
- The afternoon lectures will be broader in nature, while evening lectures are more concrete introductions to the specific film for that night.
- Students should watch the films together
  - Until very recently, films were a totally communal experience, like theater
  - You couldn't stop and start, freeze-frame, or watch at home
  - These changes have an enormous social effect on how we watch films
  - However, films are also available to watch individually in the course, for other occasions such as when you write your papers.
- Writing requirements (see syllabus)
  - Brief response paper
    - This won't get a letter grade, just a check, check plus, or check minus.
    - This doesn't have to be a complete essay
  - Three complete papers, 5-7 pages each
    - Suggested topics will be provided – you should choose among them
    - You are strongly encouraged to revise
      - All great writers revise *obsessively*
      - Revision is essential to good writing
      - You must learn to cut things out
        - Concision is a mark of good writing and well-developed critical thinking
- Exams
  - One quiz
    - Short answer identifications
  - One 1-hour test
    - Short answer identifications
    - One essay question

- One 3-hour final exam
  - Short answer identifications
  - Two different types of essay questions
- Grading:
  - *Roughly* 30% of the class will get As, 40% of the class will get Bs, and most of the rest will get Cs
- *Film is a form of Chemistry*
  - Why is that the case?
    - The actual physical process is a chemical reaction (we're not talking about digital film)
    - You can alter that chemical process by changing how you develop it
  - This is important because it reminds us that film is a natural process
  - This may be one of the greatest contributions that chemistry has given the world
    - Movies have had a profound impact on a huge number of lives.
- *Film was a novelty in its early days*
  - Penny arcades
- *Film is a manufactured object*
  - Movies could be one of the most fundamental early products to be mass-produced
  - Specialization of labor was at the heart of what allowed films to become such a mass item
  - Other mass-produced items were associated with early films
    - There were Charlie Chaplin dolls, for example
  - Movies were and still remain an essential form of mass-produced wealth
  - You could do an entire history of film looking at it from this perspective, without ever examining the content
  - Films have been economically essential to American history, culture, and development, like the automobile
- *Film is a social form*
  - Over time, from this, film developed into an essential medium of art
    - Movies illuminate the world the way art does
  - These two aspects – social and artistic – are separate. Not in conflict, but separate.
  - The less self-consciously artistic movies are often the most socially revealing
    - We don't need to be embarrassed about watching less artistic movies
    - In fact, we *should* look at them

- For example, take Griffith – an artistically brilliant director, but highly racist, with strong social prejudices
  - By analyzing these prejudices, we can examine the contemporary American social pathologies
  - These are exercises in understanding the world that we value intrinsically
  
- The Fred Ott Principle
  - Clip: *Fred Ott's Sneeze*
    - a very early film – the first copyrighted film in the US
  - The Fred Ott Principle is the process that illustrates how film goes from novelty to social form
    - In under 30 years, we go from Fred Ott sneezing to Charlie Chaplin
    - It's that evolution which is essential
  - People used to watch shorts at nickelodeons
  - This was a very popular form of entertainment
  - Clip: *The Kiss*
    - Many people were scandalized by this at the time
    - This was probably the first kiss ever shown in the movies
  - People loved shorts like these partly because motion itself was amazing – it was totally new to see it reproduced in this way
    - It felt more real to them than it does to us
    - There were stories of people running and screaming in fear when a train in a film appeared to drive straight at them, or when a cowboy turned to the camera and shot directly at it
    - To understand this you have to imagine a world where visual experience was far simpler than it is today, without modern technology.
  
- The Fred Ott Principle - summarized
  - The sociological, technological, artistic, and economic changes that allow the development from the Fred Ott film to artistic, advanced films
  - The films we look at in the beginning of this course might not make a great claim on your attention in themselves.
  - Rather, it's the process of evolution that matters in this early film era
  - The essential conventions of cinema were alien at the birth of film
  - People were so excited by the novelty of motion to be riveted regardless of content
  
- A unique language special to the film medium developed over time
  - The audience and the film-makers were editing each other as they went
  - A similar process of change would later occur with the emergence of television: movies changed their role in society and were fundamentally transformed by TV

- Editing:
  - Modern movie viewers multitask visually on a level that is extraordinarily complex. Early audiences couldn't do that.
  - In modern film we can see the camera move while the subject moves, music that doesn't match the events on screen, very fast editing, etc.
- There was always some multitasking though.
  - Silent films were never really silent – there was live music played along with them.
- Ever-increasing complexity
- The language that developed was fundamentally new and specific to the medium
- Paradox: capitalism and technology, with all of their associated greed, are the enabling conditions and seed for what becomes the defining art form of the twentieth century
  - Film is a profound artistic expression, but it originates in an industry that exists to make money
- *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)
  - This isn't quite the first narrative film, but we can consider it close enough.
  - This is a defining early narrative movie
  - It establishes the Western genre
  - This showcases an immense increase in complexity since *Fred Ott's Sneeze* and similar early films
  - You have to think away your experience with modern technology to understand this
- The complete process of development from penny arcades to nickelodeons to movie theatres took only fifteen years
  - By 1910 movie theatres were being built
  - By 1920 film was a major American industry
- New communication is always understood through the metaphors of the old technologies
  - The very first films were made like theatrical pageants
    - The camera was always still, with the action happening in front, as though on stage
    - Film-makers were naturally comparing movies to the theater
    - Later, people learned to experiment more, moving the camera, zooming in and out, etc.
  - First people had to understand film through the metaphor and ancient tradition of theater
  - Theatrical acting is broader, more stylized, because viewers were so far away
    - Over time, a quieter mode of acting developed in film

- D. W. Griffith: *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912): this film represents the more film-appropriate mode of acting that developed.
- The Fred Ott Principle (continued)
  - The immensely complex process from minor, trivial novelty to an embedded social form, the central American medium of entertainment, a more universal form of narrative than prose fiction in twentieth-century America
  - It's about the development of an institution and an art form, not just one film, like Fred Ott sneezing
  - Film scholarship is a relatively recent phenomenon
    - Much of new scholarship today is devoted to the silent era, and particularly to early silent film
      - Discoveries are being made every day
      - One of these recent discoveries: early audiences were at least as interested in the apparatus as in the content
        - Traveling film shows
        - Early audiences were situated at an angle that allowed them to see the projector as well as the image on screen
        - Early films showed motion – waves crashing, an elephant getting electrocuted – as much or more than they showed narrative.
      - Remember, early audiences had to learn the rules and language of film, which hadn't been created yet – lighting, acting, camera placement...
  - The Fred Ott Principle had three main phases:
    1. Imitation
      - Early films drew enormously on past art forms: theater, novel, newspaper, visual art...
      - Over time, distinctly cinematic methods and effects began to appear
      - There was patent warfare – distribution methods, how films would be created, how audiences would be exploited, what the length of films would be, etc. – all these issues were still unclear
      - These things didn't have to develop as they eventually did – film could have developed in many different ways.
      - Whatever approaches made the most money generally prevailed
      - Mass production, specialization of labor, and industrialization all developed around the film industry
    2. Technical Advance
      - At this stage, basic industrial stability had already been reached

- Now film makers had a chance to explore the possibilities of the film medium – parallel action, faster editing, etc.
- Griffith began to discover how film could manipulate the emotions of audiences
- Feature-length films became the standard during this era (around 1916, 1917)

### 3. Maturity

- During this stage the content of film became married to the medium
- Film became a mature art form
- Note: we might think of silent film as a separate entity from sound film
  - It's possibly part of capitalism that the maturity of silent film was truncated by the development of sound. The novelty of sound brought about a regression – early sound film was not as good as late silent film.
- Similarly, sound film was later destabilized by the advent of television
  - Film survived World War II, and came out of it just fine, even revitalized
  - The vast majority of Americans were going to the movies every week in 1948 – it was a fundamental part of their lives and routines. Consider what it means, to have such a dominant narrative form
  - When television came along, it supplanted film
  - By the 1970s, most Americans went to the movies only one or two times a year
  - This limited the centrality and influence of movies, but it also liberated them in a sense, allowing them to be more political, controversial, and artistic
- This telling of the story of film makes film history sound like a triumph, but that would be oversimplifying matters.
  - The notion that technology causes enormous, automatic changes in society is oversimplified.
    - Rather, we should consider the multiplicity principle
    - In every case we're looking at, technology might not drive society, but rather the reverse – society drives technology
      - Consider the example of how early automobiles tended to look like carriages, as they imitated the older form.
    - When Thomas Edison first began to think about film, he imagined a much more agrarian art form, where everyone made their own films

- There's nothing inherent to the technology to require the system and outcome that developed, rather, it's cultural, societal, and historical in nature
    - We take the technology in whatever form the society dictates, with all its needs and prejudice.
  - The inherited prejudices, diseases, and lies of a society are carried by the technology
    - Look at the attitude towards violence, race, and morality in these films.
  - You don't have to see all that many very early films to understand the founding principles of development
- The Multiplicity Principle
  - Think about the complex difference between the very early and then the more complex artistic films from later on
  - An instance of art carries multiple meanings at once.
  - All art is entertainment but not all entertainment is art.
    - Art is more intelligent
    - Take soap opera – it over-explicates at the cost of sacrificing character – it's a good measure of a bad movie if a character speaks in ways that are implausible
    - On the other hand, take Keaton. His jokes aren't just one-dimensional – they have philosophical ramifications.
- Buster Keaton
  - Born in the 1890s
  - His family were Vaudeville performers
  - He was in their act from age 3 on
    - As a child he used to do tricks where his father would throw him into the audience, etc.
  - He stayed in that act until he was 21, when the act fell apart due to his father's alcoholism
  - He was offered another job in Vaudeville, and then became involved in film performance with Arbuckle
  - Very quickly, he started directing his own films
  - He was still only doing shorts at this point, because comedies in that era were always done in that format. He wanted to do feature-length films though, and did eventually move into doing those.
  - Then his studio sold to MGM, and he was much more limited in what he was allowed to do there.
  - He fell increasingly into alcoholism, and then MGM fired him in 1935.
  - In 1952 he worked together with Charlie Chaplin to do *Limelight*
  - Note about Keaton: “The great stone face”
- Early cinema

- A cinema of attractions – can include gag films (*The Whole Dam Family*), trick films, narrative films
  - These early films were grouped together with live performances, music, and other acts
  - Quick, funny, and sensational
  - The apparatus itself was interesting
  - Triple exposure – Keaton was able to play himself multiple times in the same short, all on screen at once – Keaton was very meticulous about how he set up his tricks
  - These films didn't develop complex characters, but rather trajectories, gags, tricks, and climaxes
  - Clip: from *Sherlock Jr.*
    - A lot of long shots, which show that Keaton is actually doing this performance himself
    - The long shots also give you a good sense of the set up and trajectory
    - Note Keaton's stone face
    - Note Keaton's engineering genius – he did all his own stunts, and set up all the props and sets
- A lot of this sort of film style was left behind when sound film came along
  - *The General* as a culmination
    - Keaton is more philosophically complex and self-conscious as a film maker (compared to Chaplin)
      - In the second half of *The General*, he lets you revisit the first half in a complex and fascinating way
      - A philosophic idea of the world is enacted by the jokes in *The General*
      - This idea is based on the notion of contingency
  - The Keaton Universe: Contingency
    - Contingency carries the idea of accident and control simultaneously
    - Antiheroic and comic vision of human experience
    - Multiplicity principle: every joke has multiple significances.
    - This should help you see the difference between art and entertainment
  - Modern day: Keaton can be compared to Jackie Chan
    - Jackie Chan also comes from a theatrical background
    - There's a similar emphasis on the performer as someone who can perform stunts, with acrobatic ability, able to endure hardship.
    - Clip: Chan references/revises exactly the same falling set shot that Keaton used
      - Still an emphasis on long shots, but there are many more shots
      - There is a physical continuity of him actually doing all these things
      - Chan shoots in sequence, like Keaton did

- *Shanghai Knights*
- Buster Keaton (1895-1966)
  - Shorts: *One Week* (1920), *The Play House* (1921), *The Boat* (1921), *Cops* (1922)
  - Features: *The Three Ages* (1923), *Our Hospitality* (1923), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), *The Navigator* (1924), *The General* (1927), *College* (1927), *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), *The Cameraman* (1928), *Spite Marriage* (1929), *Limelight* (1952), *Buster Keaton Story* (1957), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966).

