

GAH Course Proposal

Baseball in Film

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Baseball in Film

Prerequisite: Not open to freshmen.

This course is a critical study of films about baseball for adults and children. Students discuss films as cultural artifact, and themes of interpersonal support; individual responsibility; hubris and humility; and sacrifice. Other topics include the aging athlete; barnstorming; fair play; fantasy; Negro Leagues; racism; sandlot ball; scandal; sexism; tragedy; and biography.

Attribute: W2.

A. General Studies Objectives

Objectives:

As a GAH course, *Baseball in Film* compels students to observe and reflect on how baseball reflects the time and place in which it was made, or that it portrays. It “seek[s] to develop the ability of students to make critical and aesthetic judgments,” and “introduce[s] perspectives, techniques and attitudes that can be used in the further study of the arts and humanities and suggest[s] ways of continuing to examine such issues.” Through study of films and their recurring themes, students analyze the relationship of the fictional themes to actual current and historical situations.

Baseball in Film brings “a number of the conceptual challenges and issues that artists and humanists confront, bringing a variety of approaches and viewpoints to bear on these.” In examining the biographies of baseball figures through film, students will learn how attitudes and other aspects of the culture of a period influenced a person’s life experiences, and use the lens of the present to “explain . . . historical transformations.”

Course Category:

This course is a GAH in the Tradition and Background sub-category. *Baseball in Film* offers breadth in the study of a very specific type of cultural artifact: the baseball film. Through the study of films, their literary themes, fictional characters or portrayals of historical figures, common threads, and plot development, students will attempt to gain an understanding of how a baseball film is a product of its time and place in history.

B. Course Description

Baseball in Film looks at film and its provenance. We will view films that are considered “baseball films,” those that have baseball as a significant backdrop, in its primary story line, or in its main characters. The films can be those made for general audiences (adults and children), children primarily, or mature audiences (rated R).

We will consider the films as literature, in that they have thematic elements, primary and auxiliary story lines, and fictional characters or those based on people in history. As it is, several

of the films are based on novels. In treating films as literature, we will look at some of their dominant themes: interpersonal support, teamwork, and cooperation; individual responsibility or the striving to achieve personal or team goals; the fall from grace if a character exhibits too much hubris, and the rewards that are reaped by characters who are humble and modest; fair play and integrity; and sacrifice, both as an element of the baseball games, as well as plot. In addition to these common themes, we will look for others.

Some films are set in the minor leagues, which allows the spectator to be closer to both the action on the field, as well as the lives of the players. We look at the aging athlete; though still relatively young, s/he can be considered over-the-hill at age 35. We view films that follow a barnstorming team composed of Negro Leaguers, which leads to our discussions on racism. And we view films that portray harsh realities (scandal, serious illness), as well as those that incorporate fantasy.

The baseball film is a genre, and has many common elements. Even the darker films, those dealing with scandal, mental illness, and death, still retain similarities with the more typical, idealized baseball story.

C. Course Proposal Narrative

The course will be hybrid, with two-thirds face-to-face (f2f), and one-third online. Discussions will be held in class and online. The online component will include peer review of online commentary, the submission of writing assignments, and additional, required discussions.

New Learning Opportunities:

Students will better understand the idea of a cultural artifact as a reflection of its time and place in history. Film and literature are cultural artifacts that are generally affected by when they are produced; baseball films, however, do not necessarily fit this pattern. While Marx and Engels theorized that a person's social class would affect how s/he behaves (the oppression of the proletariat would cause them to revolt against the bourgeoisie), and most social theorists and philosophers see a connection between social forces (social class, education, economic status, etc.) and beliefs, baseball films seem to defy this connection. It is not as clear in baseball literature as it is in film, this pattern that occurs in nearly every other aspect of human culture.

In this course, we examine the extracted writings of a few classical theorists (e.g., Marx, Weber, Mannheim) and discuss why baseball films defy patterns of cultural artifacts as reflections of social and historical reality. We also compare films with the novels on which they are based (e.g., *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *Eight Men Out*, *Field of Dreams*-*Shoeless Joe*, *The Natural*), looking at the differences in how they reflect structural reality.

Students also learn how to identify themes in the films, through class discussion and online discussion. They will conduct their own research on social problems, such as racism, and speculate on how these are portrayed in the films. This research will be posted online, and students will comment on one another's ideas. Finally, students will learn to become better writers, through both online critique and in-class instruction.

Student learning objectives include: understanding how film is a product of its time and place in history; learning how to identify themes in baseball films; understanding the portrayal of social problems in baseball films (e.g., racism and segregation, World War II, women in baseball); and improving writing skills, and knowing how and when to cite sources.

Students will be viewing approximately 6-8 films from the following list. I may include additional films not on this list, depending on availability.