### Lecture 3 - Chaplin 1

- I. Movies before Chaplin
- II. Enter Chaplin
- III. Chaplin's career
  - The multiplicity principle, continued
- IV. The Tramp as myth
- V. Chaplin's world - elemental themes

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- Quick review: Keaton's "contingent universe"
  - By this phrase I mean that certain artists can embody live experience in their work, even if they couldn't articulate it themselves in words
    - Art can be serious even if the content doesn't seem that way
    - Keaton has a profound understanding of the world worthy of being called philosophical
    - The phrase "contingent universe" captures the complexity of Keaton's world
    - For example, think of the cannon sequence from *The General*: brilliant long sequence, with each joke building on the previous ones, eventually becoming a statement about our existence in the cosmos.
      - The cannon actually working the way it does is repeatedly *contingent* on Buster's actions in a hundred ways... and yet also not.
      - *Contingency* also means accidental!
      - His behavior is necessary, but it also doesn't fully explain the results
    - The universe has to do with your choices, but it's also accidental – it is rational and random simultaneously
    - You get what you want, when you get it, accidentally
    - This is a particularly brilliant vision to apply to a mock heroic film about the Civil War
      - *The General* demystifies the sentimentality that has been attached to the Civil War.
  - The Continuity Principle
    - Old media determines the forms that new media will take
- Chaplin's career
  - Began as a child
  - By the time he was a teenager, he was already something of a star

- Like Keaton, he did Vaudeville acts
  - His shows were immensely successful in Europe
  - He was known as one of the great pantomimers of his day
  - He pulled in a huge salary for his time: \$150 a week, which was a huge amount of money at the time, while he was working for Keystone
  - When he moved to Essanay it went up to \$1250 per week
  - From there he moved to the Mutual Film Corporation, where he made most of his great films
  - The Tramp character had been in so many different movies, and the audience would have seen most of them – this is a kind of literacy, and we cannot underestimate the importance of that history that the audience was a part of.
  - Each year during this period Chaplin made fewer and fewer films, but they got better and better
  - He started making \$670,000 a year
  - When he moved to First National, he made \$1,000,000
  - Then he moved yet again, joining D. W. Griffith in 1919 to co-found United Artists
  - By the 1920s he was the most recognizable, famous figure in the world
  - His sound films, from later on, aren't as great artistically
- The Tramp as a myth
    - The tramp becomes a kind of mythological figure
    - He taps into deep psychological issues
    - In a way, the tramp is a communal creation, like a myth, even though Chaplin created him, because the historical culture had a part in it – there were so many unemployed hoboos and bums at the time, and so the Tramp was a kind of social reality
    - Think about the costume – coat and shirt too small, pants and shoes too big – he is an emblem for mismatch
    - His body is dexterous and graceful
    - Chaplin realizes the power of the close-up to allow him to show emotions in his face
    - Even the chase scenes help to create character.

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Week 3: Evening Lecture

## Lecture 4 - Chaplin 2

### I. Keaton vs. Chaplin

### II. Three passages

- *Cops* (1922)
- *The Gold Rush* (1925)
- *City Lights* (1931)

### III. *Modern Times* (1936)

- Context
- A culminating film
- The gamin
- Sound
- Structure
- Chaplin's complexity

**Disclaimer:** The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term.

Film viewing tonight:

Chaplin, Charlie. *Easy Street*. 1917.

Chaplin, Charlie. *The Immigrant*. 1917.

Chaplin, Charlie. *Modern Times*. 1936.

- Keaton vs. Chaplin
  - Even though *The General* comes before *Modern Times*, Chaplin entered film before Keaton – he is the earlier figure
  - Note: Chaplin greatly echoes earlier works, with extensive allusions
  - Heroes:
    - The typical Keaton figure wants to just survive and get through a task
      - His actions might lead to cause and effect, but accidentally so
    - Chaplin's heroes are grander, more chivalric, with larger ideals
  - A similar contrast can be drawn between their women:
    - Keaton's women are not silly damsels that need rescuing – he has a satiric eye for them
    - Chaplin is more sentimental
  - Shot and set contrasts:
    - Keaton
      - He uses the outdoors, with more authentic sets
      - Less interested in character than Chaplin is
      - He likes long shots

- Keaton calls attention to the presence of the camera, and the way that it alters things, thus interrupting reality
      - He even calls attention to the flat frame of the screen, and how it interferes with perspective
        - (Think of the beginning of *Cops*, where he tricks you into thinking that the character is in jail – a highly cinematic joke)
    - Chaplin
      - He is much more social and psychological in his interests
  - Physical objects and materials
    - In *The General*, we see every physical aspect and corner of the train, all over. The character's relation to that huge physical object is very intimate.
      - It is a key aspect of Keaton that he pays so much attention to these huge objects
    - In Chaplin, the objects are much smaller and more manageable – but his relation to them is enormously imaginative and transformative
      - Example: showing a rotten old shoe into a Thanksgiving dinner
      - Also note what he does with his cane and his hat
      - With these objects Chaplin's films emphasize psychology.
- The Tramp as myth
  - Anthropologists would say that myth is communally created, and while the Tramp does have an inventory – Chaplin – he also has a sort of communal evolution
  - Clip: an early Keystone comedy
    - The Keystone company (which Chaplin worked for first) created the first comedy films
    - These sorts of films built into a sort of comic frenzy – chaos, cheap jokes; they didn't really have a coherent story
    - Unlike these films, Chaplin was the first to introduce character and personality to comedy films
    - Chaplin's films were slower, but also funnier
    - Keaton's jokes, on the other hand, have the aura of randomness and chaos, but they are actually highly complex, planned-out jokes
      - The universe doesn't notice or care about us – we are insignificant specks
      - Similarly, there are the opposite jokes, when a character narrowly avoids catastrophe and doesn't notice
  - In entertainment, single events or aspects of a work have single purposes (exposition, humor, etc.). In art, they have many purposes all at once. This is the multiplicity principle.
    - Chaplin's jokes not only are funny, not only develop character, but also are complex social and political jabs.

- The Tramp was widely recognized in American and British culture almost immediately and almost instantly
- He sparked a huge number of imitators
- The various highly imaginative ways he uses his cane tell us something about his relation to objects
- He had such a universally recognized, insuppressible, versatile figure, and this is why he recalls elements of myth
- The Tramp was originally a much more anarchic, controversial figure, but Chaplin quieted the character down somewhat as he became more popular
  - Something very similar actually happened to Mickey Mouse
- Chaplin actually lived homeless for much of his childhood, when his mother was institutionalized, motivating political jabs
- Chaplin is both political and sentimental
- When IBM first marketed PCs broadly, they used a figure of Chaplin as the Tramp from *Modern Times* in their commercials
- The Tramp is so well known and incorporated into society, that Chaplin doesn't own him anymore, society does.
- He motivates an aura of mythic significance
- His main themes in all his movies are elemental – they're very basic to human existence – and they tend to be fundamentally unfunny at their core: violence, hunger, danger, humiliation, powerlessness
  - He's able to convey highly complex elemental emotions in tiny gestures and facial expressions
  - It's as if he's telling the same jokes over and over again, but you don't get tired of it – you're probably even surprised
- *Modern Times*
  - *Modern Times* is not only one of the best films of the silent era, but it's one of the 10 or 15 best films ever made.
  - Chaplin was the first to discover that you can mix drama and comedy
  - After he created the Tramp in 1915, there are always unfunny, serious, dramatic scenes in Chaplin's films
  - One of the main ways he did this is by mastering the face – he really mastered the close-up in a way nobody had done before
  - He created comedic melodramas (where melodrama is used as a neutral, nonnegative term)
  - Note: The female character in *Modern Times* is the first in his films ever to stand up to him, as an equal, as multidimensional, as having her own independent emotional life.
  - Clip: from *City Lights*
  - *Modern Times* is a culminating film, in much the same way as *The General*
    - He made this film 8-10 years after sound had already been introduced
    - It's not technically silent, because it has a soundtrack, but characters only speak when they're mediated by machines

- The role of sound is very interesting
- *Modern Times* was a nostalgic culmination of the silent era
- It was advertised as the Tramp's final farewell
- He has a whole series of jobs, which systematically invoke his older films – virtually every scene has a counterpart from earlier in his career, which the audience would have recognized
- Context: the 1930s
  - *Modern Times* is about the depression, strikes, labor and capital, class inequalities. It's not a Marxist film, but it is an angry and radical one.
    - Chaplin is just as critical of labor as he is of industry
- The soundtrack is rich and interesting
  - Drawn from tunes of the 1920s and earlier
  - Certain themes are invoked for particular characters
    - The tune connected to the Tramp would have been recognized by the audience, and it has lyrics, which are about a hobo/tramp
  - Speech is mediated through mechanization
  - He uses the music to express the psychological state of the characters – example: listen to the music during the scene where the Tramp skates on the edge of a precipice
- Character: altered states
  - Whenever the Tramp acts with great heroism, it's when he's in an altered state
  - It might be part of his heroic nature, but it's also outside himself
- Structure: plot as meaning equals organic form. Rhyming scenes: repetition.
  - The film is truly episodic, and the scenes of part II echo and reflect upon the scenes of part I. The center pivot point of the movie is the department store scene.
  - This structure evolves because the film is telling the story of Charlie's/the Tramp's life. The structure repeats because the Tramp never really gets anywhere – his life is stuck on a treadmill.
  - The form is organic because it's natural to and enacts the themes of what the work means. This is the principle of organic form.

## Lecture 5 - Film as a global and cultural form

### I. Film as a cultural form

- Global vs. national cinema
- American vs. European cinema
- High culture vs. Hollywood

### II. Montage vs. mise en scène

### III. Eisenstein and *Potemkin* (1925)

- Film as instruction
- Film as moral fable

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's notes.*

- Films are not benign objects – they can carry the viruses of society
  - The word “entertainment” is much more complicated than it might seem. It has a deeper and more powerful experience.
  - What does it mean to “entertain” an idea? Entertainment puts us in an environment when we can entertain new ideas.
  - The space of entertainment is in many ways a freer and more psychological space than the ordinary space that we live in every day.
  - This idea is something that we’ll return to repeatedly in the course. When we entertain an artistic space we enter a space of greater possibility. We watch our fantasies, our cultural fears, and an investigation of our own value systems.
  - I hope this course makes you more alert to those unexamined assumptions.
  - Film speaks to a certain greater consensus of culture: they reveal our own societal and psychic assumptions, values, and pathologies.
- We’re going to be finishing the silent era soon, but I hope you don’t forget its importance.
- This course largely focuses on American film. However, we shouldn’t forget that there are other nations that also have deeply robust film histories.
  - One could trace a very similar history, for example, in France, Germany, and Italy to the history that we’ve examined in the U.S.
  - Figures like Chaplin’s Tramp, however, had a universal effect, and film all over the world reacted to his work.
  - The connections across nations and cultures were even larger in the silent era, when language wasn’t a barrier within the films.
  - At the same time, the films created by different cultures are particular expressions of the distinctiveness of those particular cultures.
  - There is a broad divergence between American and European cinema.

- It is important that class holds less importance in American culture – it's a less hierarchic culture.
- There's also a sense of American culture being more futuristic, less interested in the past.
  - The consequence here is that the ancestral effect of past forms and technologies on the development of film was more extensive in Europe than in the U.S.
- Very soon the center of American film became Hollywood – at the opposite geographical extreme from the previous centers of American culture: New York (potentially Washington and Boston as well).
  - Yet culture in general was less centered in any one place in the U.S. than they were in Europe. Culture and art always developed all over the place in the U.S., and they were much less centered in any one place
  - The centers of film creation in Europe were located more often in cities that were already centers of cultural development.
  - The fact that Hollywood was cut off from previous cultural centers provided it with a kind of freedom early on, so that it developed particularly cinematic effects more quickly.
  - Early European film ambitions were artistically grander than American ones. There was a sense much earlier on that it could be a great form of art, and much less interested in it as a money-maker.
  - Americans were fascinated by film's capitalist potential from the beginning. It was about entertainment, not Art with a capital A.
  - The artistic expectations of film in German and European film was a great burden in some ways. It kept their film more theatrical and less cinematic for sometime.
  - Hollywood developed largely free from the high culture establishment, which was technically advantageous in some ways.
- Some important terms: Montage vs. Mise en Scene
  - Montage: comes from Monter – to assemble, edit
    - Thus the word conveys a film's system or rhythm of editing.
    - For example, how quickly it's edited, and the consequent emotional effect.
  - Mise en Scene: "put or placed in a frame"
    - Thus it conveys what's happening in the frame: foreground, background, motion, framing.
    - It's the equivalent of what the stage set is like, what the composition looks like
  - Every film has both of these elements.

- However, some directors focus more on one of them than the others. A film might get its most fundamental, signature effects from one or the other. It allows for two different sorts of styles of film creation.
  - Mise en Scene style is associated with realism, and looks more like what an observer might actually see. It's often what you would see in more political or ethically-centered films.
  - Montage style is more emotionally fascistic, like Hitchcock – it plays with your emotions more directly. The camera sits at more unusual, disorienting angles, moving faster. This brings you inside the moment faster, giving less ability to sit back and think about what you're seeing. This style is associated with horror films in general.
    - Jean Renoir is an example of this sort of director
- Most great directors today are masters of both styles, and all directors in all periods used at least some of both.
- These terms are helpful methods of distinguishing between different methods, outlooks, and philosophies of film.
- Eisenstein: A great director
  - Arguably the greatest Russian director
  - The particular nature of Russian film in this era is particularly distinctive.
    - This difference has a great deal to do with the unique economic and political situation of Russia in this period.
    - Art was very culturally connected to the creation of a great socialist utopia in this time and place. There was much less of a sense of art as individual expression.
    - Film (and art in general) was a form of exalted propaganda, although they wouldn't have called it that.
    - This is not to say that the motives were entirely contemptible. They were emerging from a highly oppressive czar-run society.
  - *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)
    - Some background: there was a historical story of a mutiny on a Russian battleship. The officers had allegedly been being inappropriately cruel to the poor proletariat sailors. The sailors mutinied and brought the ship into the port at the city of Odessa. The people of the city welcomed them, but then the czarist forces came in and massacred them.
  - Eisenstein had a theory of “typage” – that you could recognize a person's type, personality, etc by looking at his/her outward appearance.
    - This has racist overtones.
    - However, he's setting up a kind of montage of the whole population of the city.
    - In some ways this might be a little heavy-handed. However, we shouldn't underestimate the horrors of the czarist regime.
  - In the most terrible moments, he sometimes slowed things down, enhancing the great horror of them.

- You can see the power of his method of montage.
- Clip played: from the czarist forces attack in *Battleship Potemkin*
  - Note the many images that are reflected and alluded to in modern movies: The falling baby carriage, the shot through the man's eyeglasses.
  - This form was enormously influential. Above all else, it demonstrated the enormous emotional power of editing.
  - This Russian film example reverberated globally on almost the level that Chaplin's work was.
  - Eisenstein also studied Griffith's work
  - This clip might seem easy to make fun of today, but we mustn't underestimate its effect at the time.
  - You certainly don't have to live in a democratic society to investigate the potentials of art.

## Lecture 6 - German film

### I. German film and Expressionism

- Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (1969)
- The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Weine, 1919)
- *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926)

### II. F.W. Murnau (1889-1931)

- Nosferatu (1922)
- Sunrise (1927)
- *Tabu* (with Robert Flaherty, 1931)

### III. *The Last Laugh* (1924)

- The unchained camera
- Themes
- Character: work and personal identity
- The ending: true or false

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

Film viewing tonight:

Murnau, F. W. *The Last Laugh*. 1924.

- Remember, material from the lectures and material from the readings will both be tested on the exams
  - I intend my exams to be intellectually and emotionally enhancing: if you've gone to lecture and done the reading they should be easy. You should expect to be able to do wonderfully well on the exams if you're doing the work. They should be empowering.
  - If you keep up with the course and really apply yourself, you shouldn't be in a situation where you have to pull all-nighters.
  - There will be material from early in this lecture that will definitely show up on the text.
- Review from this afternoon: We were examining the power of editing and mixed shots to create emotion and to control and rivet the audience's attention in Eisenstein's work.
  - This is an emblem for how film relates to revolution, politics, culture
  - Compare this to the potential for social irresponsibility that exists in some American comedies of the period.
  - Don't let the intensity of the subject matter detract from your ability to notice the technical editing genius.
- Expressionism

- At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term referred specifically to artists in Europe, particularly Germany, in certain years: around 1903-1933.
- It deals with certain fears in our life. Vampires, etc.
- S. Kracaver, *From Caligari to Hitler* – this book makes the disturbing but powerful argument that expressionism in this period laid the groundwork for the rise of Hitler.
  - The freedom from restraint, etc that was encouraged during this period
- Expressionism aimed for the external representation of our inner life
- It was very psychological, and dealt with elemental emotions
- Some of the sources for the movement lay in the previous German Romantic movement of the previous century.
- It also had to do with the situation of the Weimar republic in Germany. The system was very unstable, with enormous wealth gaps and great uncertainty. There was also a kind of apocalyptic sense of newness.
  - You can see a lot of these qualities in the visual appearances of film in this time.
    - Disorienting lighting and set design, both meant to evoke some idea of morbid states, inner fears and anxieties, distortion.
- Expressionism aimed at irrational fears and anxieties that were thought to lie in every human breast, and that could be released by certain representations
- Clip shown: from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1919)
  - Keep in mind how late this is: it's after nearly all of Chaplin's important shorts had been made.
  - Note the treatment of women, the sort of voyeurism involved. On some levels this film is about illicit sex. And in many ways this subtext is very close to the surface – the filmmakers were aware of it.
  - Probably the most extended scene this early in the movies of a woman lying vulnerable and partly unclothed.
  - Note the silhouette effect that's used. It's not very cinematic. Rather, it's still highly theatrical. The camera is highly arthritic. The motion is lacking. Its visual effects are limited. The chiaroscuro effects are remnants of the heritage of theatre and visual art rather than that of cinema.
  - I'm not suggesting that it's trivial, because it's content is a disturbing investigation of sexuality, murder, irrationality, vulnerability.
  - However, this ambitiousness is literary rather than cinematic. It has to do with the expressionist influence of artists and poets rather than filmmakers.
  - And while this film makes a great contribution to that literary and artistic development, as a film in the history of cinema, it's less relevant.

- There was an overall greater tendency of European film to behave this way, and the greater respect that European film had for Art with a capital A was disabling in many ways.
- Fritz Lang: *Metropolis* (1919)
  - Probably the first science fiction film
  - Clip shown: the opening
    - Note how much the opening of Chaplin's *Modern Times* was influenced by this.
  - German films of this time were largely financed by the government, so their creation was very centralized.
  - The visual effects still aren't necessarily as sophisticated as other films of this time.
  - The movement in this clip might seem very slow, but remember that audiences of this time weren't trained to process visual effects nearly as efficiently as we can.
  - Another clip shown: a view of the factory in *Metropolis* and the development of Moloch.
    - Note that this is where Chaplin got the highly stylized factory set in *Modern Times*.
    - Within limits, you can still see how much less cinematic and fluid the editing and shots are than American films of this period
  - Of course, there were still many European films that were much more fluid than this. However, this is an illustration of the greater power that theatre and art still had over film in Germany during this period.
  - On the other hand, American audiences and filmmakers just didn't care nearly as much about the theatrical and artistic heritage regarding theatre, which had both negative and positive effects
- The Director who freed German film from this limiting heritage was the one who directed tonight's film: F. W. Murnau.
  - Consider the heritage of the vampire story. It seems silly and certainly implausible in many ways. But it's something that has fascinated audiences for many, many years.
  - *Nosferatu* continues to be very alive in the world of film studies.
    - There was recently a remake with John Malcovitch
  - In any case, the important element for us regarding this film is its form, shots, editing, the use of the real outdoors instead of just indoor sets.
  - Note that there is a sort of conflict between form and content
  - Clip shown: from *Nosferatu*
    - Note the use of real horses, real outdoors
    - The use of a still camera in order to show the motion of the characters, the setting.
    - Note the unusual placements of the camera, from above or below, showing visually and intellectually exciting elements of the setting.



## Lecture 7 - Hollywood in the Thirties

- I. An industry emerges
  - The Studio Era
  - "The golden age of Hollywood"
  - Stars and genres
- II. Strains of comedy
  - Anarchic
  - Worldly
- III. Screwball comedy

*Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- An Industry Emerges: Now we are leaving the silent era, with synchronous sound.
  - This is the great cut-off – the moment of seismic change.
  - Things had to be radically reorganized
  - I don't think, however, that this is such a large change as the change that occurs when television enters the scene.
  - But it definitely felt like a revolution to Hollywood at the time.
  - The systems created in the silent era were fortified and expanded during the era of sound.
    - The infrastructure, control,
  - Large amounts of money were spent by the movie industry as they geared up for sound.
  - Remember, the return to silent film with Modern times had a profound nostalgic effect.
  - The complexity generated by the movies had already been internalized by the audiences of the time.
- "The Studio Era"
  - Remember, people watched the movies all the time, habitually
    - For example, in 1938, 67% of the American population went to the movies each week
    - In 1968, it's only 10% each week
    - This represents a profound transformation in how audiences interacted with films
  - Specific genres had developed, and audiences expected particular things from those genres.
  - It was a gigantic industry, employing tens of thousands of individuals
  - There were many studios, and they were well known, with their own reputations for certain kinds of movies and certain specialties. (There were

- five major studios, with 75% of the revenue between them (MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, and RKO)
- It appealed across age, gender, race, class divisions... the movies were the national entertainment system.
  - The stars became even more important, with even bigger, more famous names, during this era.
    - The philosophy of acting that developed was one where stars played variations on a theme, so that their own personality came through, with recognizable characters.
  - Strains of Comedy in the 1930s
    - Westerns were in some sense trivialized in the 1930s, because they started using sound and music in strange, gimmicky ways
    - In other genres, however, the new premium on top was very beneficial
    - Signature strains:
      - Anarchic
        - The Marx brothers fall into this category
        - The plot and character isn't so important
        - There is a lot of destructiveness, subversive playfulness
        - A reduced, less well-developed version of this sort of comedy survived in the Three Stooges.
        - W.C. Fields was a writer of this sort of comedy. He often played a drunk in his roles, unfriendly to children and dogs.
      - European comedy
        - This is artistically more interesting
        - There was a European attitude towards sexual discretion
        - Many of the Hollywood directors who created this sort of film were themselves transplanted Europeans, often Germans
      - Screwball comedy
        - This is the form that was dominant.
  - Screwball comedy
    - This was a distinctive American creation
    - It derives from Broadway farces of the 1920s, and from the slapstick comedies of the
    - Some characteristic features: Profound irreverent humor, very fast-paced dialogue, slapstick comedy intermixed with a new emphasis on well-developed character
    - It was very often about the differences in the social classes, and it was often very mocking and satiric of the high-born characters (remember, it developed during the depression)
    - The films reflect the social disorientation that was characteristic of the depression

- This genre created extremely powerful women, and they were the first films to create dominant female characters, who were more important than their corresponding male characters in the same films.
- Clip: from “Bringing Up Baby,” 1938
- These movies had a lot to do with the carnal, physical relations between men and women.
- Clip: from “Ball of Fire,” 1942

**Lecture 8 - Capra and *It Happened One Night***

I. Screwball heroine - Barbara Stanwyck in two clips:

- Ball of Fire (1941)
- The Lady Eve (1941)

II. The cultural work of movies

- Consensus narrative

III. Frank Capra

- Sentimental populist
- Key films

IV. *It Happened One Night*

- Context: the Depression
- The American Male
- Romance across social class
- "A marriage of true minds"

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

Film viewing tonight:

Capra, Frank. *It Happened One Night*. 1934.

- The Cultural Work of Movies
  - Class differences if very important in Screwball comedy
  - The same ensemble of characters appear again and again in this genre – this means that the audience picks up on variations even more than they otherwise would
    - This entails a different kind of literacy from what we would ordinarily assume
    - Every time the audience sees something they don't expect, meaning is created
    - This has to do with why such a popular entertainment medium can create art
  - These movies were often very willing to avoid the spirit (if not the letter) of the law in their willingness to show sexuality
    - Example: Barbara Stanwyck in *Ball of Fire*
  - Clip: from *The Lady Eve*
  - Movies in this era were a "consensus narrative," meaning that the whole culture shared in seeing them
    - As a result, the whole culture's interests, preoccupations, and problems get dramatized in movies
    - The establish a kind of consensus idea of the society

- Of course, some people are always excluded or marginalized: for example, although 60s television you would never see a black face on screen, even though it was a consensus narrative.
  - On either side, traditional voices and emergent voices both appear.
  - Consensus systems are deeply conservative – it might present certain challenges to the status quo, but it won't acknowledge that the whole status quo is rotten.
    - This is how television is today
  - Consensus narrative is also deeply collaborative – it has to do with the society's shared values
  - Within the accepted context of genre forms, the culture is able to confront what might otherwise be considered forbidden or dangerous. This works because the expectations and standards of genre are comforting, so that other differences are more accepted.
    - Hollywood often confronted some of the most controversial issues in genre films.
    - Westerns started out as highly imperialist, but this reversed over time, as the white cowboys became the bad guys
  
- Frank Capra – great director
  - Immigrated to California from Italy at six
  - Sold newspapers and played the banjo as a child
  - Graduated as an engineer from Caltech
  - *It Happened One Night*, *You Can't Take it With You*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *A Wonderful Life*, and many others
  
- *It Happened One Night*
  - Think about how stars and genre operated in Hollywood while you watch this film
  - Production history
    - At the time it was a minor project by a minor studio – nobody expected it to be a success – but it was hugely successful
    - Both leads became stars after this film
    - Notice that the lead actors are missing from the ending – this is because they'd both moved on to other films already
  - Social context
    - It very subtly and skillfully notes the economic miseries of the 1930s, but without ever throwing it in your face
    - The lead female character is slowly educated in the ways of the world over the course of the film
  - Class and gender – watch these elements as you watch
    - The Gable character is the “ordinary” character. Colbert comes from spoiled wealth.
  - Private spaces
  - The ending

- This was the film that established screwball comedy as a central Hollywood genre.

## Lecture 9 - Hitchcock

### I. Movie house culture

- Entertainment
- Genre and license
- Invention vs. convention
- "The genius of the system"

### II. Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980)

- An anecdote
- Hitchcock's career
- Hitchcock the technician
- Themes

### III. The Double Man

*Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- The Hollywood Era and Consensus Narrative
  - The problems of a society are acted out within consensus narrative.
  - In the middle ages, the consensus narrative environment was the church
  - Theater grew out of certain performative dimensions of religion.
    - The earliest theater traveled from town to town on wagons, and it was religious in nature.
  - From the silent era until the advent of television, film in America was a consensus narrative.
  - You used to be able to walk down 42<sup>nd</sup> street in New York, and there would just be block upon block of nothing but movie theaters.
    - Many of these theaters were unbelievably ornate, with gilt work, plush carpets, balconies...
    - Virtually everybody in society had access to these places
    - You could go and watch 4 or 5 movies in a row.
    - You could stay for hours and hours without getting kicked out.
      - Homeless people could go there
      - They were a place of illicit sexual trysting
      - Jack Kerouac describes spending several weeks at a time in a movie theater in *On the Road*
- Hitchcock (1899-1980)
  - We'll be watching earlier Hitchcock in this class
  - Genre Work might look formulaic, but in fact it is the fact that it seems so comfortable that allows the form to explore the forbidden
    - In Hitchcock's work, these forbidden elements often lie right under the surface

- “High” art vs. “Low” art
- Hitchcock is a particularly dramatic example – he’s so unique that we might want to call him a genre unto himself, within the genres of mystery or thriller
- An anecdote, which Hitchcock told to many people: his father called him over one day and told him to take a note down the street to the local constable, and the constable read the note and then locked him in a jail cell, and told him “this is what happens to bad boys.”
  - This is representative of the unexpectedness of life – a young boy who has no reason to think he is guilty of anything
  - The eruption of something terrible and unexpected
- Hitchcock’s work is full of sudden eruptions of violence and evil – it’s a world of black and white good and evil
- He never graduated from college
- He worked in film at a variety of levels
- Worked for a time in German film, and he was fascinated by German expressionism.
- He directed six silent films – he spans both the
- *The Lodger* – 1926. A sort of Jack-the-Ripper story. Innocence accused.
- *Blackmail*, 1929, the first British feature with synchronous sound. About homosexuality – a very shocking subject at that time.
- He made *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The 39 Steps*, and *The Lady Vanishes* in the 1930s – here he really came into his own, became famous
- *Rebecca* – bestseller, won an academy award, established him as an international figure.
- *Shadow of a Doubt*, 1943
- *Rear Window*, *Verdigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, *The Birds* – these classics came later, in the 1950s and 60s
- His two periods, early and late, are very different
- We can think of Hitchcock as a technician and craftsman
  - He was obsessed by every aspect and detail of how movies were made
  - By the time he came on the set, he already had everything planned out
  - He once called actors “cattle”
  - He loved to set himself problems that were difficult to solve, so that these limitations would create a more creative and interesting film.
    - For example, in *Rear Window*, the entire film takes place in one room
- He likes to make brief appearances in all of his films
- His themes include: Disorder, Entrapment, Voyeurism, Instability, Evil...
- Clip: A famous part of *North by Northwest*, in which a previously safe environment suddenly becomes a place of menace.
  - This clip is an example of the trauma that he forces his innocent characters to go through

- Notice the crane shot at the beginning – why does it return at the end? Why is it important?
- Note how he uses silence
- Evil erupts from the strangest places in Hitchcock's universe

Lecture 10 - Shadow of a Doubt

I. Hitchcock's themes (continued)

- The double
- Comedy
- Moral ambiguity
- Film clip: *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

II. *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)

- Context: WWII, Hitchcock in exile
- Against Capra
- The opening: behind any door or window...
- An American town
- An American family
- Two Charlies: rhyming shots
- Subplot: murder as diversion
- The ending: ambiguity

**Disclaimer:** The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

Film viewing tonight:

Hitchcock, Alfred. *Shadow of a Doubt*. 1943.

- The severe rationality of Hitchcock's methods as a director.
  - His story boards were astonishingly detailed, including camera angle and every available detail, all finished before he got on the set.
  - By the time he got on the set, he seemed almost bored, because he had everything so planned out.
  - Sometimes it might seem like directors who let the process of filming be more of an improvisational discovery can release more of a freedom, but Hitchcock's planned filming was a real discovery
- The Double Man
  - There are very often a lot of doubles in Hitchcock's films
  - In the film we're watching tonight, the two main characters are both named Charlie, and it's not an accident.
  - *Strangers on a Train* – a man gets on a train and meets a famous tennis player – they become grotesque doubles as the plot of murder unfolds
  - Hitchcock's vision of irrationality and danger, where evil can erupt at any moment.
  - Clip from *Shadow of a Doubt*: shown without sound, watch the way that the tracking shot reverses the position of young Charlie and Uncle Charlie.

- The disorder and turbulence of the world suddenly turn into larger mechanisms of evil in Hitchcock's films, such as in *The Birds*, where nature is suddenly out to get people.
- Clip, from the climax of *Strangers on a Train*. The children's carousel becomes a place of evil.
  - Note the mixture of comedy and terror
  - The mordant skepticism about the value of policemen in times of emergency
  - Hitchcock wasn't a political radical, but in his films the forces of order are often stupefied in the face of real chaos and evil
- Montaigne – “we are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe, we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.”
  - What Hitchcock himself condemns, he cannot rid himself of, and comes up again and again in his films.
- *Shadow of a Doubt*
  - This film is more austere than a lot of the rest of his work
  - Hitchcock's English films have a kind of British parochialism to them, which some people felt would not translate well to American film.
  - *Rebecca*, the first film that Hitchcock made in the U.S., was Hitchcock's least Hitchcockian film – he was giving into the standards of Hollywood, trying to show that he could fit in in American film.
  - By the time he made *Shadow of a Doubt*, this was still going on, but Hitchcock was also allowing himself to be more himself.
  - An American Town
  - An American Family
    - The young children are greedy, silly, and misbehaving
    - The parents are also subjected to a kind of skepticism and mockery
      - The mother is an airhead
      - The father is a weak, gentle, essentially sexless character
      - Young Charlie is bored, idolizing her Uncle Charlie
    - Uncle Charlie himself is not a nice guy – he's a serial murderer using the family as a place to hide out.
  - Hitchcock is gifted at making the audience complicit in the evil that they watch
    - The camera becomes a voyeur or a peeping tom, and you participate in this.
    - One might say that *Rear Window* is about voyeurism, and the ability of people to watch forbidden things that they shouldn't see.
    - Note the apparently harmless conversation early on with relatively airheaded characters discussing the perfect murder, totally unaware that there is a real murderer in their midst. They read murder mysteries the way that we watch Hitchcock movies
    - Young Charlie has a whole vision of the face of the exotic, but what she finds is the face of the murderer. And she identifies with him.

- These plot issues are reflected in technical decisions that Hitchcock makes again and again.
  - Rhyming scenes
    - The two scenes with the Charlies lying on a bed.
    - He uses these sorts of scenes as sorts of reenactments of each other.
- The Ending: Moral Ambiguity
  - The use of doubles
  - This ending is characteristically Hitchcockian.
  - The movie seems outwardly to comply with the audience's expectations of a murder mystery:
    - Evil seems to be vanquished
    - The heroine isn't entirely defeated, she survives,
    - She has a love interest
  - And yet there's a terrible ambiguity, because all of this is never acknowledged
    - The family doesn't know what has happened.
    - Note the scene at the bar, with the terrifying speech that Uncle Charlie gives to young Charlie
      - An incredibly overt expression of despair, coming out of the mouth of the most fascinating character, whom she has idolized.
    - Evil resides at the heart of the American family and the heart of the American town. It's not something external to you and me, it *is* you and me.
    - This sort of ambiguity occurs also in *Psycho* it's common in Hitchcock's films
    - Also in the end of *The Birds*. There's a moment of calm as the characters seem to have escaped, but the film ends with a shot of the birds regathering, not on an isolated island, but on the mainland.
  - Hitchcock often seems on the surface to satisfy the expectation for a happy ending, but really he leaves you with a terrifying ambiguity.

## Lecture 11 - The Musical

### I. Numbers

- 1927-1947: 919 films (48 films each year)
- 1949-1958: 23 films per year
- 1959-1980: 7 films per year

### II. Themes

- Show business: community: the show goes on
- High culture, popular culture
- Class or position vs. talent, merit
- Convention, restraint vs. spontaneity, energy, "the natural"

### III. History

- Revue, Operetta - *Love Me Tonight* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932)
- Busby Berkeley and Warner Brothers - *42nd Street* (1933)
- Astaire, Rogers and RKO - *Top Hat* (1935)
- MGM and "the integrated musical"
  - *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen and Kelly, 1952)
  - Arthur Freed (1894-1973): The Freed Unit

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## The Musical

### ▪ Numbers

- A breakdown:
  - 1927-1947: 919 films (48 films each year)
  - 1948-1984: 466 films
  - 1949-1958: 23 films per year
  - 1958-1980: 7 films per year
- Like American Westerns, the musical is one of America's true contributions to film.
- Product of studio era, musical was very central to this era, after growth of film, before explosion of television
- They coexist without realizing their effects on each other
- By 1970s they were having great effects on each other
- Musicals are not simply operettas, but from their own cinematic identity
- Declining numbers show decline of film as the central means of storytelling
- By 70s/80s, no longer a habitual experience
- 1949-1958 movies still dominant, but losing strength
- After World War II, more skepticism, and musical becomes attributed to pre-war sentiment
- After 70s, musicals seen as more experimental in form

- History
  - Three different aspects (subcategories) of musical film:
  - The first owes life to theater tradition – Revue
    - Remakes of Broadway
    - “You ain’t seen nothing yet”
    - Jazz very successful
    - *The Broadway Melody* (1929)
      - Tells backstage story (meta-theater)
      - Common plot of movie musical
      - Establishes basic back story
      - It’s a Revue – stage show not linked by plot
      - Show was immensely popular – won Oscar for best film
      - Drew and produced large numbers intermixed with comical sketches
      - 1930: 70 new musicals
      - It influenced increasing use of music in films in Europe as well
  - The second subcategory was Operetta
    - Influenced by European light opera
    - Example: Gilbert and Sullivan
    - Clip: from *Love Me Tonight* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932)
      - This is proleptic. A pass-along song.
      - Central character: Maurice Chevalier, a tailor
      - Plot: Aristocrat comes to his shop, he meets an aristocratic woman – class conflict, etc.
    - Crosses class and geographical boundaries – proleptic – music creates community across social classes
    - Multiplicity – art does many things at once
    - Notice how cinematic that clip was – you could not have ever done that on a stage.
      - The camera work was complicated – notice that in the tailor’s shop some of the shots were done through mirrors
  - The third subcategory that emerged was associated with the choreographer and director Busby Berkeley
    - These films exist for the musical numbers – the plot and characters are weaker
    - Berkeley was an essential and enormous innovator. He created a great sense of space, using the power of editing and the camera to make the space enormous. He exploded the older of idea of film as a theatrical space.
    - Berkeley anticipates a form of film that is severed from character, but becomes about an artistic expression of abstract pattern and music – it’s almost like he anticipates MTV.
    - Clip: from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933) – Warner Brothers
      - Note that it starts on a stage, in a theatrical space... but it grows, the camera moves...
      - Note the sexual subtext

- Note the Berkeley topshot – he cut holes in the ceiling of the studio so that he could film down
  - There are many Berkeley numbers that are even more extravagant than this one.
- Astaire and Rogers
  - In one six year period, they made nine musicals together
  - The classical romantic structure
  - Dance is important
    - Carnal, arousing nature of dance
    - The movies were censored, remember
  - Clip: from *Top Hat* (1935)
    - When this clip begins, she is very reluctant to be dancing with him – she thinks he’s a married man
    - Note how the dance moves into a private space
    - The dance becomes a metaphor for good sex, where there are no leaders and followers by the end – it’s entirely mutual.

## Lecture 12 - Astaire, Kelly, Fosse

### I. Astaire vs. Kelly

### II. *Singin' in the Rain*

- Self-consciousness: an encyclopedia of musical history
- Key themes
- The place of song and dance

### III. *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972)

- Beyond genre: the end of Hollywood
- Fosse's career: the inheritor
- Weimar Germany and America in the late 1960s
- Style: mise en scène and montage
- Texture: multiplicity
- Musical numbers: true integration
- Key themes: innocence, history, the limits of satire

**Disclaimer:** The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

Film viewing tonight:

Donen, Stanley, and Gene Kelly. *Singin' in the Rain*. 1952.

- The integrated musical – this is what they called it at the time
  - Even to the people making these films, it became clear that there was a certain discontinuity between the energy of the production numbers and the lack of interesting character or plot
    - There was a lack of psychological depth and complexity
    - Remember the dance scene we saw from *Top Hat*
      - Metaphor for mutual sex and shared desire
      - The audience might not have explicitly noticed this symbolism, but they did process it on another level
  - 
  - Arthur Freed
    - Began his career as a lyricist
    - Became executive producer of over 33 MGM films, and they included all the great musicals of this period
    - He assembled an enormous unit of performer, choreographers, directors, that was unrivaled
      - Busby Berkeley was in this unit
      - It included all the most distinguished people
    - He made character and story as interesting as the musical numbers

- He integrated the musical numbers into the rest of the story, so that the plot didn't just stop and then start again whenever there was a song
- Themes
  - Show business
    - Implicitly, this always contains within it themes of community building and democracy
    - There's almost always one snotty star who humiliates or mistreats the underlings
    - Thus class antagonism comes out
    - When this elitist is purged in some way, the community comes together in a kind of democratic excitement
    - Thus the group has achieved something, and become a place of democracy instead of one of snobbery
    - The humble and talented understudy gets the chance to finally shine
    - Thus it celebrates especially American values
  - High culture, popular culture
  - Convention, restraint vs. spontaneity, energy, and "the natural"
  - H
- Fred Astaire vs. Kelly
  - You can see them as embodying different sorts of principles in their dance
  - Astaire almost always danced very well dressed – tuxedo, etc.
    - He always danced in places that were recognized as places to dance – the stage, etc
    - Within his own films, he's usually recognized as a great or professional dancer
    - He embodies a kind of grace in his dancers
    - He almost never violates the Proscenium arch
  - Kelly's dance is much more energetic and spontaneous
    - He's graceful in a way that violates boundaries instead of respecting them
    - His dances take over spaces that don't normally belong to dance – he dances in trees, on roofs, on tables...
    - It's like he's disobeying the ordinary restraints
- *Singin' In the Rain*
  - It embodies a lot of these themes we've been talking about – high vs. low art
  - Note Don Lockwood's speech, where he speaks of himself like a cultured, upper-class person, when the reality is more varied
  - Note Debbie Reynolds's claim to prefer higher art (Shakespeare, Ibsen), when she is in fact a popular dancer herself
  - Satire and Parody

- A satire makes fun of something, holding it up to mockery – it can direct itself at a broad range of things
  - A parody is a more specific form of satire, where a specific object is made fun of via imitation
- Self-consciousness
- The key themes
  - One central theme is about performance
  - It sort of acts as an encyclopedic revisiting of the history of film.
  - The movie has a structural exuberance – there are so many different genres of performance going on at once
  - The gap between the outer (formal façade) and the inner (much more energetic intrinsic human energy)
- The place of dance and song
  - Faced with the boring elocution expert, the characters improvise a dance
  - Couches and staircases become elements of the dance – the space is transformed, and the ordinary objects become props
  - This is somehow connected to the somehow naïve exuberance of American culture – our ordinary talk can be edged into song, or normal walking can become dance
    - This has to do with the appeal of Musicals for their audiences – forms of freedom are particularly enacted.

### Lecture 13 - The Western

- I. Movies as consensus narrative
  - The Western genre as a space of discourse
- II. Historical and cultural background
  - The "real" west: 1860-1890
  - Popular culture before film
  - Intellectual culture: The Turner Thesis
- III. The Western as cultural myth
  - Founding story
  - Dichotomies
  - The divided hero: savior and savage

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#### The Western

- Display: Reproduction of a poster for the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show
  - In the mid 70s, there was a film called *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* – disturbing
  - Chief Sitting Bull himself actually appeared in the original show, which mythologized and lied about the racist history of the West
- The Western offers us a particularly clarifying example of the larger operation that the movies played in American culture in the days when they were such a dominant form of narrative
  - The age of the dream factory, mass-producing movies, capitalist principles and art
  - Other examples of consensus narrative in their own day: Shakespeare's theater, Dickens's novels, Homer's epics
  - American film was less burdened by cultural expectations in the way that French, German, or Italian film
    - There are both positive and negative consequences of this
  - Consensus Narratives have three central defining features
    - Conservative – in both a political and an aesthetic sense
      - Consensus narratives could not completely attack the culture they emerge from
      - If they larger politics were too upfront revolutionary, then it couldn't address such a huge audience
      - Of course, it can still be subversive in its own way, but it must do so within a familiar context

- The artistic commitments of consensus art are in a large sense conservative as well
- Today, theater has the opportunity to be hugely revolutionary, because it's not a consensus narrative (and never has been in this country)
- Collaborative – movies are a hugely collaborative act
  - As the theater is, in a way that poems and novels don't have to be (though sometimes they can be)
  - The various dissonant views (actor, director, writer), need to be harmonized in some way.
  - As a result, there will always be some jagged edges where the various efforts don't perfectly harmonize.
  - We need to value and take place in partial excellence, because full excellence isn't always possible.
  - More importantly, movies collaborate with their culture
  - They all include myth, founding tales, ways of understanding themselves
  - Consensus narrative collaborates with an inherited range of myths and stories that are reoriented to adapt to the current medium
  - Genre itself is an inherently collaborative category – the meaning of any Western is partly based on every Western that has come before it.
  - This is a profound form of collaboration
  - An example: In Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, there's a great moment of a beautiful dirge: "Fear no more the heat of the sun... Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers come to dust": even the most privileged of us die.
  - In Shakespeare's era, dandelions were called "golden lads," and when they go to seed, their white ball is called a "chimney sweep"
  - Thus what Shakespeare says carries a greater, broader-acting effect
  - But the metaphor comes from the culture – it is in some sense still a collaborative event
- Accessible
  - The fact that Westerns were set in the past made them more accessible in a sense, because it made the story more comfortable, so that it could displace the conflicts of whites and blacks 100 years back, to the older conflict of whites and Native Americans.
  - Thus *The Searchers* becomes a complex meditation on racism, but it is able to do so because it occurs within such a comfortable genre

- The size of the movie screen seems appropriate to the epic quality of the Western, which is part of why the Western form was never as successful on TV as it was in film
- Historical and Cultural Backgrounds
  - Racist history
  - The irony of envisioning the cavalry bugle as a saving sound
  - This was the era of the transcontinental railroad
  - This was the era of range conflicts – ranchers and settlers fighting each other
    - Sometimes films were from the standpoint of the ranchers, sometimes the settlers.
    - Rarely, before the 1970s, was it ever on the side of the Native Americans.
    - *The Settlers* was a great shock, because it was sympathetic to the Native Americans
  - The West was also the story of the extermination of the buffalo
  - The era of the near genocide (certainly murder on a massive scale) of the Native Americans
  - The real story of the West is a lot uglier than the myth that we all grew up with
- Forms of American Westerns
  - TV: The Buffalo Bill Wild West show was a huge success
    - The real Annie Oakley, the real Chief Sitting Bull
  - The entertainment vision of the history had very little to do with the actuality of what really happened
  - Books: *The Virginian* – hugely popular.
    - Several movies were based on it
    - Powerful contribution to the mythology of the West
    - One of the great best-sellers of all time
    - The 50<sup>th</sup> edition was published within 15 years of when it first came out
  - Intellectual component of the wild west
    - An essay in the 1890s: Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”
    - It’s impossible to exaggerate the important effect that this essay had
    - It organized the entire culture of how American intellectuals thought about the West
    - The paper said that while we live in a society where the frontier is constantly receding, settlers’ ability to push ever west acted to eliminate divisions of race and class
    - Turner defined the central American intellectual myth about the West and European-Americans

- Now it is true that the existence of free land in the West created a kind of safety valve
  - Turner said that the closing off of this frontier marked a very important point in American history
  - This claim helped spawn all the stories and mythologizing of the American West
  
- The Western as a Cultural Myth
  - What do we mean when we call the Western a myth?
  - Westerns are not by one person, but by many
  - A story that is told over and over again, constantly repeated
  - The word mythology implies many strands to the myth, rather than just one story
  - The writing of Levi-Strauss
  - The founding myth – Westerns are always in part about establishing a society out of chaos, civilizing of savagery, etc.
  - Society and communal values versus the values of the individual – this is relevant to American society, because our culture values individual heroism so much, but it doesn't want to take this idea to the point of chaos
  - The dichotomy between East and West
  - The division between nature and culture
  - The Western dramatizes American values and American ambivalence
  - Genre as a category is a discourse space that provides a license to take up these dichotomies, contradictions, and controversies

**Lecture 14 - Ford and *The Searchers***

- I. The Western film - a quick history
- II. John Ford (1895-1973)
- III. *The Searchers* (1956)
  - Damaged hero
  - Setting: Monument Valley
  - Plot: founding story, captive's tale
  - A turning point
  - The title: ambiguity

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Film viewing tonight:  
Ford, John. *The Searchers*. 1956.

- The role of the Western movie
  - We need to think of the Western as not only a consensus narrative, but a form of our national theater
  - Like a national repertory theater
  - It involved a relatively fixed number of actors appeared over and over again
  - Display: a John Wayne poster. Note the epic quality.
  - Science fiction films and television today fulfill a lot of the same epic qualities that Westerns used to address.
    - *Serenity*, for example
  - The power of the Western mythology is partly useful to us because other genres can borrow or piggyback on their resonance
  - Even though fewer Westerns are being made today, they're still relevant
  - We live in a much more technological environment today, and so a lot of the nature-based aspects of the Western have now become residual in some way
  - A lot of doubling goes on in Westerns
  - A result of all these genre qualities is that even the worst Western can be interesting for us – bad movies are very revealing culturally – they tell us about the society they come from
  - Films that aren't self-conscious about their own role are even more emblematic of the culture they come from
  - This is not a triumphal story of film getting better and better – consensus narratives aren't necessarily good or effective. They can be a site for great and rich art, but they aren't necessarily.

- The main function of these consensus systems is to propagate the belief systems of their society. They may or may not produce great art, but that is secondary to their creation.
- If we look at Western movies of the 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s in order, we can actually chart the changes in the value system of American culture
- It's not an accident that Ronald Reagan was a star in Westerns, and it's not an accident that his political policies sometimes resembled a Western.
- The Western investigates and often celebrates individuality and antisocial qualities
- There's always an implicit racism in the classic western – the villain looks dark and semitic, the hero rides a white horse, etc.
- All the value systems and assumptions about human nature come alive here
- Clip: “the hero saves the day” – everything you expect gets turned on its head when instead the hero is murdered meaninglessly.
  - All the audience's expectations of masculinity and values are switched.
  - It's an astonishing work of art
  - The murder is motivated only by the villain's empty embarrassment that he didn't hit an empty bottle earlier in the scene
  - The murderousness and simplemindedness of the classic Western gun fight is exposed
- The conventions of Westerns and genre in general provide an excuse to study how they have changed
- Western Film, a history
  - Westerns existed in penny arcades, even before the apparatus of the movie camera was developed
  - Before the advent of television, 25-30% of all films were Westerns
  - It was by far the largest genre category
  - Even after the advent of television, nearly half of all films set in the past were Westerns
  - Bronco Billy Anderson – the first Western hero and star
    - He helped establish the system of great Hollywood stars
    - First appearance was in *The Great Train Robbery*
  - Even today, when Westerns are less common, they continue to be hugely influential on movie form
  - The genre of the Western is associated with many of the first technically revolutionary early films
  - Some of the first narrative films and the first two-reel film
  - 1913 – *Battle of Elderbush Gulch*
  - 1914 – One of the very first feature length films – *The Virginian* (three reels)
  - In the 1930s, most Westerns were not major works of art

- Lots of these early sound films were too easily attracted to gimmicks
- There were lots of singing cowboys
- A lot of this was because these films were B films – they were made to be given second billing
  - In those days, when you went to the movies, you would see:
    - A couple of animated cartoons
    - A news reel
    - A serial
    - A feature film (“A” film)
    - A second-billing film (“B” film)
  - These serials were important:
- The 1940s are often thought of as the classical age of the Western film
  - 1940s were the time of WWII
    - In the 1930s, during the Depression, Americans weren’t feeling good about their country
    - With the War, Americans got much more nationalistic
  - Imperialistic Westerns came along with the 1940s
  - 1944: *Buffalo Bill* (Henry Ford)
    - This was one of more than a dozen movies with Buffalo Bill in the title
  - 1946: *My Darling Clementine* (also Henry Ford)
    - The murder of the Clantons by the Erps
    - The taming of savagery by civilization
    - There have been at least six films retelling this same historical story.
    - The early films are heroic, while the later films are increasingly skeptical
  - 1943: *The Oxbow Incident*
    - A film about lynching and the evils of majority rule
    - An innocent man is hanged
  - 1949: *Red River* (Hawks)
    - Undercurrents about homosexuality
    - Montgomery Cliff stood for a kind of decency and tenderness
- By the 1950s and 1960s, the Western has become more urban
  - Billy the Kid, for example, is a misunderstood kid who plays hooky all the time
  - 1961: *One-Eyed Jacks*, with Marlon Brando
    - Undermines traditional notions of macho masculinity
  - 1962: *Hombre*
- By the 1970s, Westerns became very different
  - A series of Westerns were made by Sergio Leone – he was Italian, not American
    - His conception of the Western was very different

- He brought forms of European anarchy to his films
    - He cast Henry Fonda, the all-American hero, as an evil villain
  - The genre gets turned on its head
  - 1970: *Soldier Blue*
    - The native Americans are the heroes, and the cavalry are bad guys
  - 1971: *Little Big Man*
    - Again, the Indians are the good guys
  - The change in the political structure reflected by Westerns during this period had to do with the breakdowns caused by Vietnam and Watergate
  - However, this change in the revolutionary quality of Western films had even more to do with the fact that TV had already come along, and film was no longer a consensus narrative
- John Ford
    - His career is various
    - He made a huge number of films
    - The Western was his signature film
    - He appeared as an actor in *Birth of a Nation*, where he also worked as an assistant director
    - His career spanned both the silent era and the sound era
  - *The Searchers*
    - The hero/star: John Wayne
      - However, John Ford has begun to problematize his character
      - He's a damaged character
      - He's racist
      - He's admirable, but also deeply un-admirable
    - Space/Setting
      - This film doesn't lie about the nature of the West – you see the snow and the rain
      - Filmed in Monument Valley, Arizona – it came to be known as John Ford's theater
      - This setting, with its looming rock formations, makes all human endeavors seem small in comparison
      - The human buildings seem transient in comparison with this forbidding landscape
    - Time: visual style
      - The film spans many many years
      - Watch for the transitions
      - You begin to feel like you're in a space of endless quest
      - It's like an otherworldly space, that operates according to different rules
      - The visual style reinforces this

- Note the use of doorways to look into a building or out onto a landscape
  - What is implied by this contrast of enclosure and infinite expanse?
- Story
  - Remember that the story is a racial one
  - It acts out one of the oldest American narratives – captives tales
  - There's this uncertainty of what John Wayne will do if he finds this girl – will he rescue her, or will he kill her for having been polluted by Indians?
  - Note the doubling that takes place via the character Scar – he's a kind of hero double for Wayne, similarly damaged
- A turning point
  - The scene where Wayne and his partner are riding down a steep hill in the snow
  - The Indian village they ride towards has just been annihilated and massacred by the white cavalry
  - The moral center of the film pivots
  - This is not an imperialist film that is simply celebrating white folks
- The Title
  - What are they searching for? Why are they searching?
  - The longer you watch, the more pointless the whole thing comes to seem
  - The older clarities of the Western form are no longer present
  - There is a terrible, compelling critique of earlier Westerns

## Lecture 15 - Film in the 1970s

### I. Transformations and subversion

- Directors
- Actors
- Style and endings
- Dissenting genres

### II. Social history

- Vietnam war
- Assassinations
- JFK, LBJ, Nixon
- Watergate

### III. Film and Television

- A new consensus medium
- Two versions of *MASH*

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## Film in the 1970s

- Remember: the history of film is not just the history of a single form – the medium migrated from one form to another depending on whether it was currently consensus narrative
- The late 1960s and early 1970s were one of the richest moments of American film, one of the richest moments of any national film history
  - French film might have had slightly richer eras
  - The movies of this era were very different from movies that had come before
    - They were self-conscious of this difference
  - Key figures of the 1970s:
    - Actors:
      - Warren Beatty
      - Jack Nicholson
      - Elliot Gould
      - Dustin Hofman
      - Robert DeNiro
      - Julie Christie
      - Jane Fonda
      - Faye Dunaway
      - Donald Southerland

- These actors and actresses weren't necessarily handsome/beautiful or heroic in the way that previous actors had been – they often played flawed characters
  - These actors don't project grandeur the way past actors had
  - They have a sort of subversive energy
- One of the transition actors might have been Humphrey Bogart
- Directors:
  - Robert Altman
  - Francis F. Coppola, *The Godfather* (72), *The Godfather II* (74)
  - Bob Fosse
  - Stanley Kubrick, *Clockwork Orange* (71)
  - Alan J. Pakula, *Klute* (71), *The Parallax View* (74)
  - Sam Peckinpah, *The Wild Bunch* (69), *Straw Dogs* (71)
  - Roman Polansky, *Chinatown* (73)
  - Martin Scorsese, *Mean Streets* (73), *Taxi Driver* (76)
- These directors took control of their films, and their vision of the world permeates their movies in a way that hadn't been present in previous films
- By this era, the studios were no longer the enormous, extensive film factories that they had been before
- The visual style of these films was different, with elements like quick clips, discontinuous editing, shots from strange angles, etc.
- The traditional Hollywood film generally ended in a comforting way, or if the ending was subversive, it was subtly so
  - The endings of films from the 1970s were often much more disturbing, discontinuous, and morally uncertain
- Dissenting genres
- Pakula's *Klute*
  - The female lead is a prostitute
  - The subject matter is often morally disgusting
  - The comically innocent eyes of Donald Sutherland's character are dramatically opened to the dark realities of the world
- Pakula's *The Parallax View*
  - Alcoholic former newspaper reporter who can never hold a job anymore because he's always drunk
  - The landscape is eerie and science fiction-like – as though Pakula is taking us into a modern world that is unfamiliar, hostile to human beings
  - The alcoholic reporter who is now working for some lousy local paper gets on the trail of the assassination of the president
  - In a way, the plot resembles Hitchcock's films, with a lone hero working against the world, or James Bond films, with a lone hero saving the world against all odds
  - This main character discovers a vast conspiracy of corporate leaders who are trying to control national politics

- Just as he's about to discover the evil absolutely, he is suddenly killed
    - In the last scene, we see a judicial scene meant to echo the inquiry in to the assassination of JFK, where the respectable judges decide that the assassination was the work of one lone gunman
    - The implication is that you live in a world where political and moral conspiracies are everywhere, and they cannot be exposed because they are too extensive
  - Altman's *The Lone Goodbye*
    - The title of a famous novel, made into movies many times previously
    - The film's in conversation with detective stories generally, as well as in conversation with the many films of the same story that had been made previously
    - Elliot Gould, the star, detective
    - He finally discovers that the killer is a friend of his, who he had previously defended
    - Clip: the protagonist suddenly kills the murderer, upon discovering him
      - This ending is an absolute shock
      - The Gould character is somehow unheroic and selfish
      - This is not how the novel or any of the previous films by the same title ended
- The films of this period have to do with the turbulent politics of the era
  - The catastrophe of the Vietnam War
  - The Civil Rights Movement
    - Brown v. Board of Education
    - Martin Luther King
  - These two movements became increasingly connected
    - Some of these movements, unlike Martin Luther King, were violent in nature
  - The double assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy
  - Nixon's election
    - Elected on the platform of ending the war, but he ended up expanding it into Cambodia before eventually leaving
    - The Watergate scandal
  - All the structures of order and the basic institutions of the society were in question
  - All of this has to do with the great disorder, controversy, and subversion of the movies of this era
- But remember, at this point the movies are no longer a consensus medium in the United States, because television had replaced them
  - Television in this era is much more aware of politics in the outer world

- But it's still a television in which the center holds – it's not as subversive as films of the era
- Example: *All in the Family*
  - The contrast between conservative and liberal, old and young, a father-in-law and his son-in-law
  - Even though they argue and scream at each other, in the end they stay in the family
  - The idea broadcast is that the country's still a family – we can get through our difficulties
- Television is still maintaining its consensus function
- *M.A.S.H*
  - The difference between the movie and television versions are deeply revealing of the consensus narrative function of television
  - The difference can't be explained by date – they're nearly simultaneous, rather, it is a function of the place that society gives each form and medium
- A great irony and paradox: just as film finally articulates the problems of society, it is no longer watched as much
  - Just as film finally fully realizes itself, it surrenders its great popular function
  
- Robert Altman (1925 - )
  - In the early 70s, he was seen as such an outlaw that he often had great trouble financing his movies
  - He was very prolific, with lots and lots of magnificent films – he's still making movies today
  - He loves improvisation, and encouraged his actors to do it while they were being filmed
  - He likes to play with sound
    - It's sometimes hard to distinguish what the characters are saying in the foreground from the background noise
  - He's hostile to plot, like he's more interested in juxtaposing characters with each other than in following a linear story
    - In *Nashville*, you spend a long time following several different characters without any understanding of how they connect to each other
    - He's announcing his distinction from traditional Hollywood film, where you could only keep characters interested by having something going on and happening for every second.
    - In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, you can see this emphasis on characters at work by the fact that even though the movie is about the growth of the town in many ways, you never notice it until the end because the movie is so grounded in the characters
    - This trend is not new to narrative – we see it in great novels all the time – but it was new to film

- Bob Fosse (1927-87)
  - He worked in theater before he moved to film
    - Many people expected him to replicate his Broadway work on film, but in fact he developed a deeply cinematic style, with effects that never could have been achieved on stage
  - “Life is a Cabaret” – but you know by the desperation with which the character delivers those lines, that life is *not* a cabaret.
  - His dance sequences introduced a kind of carnality and realism into film dance that had never been there before
    - His dances don’t necessarily project beauty, but they do project dances and power
  - He made dances about subjects that earlier musical directors would never have addressed
  - He made only one movie without a musical dimension: It was called *Lenny*, about Lenny Bruce
    - Dustin Hofman plays Lenny Bruce
  - In 1972, he became the only director to win an Emmy, an Oscar, and a Tony all in one year
  
- Both Altman and Fosse can stand for the greatly revolutionary creators of film in this era of the 1970s

## Lecture 16 - Altman

### I. Robert Altman (1925-2006)

- Career
- Defining qualities:
  - Moral skepticism
  - Sympathy for the marginal
  - Plot vs. character
  - Fiction vs. "reality"

### II. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)

- "Ruin the sacred truths"
- Sound and image: a new realism?
- Hero/savior - clown or fool
- Love story: gal from the East
- Founding myth: Presbyterian Church
- The ending: slapstick murder as the town is born

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- Dissenting genre
  - *The Searchers* is not quite a dissenting genre – rather, it's one of the most subtle and complicated examples of a classic western
    - John Wayne is deeply flawed, but he's still a hero
    - Positions are not entirely repudiated and reversed
  - Dissenting genre goes much further
- *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)
  - What happens to American movies in the 1970s involves a systematic commitment to reverse or undermine all of the commitments to which any given genre belongs
  - To borrow from Harold Bloom, "ruin the sacred truths" – this is what happens to film in this era
  - *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is in conversation with the whole history of the Western, going all the way back to the silent era.
  - The arrival of the fire engine – it's a symbol of the fact that the town has become respectable enough to have institutions like a fire company
  - Of course, the use of the fire engine is a comically inept scene – it evokes the era of slapstick comedy
  - *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* asks its viewers to think especially about two older Westerns:
    - *High Noon*
      - Clip: the opening sequence of *High Noon*

- Note that it begins with a ballad, like many Westerns
- Note that the bad guys are marked by their dark appearance, their uncleanness, and their evil expressions
- The hero has to fight them alone – what allows him to survive is in part his greater knowledge of the physical geography of the town
  - This same pattern is clearly present at the end of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*
- Note that our introduction to the town comes via church bells and the appearance of the church
- My Darling Clementine
  - The central energies of this film are very close to those of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* – except that they’re the obverse of each other
  - The classic Western is always about the creation of a civilized community out of a savage and chaotic wilderness
  - The looming rock formations of John Ford’s setting suggests the smallness of human endeavors
  - The hero kills with impunity, but he’s nervous around women
  - Notice the flags – there’s always an implicit patriotism in classic Westerns
- All of this is reenacted in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, but exposed to a terrible irony and skepticism
- It’s a color film, but it doesn’t have much color
- There’s the sense that the weather really matters, as the snow piles up higher and higher in the snow storm, it’s important, and related to the terrible killing sequence
- Altman calls our attention to ambient sound
- The classic hero or savior figure is a kind of silly clown or fool – he’s terribly easy to manipulate
- The heroine has come from England to be a madam, a manager of whores
  - She’s much more intelligent than McCabe, but because she’s a woman there are limits to what she can do
  - This is a sort of commentary
- The town grows on the periphery of the film – even though it’s always going on, you’re not aware of it
- The barber is black – in St. Louis he couldn’t work as a barber, but in this brand new town, everyone still has a chance, because there aren’t enough people
  - In this way the town is made up of outcasts, who are limited in larger society because of prejudice or because of some other disability
- Altman likes shocking shootings, with bodies bleeding in the water
  - For literate readers of the Western, this has an absolute shock value, because it so completely reverses all their expectations

- In the classic Western, there is apocalyptic violence, after which society is regenerated
- In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, you see this violence with McCabe trying to save his own life, inter-cut with the slapstick scene of people trying to put out the church fire
- Every element of the classic Western is mocked and turned upside down in this manner in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*

## Lecture 17 - Renoir and Poetic Realism

### I. French film

- A parallel history
- Film theory

### II. Jean Renoir (1894-1979)

- 1926 *Nana* (Zola novel)
- 1928 *The Little Match Girl*
- 1931 *La Chienne*
- 1932 *Boudu Saved from Drowning*
- 1934 *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert novel)
- 1935 *Toni*
- 1937 *Grand Illusion*
- 1939 *Rules of the Game*
- 1950 *The River*

### III. Poetic Realism

- Forerunner: Jean Vigo (1905-34)
- Key features
- Andre Bazin (1918-58) on Renoir

### IV. Two examples

- The ending of *Boudu*
- Dinner in prison: *Grand Illusion*

### V. Visual style as moral vision

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- Final exam in three weeks
  - There will be one makeup exam available if you can't make it at the normal date.
- A word about the last three weeks in this course:
  - Normally the final three weeks are devoted to examples of three different filmmakers from three different nations/cultures
  - Often we look at Bergman or Kurosawa
  - However, this time we'll be looking at two different French directors: Jean Renoir and Truffaut
  - I'm looking to illustrate a certain continuity across European cinema
  - These films are central examples of dominant schools of filmmaking
    - Renoir is at the center of the movement of Poetic Realism
  - Neo-realism is also an important movement

- You should get a feel for both how different these films are from American cinema, and simultaneously you should understand the continuity of style
  - Look for the continuity in the moral vision of these movies
- For these reasons we won't be watching Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* this semester, but it's a wonderful movie, and you should watch it on your own time
- French Film – history
  - One could create a sort of map in which every phase of American movies is matched and overcome by French film
  - Even the invention of film is rivaled – as Edison worked on inventing film, there were French inventors working on it simultaneously
  - Fundamental features of film like the fadeout
  - French film underwent a consolidation similar to American film, as production companies developed
  - Zecca – chase films
  - Variety of French film – closer relation to cultural and artistic authority
  - Avant-garde movement – very experimental films were made that could not have been made in early Hollywood
  - A critical discourse about film emerged in France very early, in the silent era.
    - We might say that the French invented film criticism
    - It developed like the French literary salon
  - We could list a French counterpart to virtually every technical advance and every genre that developed in the U.S.
- Jean Renoir
  - Many people would say that Renoir is the most important director of all time
  - He's certainly still a director that contemporary viewers continue to look back on with respect
  - He's the second son of the great impressionist painter, Auguste Renoir
  - He wrote a book about his childhood with his father
    - He grew up relatively privileged, surrounded by artists
  - Little redheaded boy, shows up in a number of his father's paintings
  - He served in the first World War in the cavalry, in the infantry, and very briefly as a pilot
  - First film: *The Water Girl*
    - It was fantastical and fable-like
  - Another early film: based on Zola's famous novel, *Nana*
  - However, these films were silent, and it was in the sound era that he really made his reputation
  - *La Chienne* (1931)
    - The title means "The Bitch"
    - Established the actor Michel Gabin

- Noble but working-class character who is driven to extremes
    - The character murders his girlfriend – an act of despair
    - Gabin embodied this noble despairing character – he later had it written into his contract that there had to be a moment in all of his films when he sort of lost it
      - He was sort of like an early Jack Nicholson
    - Marxist undercurrent – noble working classes
    - Established Jean Renoir
  - *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932)
  - *Toni* (1935)
    - In a way this is the origin of the Italian Neorealist movement
    - It's about Italian immigrant workers
    - It doesn't use professional actors – he was trying to create an additional note of realism
      - This use of real people instead of professional actors was an essential part of Italian Neorealism
  - Renoir always worked with a certain anticipated discovery to complete his films
  - *Grand Illusion* (1937)
  - *Rules of the Game* (1939)
    - In some ways this is a better film than *Grand Illusion*, but it depends on a lot of elements of French culture and language that are hard to understand in translation
  - Renoir's career continued after this – don't think that it ended after this list
  - Renoir lived in the U.S. for a time during World War II
  - He made *The River* in English, about life in India
    - It's an astonishing film visually
  - Renoir was an acknowledged master, and he was actively sought out by others
- Poetic Realism
    - This is the movement that Renoir originated
    - The name comes from a quality of the camera:
      - Even the most ugly slum is photographed in a way that becomes lyrical
      - It's not that this denies the ugliness of the situation, but that it responds poetically to the complexity of the situation
    - Andre Bazin (1917-1958) – a great champion of Renoir
      - Wrote a book about him
      - Prof. Thorburn reads the class a passage by Bazin, explaining Renoir's magnificence and his essential contributions to film
      - Renoir is the one who frees movies from imprisoning rectangular framings – Renoir was famous for very long takes.
        - As Bazin puts it, "Montage disappears"
        - So much takes place in one take, so that you're left trying to figure out what to watch

- Almost everything takes place at eye level, without distortion, because Renoir wants his audience to experience the movie the way that people really view the world
  - Renoir reminds you that you are only seeing a chunk of a three-dimensional world
  - He calls your attention to the space that normally doesn't make it into the frame
- Clip: from *Boudu Saved from Drowning*: rowing on the river on the wedding day, and then what happens after Boudu pulls them over and swims away
  - Note the way the boat sort of comes into the frame, and the way Renoir gives you a physical sense of the environment
  - Note that the music is part of the action – it gets louder as they move toward the band, and softer as they move away
  - Boudu represents unmitigated nature. He stands for accident, contingency.
  - Note the wide, slowly swinging turn of the camera at the end
  - The true purpose of the scene ceases to address Boudu's intentions, and instead addresses his pleasure
  - At the end, everything becomes intrinsically beautiful
- Visual Style as Moral Vision
  - Embedded in what you've seen.

## Lecture 18 - *Grand Illusion*

### I. Camera

- Invisible witness: respectful, attentive, restless

### II. Actors

- Von Stroheim: The man you love to hate
- Gabin: Mad proletarian

### III. Themes

- Prison camp as microcosm
- Barriers, boundaries
- Historical transition

### IV. Renoir's maturity

- Character
- Plot
- The title: how many grand illusions?

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Film viewing tonight:

Renoir, Jean. *The Grand Illusion*. 1937.

- As Bazin makes clear, Renoir liberated film from its unnecessary ties to older art forms
  - Renoir's films have a certain impulse to avoid the plot in favor of investigating the beauty of the world, even if it doesn't seem relevant to the story
  - It's as though the work of the camera is that of an anthropologist
  - The style of poetic realism is a purely cinematic style, one that acknowledges that what you see through the camera is only a tiny chunk of the world, and that life continues outside of the frame
  - Renoir makes you aware of three-dimensionality
  - Renoir explored the features of the camera in a totally new way
- Renoir's camera
  - Mise en scene style
    - Long takes
    - The camera's almost constantly, subtly moving, but it follows the content of the scene
    - Editing is much less prominent
  - In-camera editing
    - The camera does the editing work while it's watching

- You can almost feel the small, nervous decisions that the camera's making
    - There's a kind of tentative respect for the complexities of the world present in the movement of the camera
  - Location filming
    - Renoir hated the studio
    - He almost always filmed in real places or buildings, whether indoors or outdoors
  - Commitment to true light and true sound
    - It's very rare in his work to have music that's superimposed on the action
    - The music in the scene is generated by an actor within the scene, whether by singing, instrument, etc.
    - Diegetic sound
    - He insisted on natural light
      - This was very difficult to do in his day – film wasn't very light sensitive
      - However, this choice enhances plausibility
  - Fluid, moving camera
    - The camera is always moving in some way, shifting around, changing its focal length, etc.
    - The camera is an expression of the audience's gaze
    - In any image there is a foreground, a midground, and a background
- Visual style as moral style
  - There's a quality of openness in the way the camera behaves, which has value, moral implications
  - These implications have to do with the fact that an attentive viewer can understand the world, but we have to be very respectful of the world's complexity
- *Grand Illusion*
  - Oddly lighthearted, for a war film
  - Foot-washing scene – echoes a story of Jesus washing feet in the bible
  - Characters of very different social strata interact
  - The sense of life going on outside the scene is very strong
  - Profound similarities between Robert Altman and Renoir, or between Orson Wells and Renoir
  - Clip: from *Grand Illusion*
    - Note the motion of the camera
    - Note the people moving on the other side of the window
    - The French prisoners are eating much better food than their German captors
    - Note how unbelievably concretely each of the characters are defined – they're hugely different from each other

- The camera moves so that we follow all the characters and experience the space of the entire room
  - Even when it's not making large movements, the camera shakes and adjusts slightly – it never stays still
  - There are at least four different social classes or positions that are discussed
  - There are class tensions (though not class hostilities) dramatized here.
  - The dinner party becomes a microcosm of French society, with so many different class positions involved
  
- Actors in *Grand Illusion*
  - The French audience would have had certain expectations for Gabin's character – like John Wayne or Jack Nicholson, he had developed a type of character that he always played and that the audience expected
    - The way that Renoir uses this is very subtle
  - Similarly, there's another character that the audience expects to be evil and morally repugnant, but who turns out to be much more gentle, complicated, and interesting
    - Note the point where he starts speaking to the French aristocrat in English
    - In a way, they have more in common than either of them has with their lower class compatriots
    - The first World War marked the death knell of aristocratic Europe
  - Note the way that the French aristocrat is treated
    - He is less open than the other Frenchmen somehow – he has a certain reserve
    - There is sometimes a class separation and tension between him and the other characters, though he likes them and they like him
  - There is nobody in this film without imperfections, and there is also nobody without human, redeeming qualities
    - The Germans are sometimes kind to their French prisoners – this is not a film about bitter enmity
  
- Themes
  - What separates people from one another?
  - Social class
  - Language
    - Note the scene where Gabin takes a tremendous risk to try to inform an English prisoner of the tunnel they've made – but he can't communicate, due to the language barrier
  - Barriers and boundaries
    - The barriers and cultural traditions that separate one nation from another may have the same stupid arbitrariness that the physical geographical lines between countries have

- Note what the camera does in the scene where the French soldiers stand up to sing their national anthem
- Pay attention to the complexity in the balance of character, with French soldiers who sometimes seem greedy or petty, and German soldiers who are sometimes very kind
- Historical transition
  - The class balance of the world is shifting – the upper classes are becoming less important, less powerful
  - Comradeship, respect for one’s enemy, respect for people of other nationalities
  - Think about the title of the film – what are the grand illusions that it wants to remind us of?
    - Two of the characters spend the winter sheltered by a German widow
      - They become very close – unbelievably so
        - One of the soldiers has a love affair with the widow – he claims he will come back, but this is very difficult to believe
        - The two soldiers become like fathers to the widow’s daughter
      - If you think about it, this seems like a grand illusion
        - It seems like an illusion of comradeship and the crossing of barriers and boundaries
    - This film is made on the eve of the second World War
      - It exposes the fallacy of believing that the first World War was the “war to end wars”
    - Film itself is a grand illusion – it isn’t real

## Lecture 19 -- Italian Neorealism

- I. The Opening of *Bicycle Thieves*
  - The multiplicity principle
- II. Historical Context
  - WW II
  - Italian film under Fascism
  - Hollywood film
- III. Origins
  - Italian, German, French
- IV. Key Features
  - Character vs plot, mise en scene, the contemporary world
- V. Central Figures
  - Cesare Zavattini (1902-77)
  - Luchino Visconti (1906-76)
    - *Obsession* (1942) *The Earth Trembles* (1948)
  - Roberto Rossellini (1906-77)
    - *Open City* (1945)
  - Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)
- VI. The Neorealist Counter-plot
  - The beginning of *Open City*

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- A note about the distinction between art and entertainment:
  - There are levels of success that different entertainment forms have.
    - No one would confuse an escapist melodrama with a great film by Renoir or Hitchcock
  - It's important to learn how to make these distinctions
  - However, the difference is never simple
  - Most movies contain some of both.
    - Parts of the film will jump out at us as compelling
    - The performances might be richer than the actual story
  - The crucial element of works of art is multiplicity
    - Every piece of the film works double-duty, or triple or quadruple, and so on
    - There are always multiple levels (which is not to say that the surface is less important than the depths)
    - The details register in more than one way
    - There are multiple facets
  - Clip: the opening of *Bicycle Thieves*
    - Men are shaping up hoping to get work

- Notice that the camera work is similar to that of Renoir
      - This camera work is technically impressive
    - Notice the multiplicity:
      - You can see the conditions of post-WWI Rome
        - So many people without work for so long
        - Huge apartment buildings without running water in them
      - There is sociopolitical meaning to all these details
      - Note the relationship between Ricci and his wife
        - He doesn't notice that she's carrying such heavy buckets by herself
        - He doesn't do this because he's mean, but only because he's distracted about the job
        - They're close
        - He takes only one bucket and helps her down – they're partners
      - Notice how there's nothing growing anywhere
        - It's like a desert
      - All of this is demonstrated by the action – nobody has to tell you
    - Neorealist films like *Bicycle Thieves* are impressively free from motives of profit
  - The multiplicity principle works for all forms of art: films, music, visual art, literature...
- Historical context of Neo-realist films
  - Actually a brief period, though it was hugely influential
  - Very successful internationally
  - Two academy awards (*Shoeshine* and *Bicycle Thieves*) made Neo-realism an international movement
  - Its films were very serious, and dedicated to describing social and moral issues
  - By the mid 50s and the late 50s Neo-realism was just a memory
  - The most important thing about the Neo-realist movement is that it appears right after WWII, and it's about the devastation of that period
    - 35% of all the permanent buildings in Europe had been bombed
    - 25% of the Polish population was killed
    - Unemployment in Europe was at least at 25%
  - The Neo-realist films are in part a reaction against other styles of film making
    - Under Mussolini, a style of escapist melodrama had been popular
    - These films described the minor troubles of the upper classes
    - The films were called white telephone films, after the more elaborate white phones that the wealthy used (instead of ugly black ones)

- The Neo-realist films explicitly saw themselves as a reaction against the escapist tendencies of these white telephone films
- They were also a reaction against the escapism of Hollywood films
  - Note the moment in *Bicycle Thieves* when Ricci has to put up a poster of an American movie star, and he's told to be careful not to put any wrinkles in it
  - This can be seen as a commentary – in Neo-realist films, the stars had wrinkles, because they looked like real people
- The great theorist of Neo-realism: Cesare Zavattini
  - He wrote about these movements
- Origins of Neo-realism
  - Influential movements:
    - The chamber film – a German movement
      - The whole film often took place in one room
    - Street films
      - similar to chamber films, but it took things outside, to see real poverty
    - Poetic realism – Jean Renoir and the other French directors
      - Aimed for authenticity
- Key Principles of Neo-realism
  - Note the use of non-professional actors
    - The neo-realist directors were skilled at getting great performances from non-professionals
    - The actor who played Ricci in *Bicycle Thieves* wasn't a professional
  - Improvisation – aimed at reality
  - Outdoor camera and commitment to using real spaces
    - The neo-realists were willing to sacrifice a certain gloss in order to get the realism of actual spaces
  - Mise-en-scene style
  - Documentary flavor to these films
    - They're interested in real people, and sometimes you begin to feel like the characters actually exist
  - Clip: from a film that tells an anti-Fascist fable
    - The children have essentially been acting as anti-fascist terrorists
    - They're returning from an insurrection, great heroes of the war
    - But when they return, they are instantly children again, and it begins to feel like a comedy
    - The immensely crowded apartment says something meaningful about the living conditions in Rome at the time
    - We can see how much human destruction and distraction have been crammed into this small space

- Later on, we see a small child on a potty – it’s probably the first toilet scene of Western film – it says something about where Neo-realist films are willing to go
- Central Figures
  - Cesare Zavattini (1902-77) – the great theorist
  - Roberto Rossellini (1906-77) – the director of a great series of Neo-realist films
  - Luchino Visconti (1906-76) – often identified as the first Neo-realist
    - Great masterpiece: The Earth Trembles
  - Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)
  - The influence of Neo-realism is almost impossible to exaggerate
    - It extended globally
    - It was very influential in the U.S.
    - It was influential on the emerging forms of American television
    - A series of early television plays were deeply influenced by Neo-realism
    - The influence extended to Asia, and all over the world

**Lecture 20 -- De Sica, *Bicycle Thieves***

I. Vittorio De Sica (1902-74)

- 1942 *The Children Are Watching Us*
- 1946 *Shoeshine*
- 1948 *Bicycle Thieves*
- 1950 *Miracle in Milan*
- 1952 *Umberto D*
- 1960 *Two Women*
- 1971 *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*

II. *Bicycle Thieves*

- Structure: organic form
- Social themes
- Character: father and son
- The title

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Film viewing tonight:

De Sica, Vittorio. *Bicycle Thieves*. 1948.

- The Neo-Realist Counterplot
  - Striking the balance, with a story that has momentum while revealing meaningful, realistic character
  - The effort to make films that grew organically from reality
  - Counterplot: the tendency of Neo-Realist films to undermine the expectation of what comes next
  - Robert Altman and Renoir used some of this as well, but the Neo-Realists really brought this practice to its height
  - The natural rhythms of life, with all its details
    - Comparison: James Joyce treats realistic detail in a similar manner in *Ulysses*
  - Plot does not dominate the character
    - The story embodies the nature of the character, rather than the character acting in a given way to satisfy the demands of the story
  - The film and the camera might follow a particular plot line, but they are willing to be interrupted by detours in the character's life
  - These films are about life, and they move between comedy and seriousness, different stories, and different details, just as life moves through all these.
  - Passage by Andre Bazin, about the moment when the son has to stop to urinate while his father is trying to chase the bicycle thieves

- “That ambiguity that characterizes any fact”
    - The boy learns that his father is mortal, not a god
  - Clip from *Umberto D*: The despairing Umberto on a bus
    - The audience thinks Umberto might be ready to take his own life
    - Notice how the man next to him on the bus looks just as upset
    - An implication is that there are infinitely many stories, all of them just as complicated
  - Clip from Truffaut: children watching a puppet show
    - You can see how the older boys are cut off from the innocence of the rest of the children
    - The camera becomes endlessly interested in the magic of those many children’s faces, even though those children never appear in the film again
    - The endless complexity of reality is constantly threatening the forward momentum of the story
  - Clip from *Bicycle Thieves*
    - Notice how the camera follows the two beggar children after the man kicks one of them.
    - They’re not directly relevant to the story, but they’re still interesting
- De Sica’s Career
  - De Sica was an excellent actor himself, though his greatest achievements are as a director
  - His most luminous films were made in a short period:
    - *Shoeshine* (1946)
      - About shoeshine boys in postwar Rome
      - De Sica was definitely sympathetic to communist causes
      - It might seem a little heavy-handed in some ways, such as with the boy’s death at the end
      - You can feel that the film-makers are trying to give you a lesson about the hardship of life for children in post-war Rome
    - *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)
      - The ending is more complex than that of *Shoeshine*
    - *Miracle in Milan* (1950)
      - From a novel
      - An orphan escapes from an orphanage and goes to live in a shanty town in Milan. He works miracles that are hurtful only to the capitalist class.
      - It’s a sort of communist fantasy
    - *Umberto D* (1952)
  - *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* (1971)
    - About the buildup to the Holocaust
    - It’s also a coming of age story

- The main character is a working-class scholar, but he's denied access to the libraries, and so he comes into contact with the life of a very wealthy Jewish Italian family when they let him use their private library.
- *Bicycle Thieves*
  - The film has a perfect organic naturalness
  - There is a powerful momentum, but the momentum originates from life itself, not from any artificially constructed plot
  - Watch the power of the scene where Ricci and his wife go to pawn their linens to get back the bicycle
    - Notice the huge quantities of linens you see in storage – it's as though all the sheets in Rome have gotten pawned off
  - We're set up to be constantly terrified that the bicycle will be stolen, before it ever is
  - Organic structure of the film: everything that follows has to do with how Ricci responds to the loss of his bicycle
  - The whole film takes place in a weekend
  - The story is so natural, that you're not aware that anything fictitious has been added.
  - Institutions – they all seem to be failures
    - The police are of no help
  - As the father begins to show his failings under the stress of losing his bicycle, the son begins to show his strength
    - They begin to switch places
  - The exploration of character also becomes an exploration of the physical spaces of Rome
  - There is an immense emotional depth to their interactions
    - Note the scene where Ricci becomes terrified that his son might have drowned
    - Ricci takes him to a restaurant that he can't afford in an effort to apologize to his son
    - The restaurant becomes a powerful exploration of class differences
  - When Ricci finally finds the thief, the thief is protected by his neighbors
  - It's important that the title is *Bicycle Thieves*, not *Bicycle Thief*
    - The film suggests that we're all thieves in a certain sense
    - We're driven to it by desperation
  - Ricci's son rescues him twice
    - Ricci looks like he might be arrested or beaten to death, but his son's presence brings mercy from an authority figure
  - There's a moral and psychological complexity to this film, along with a inspiring and generous sense of human nature

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