1. Angels in the Outfield, 1951
2. Bang the Drum Slowly, 1973
3. The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings, 1976
4. Bull Durham, 1988
5. Damn Yankees, 1958
6. Eight Men Out, 1988
7. Fear Strikes Out, 1957
8. Field of Dreams, 1989
9. Hustle, 2004
10. It Happens Every Spring, 1949
11. The Jackie Robinson Story, 1950
12. A League of Their Own, 1992
13. Long Gone, 1987
14. Major League, 1989
15. Moneyball, 2011
16. Mr. Baseball, 1992
17. The Natural, 1984
18. Pastime, 1991
19. The Pride of St. Louis, 1952
20. The Rookie, 2002
21. The Sandlot, 1993
22. Soul of the Game, 1996
23. The Stratton Story, 1949
24. Trouble with the Curve, 2012
25. A Winner Never Quits, 1986

Interdisciplinary Nature:

This course is primarily a review of literature through film (film as cultural artifact), but it also deals with social philosophies (sociology of knowledge, social interaction/Erving Goffman, symbolic interactionism/George Herbert Mead). We look at all films and literature as products of a historical period, and by a writer/director with a particular idea, though most of the films are from the last two and a half decades.

Difference from a Program Course in an Academic Discipline:

Not only does this course draw from a number of disciplines, but it addresses the critical review of baseball films from an interdisciplinary perspective. Each school of thought, whether it be a film critic's take on the film or a classical sociologist's theory on culture as a product of society, is given weight in the discussion of films.

Organization of the Course:

The course will be taught as a hybrid, with approximately two-thirds of it given face-to-face, and one-third online. The course will need to meet once a week for 2.5 hours to allow for the showing of the films, most of which are two hours long. Many of the days or evenings the class meets will be used for viewing the films.

Each film will generate discussions both online and in class. As indicated above, discussions will be centered around a thematic analysis, and grounded in theory. Writing assignments will be critiqued online, and then discussed in class. Writing instruction will be given both online and in class. Students, at times, will be expected to read other students' writing assignments and comment on the assertions made; the intention of this exercise is to help develop students' critical analysis of the course content.

Readings

The text for the course is:

Stars, Stripes And Diamonds: American Culture and the Baseball Film by Marshall G. Most, Robert Rudd - McFarland - 2006 - Paperback - ISBN 0786425180 (\$29.95)

Additional articles will be assigned and made accessible through Blackboard. These include:

- From *Great Baseball Films, From Right Off the Bat to A League of Their Own* (1994) by Rob Edelman, Citadel Press, Carol Publishing – “Baseball and Race,” “Baseball and Fantasy,” “Baseball and Women.”
- From *The Baseball Film in Postwar America: A Critical Study, 1948-1962* (2011) by Ron Briley, McFarland & Company – “The Babe Ruth Story and the Myth of American Innocence.”
- From *Baseball, Literature, Culture: Essays, 2006-2007* (2008) by Ronald E. Kates, McFarland & Company – “Jim Bunning's Perfect Game, At the Intersection of Baseball, History, and Self” (Carl Schinasi).
- From *A Century of Children's Baseball Stories*, by Debra A. Dagavarian (1990), Meckler Corp., Stadium Books – “Introduction.”
- From *Saying It Ain't So: American Values as Revealed in Children's Baseball Stories, 1880-1950* by Debra A. Dagavarian (1987), Peter Lang Publishing – “Sociohistorical Significance of Baseball” and “The Context of the Themes: Structure of the Game.”

The work of the classical social and philosophical theorists will also be made accessible through Blackboard, generally by the posting of excerpts.

Excerpts from:

Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, T. (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality*

Goffman, Erving. (1967) *Interaction Ritual* and (1961) *Encounters*

Mannheim, Karl. (1936) *Ideology and Utopia*

Marx, Karl, and Engels, F. (1947) *The German Ideology*

Mead, George Herbert. (1974) *Mind, Self, and Society*

Assignments:

Students will be given writing assignments of different lengths. Some examples of these assignments are contrasting two characters in one film (or two characters in two films) and how they change from the beginning of the film to the end (what they learn and how events in the film change them); fantasy in film, the role it plays, and why it is used; themes in the films and how they are illustrated; social issues and how they are depicted in relation to historical fact (i.e., racism, sexism, rural to urban migration, war, etc.).

In addition to these assignments, students will be presented with thought-provoking questions to respond to online. This will present them with the opportunity to continue discussions begun in class, and in particular, allow students who were not able to participate in the f2f discussion write their thoughts online. Students are expected to discuss issues online as well as in class; discourse and interaction among students in the online environment will be required.

Students will also produce a creative project as a capstone, such as writing several scenes involving two or more characters in a film they watched that did not actually happen in the film; producing a video (graphic or filmed) that illustrates one or two of the literary themes we discussed; writing two or more scenes for an original film.

D. Alignment of Learning Goals and Assignments

GAH Goals:

Baseball in Film introduces students to the study of film as literature. As stated above, it encourages students “to develop the ability . . . to make critical and aesthetic judgments.”

Assignments: Writing about the development of characters throughout a film; writing on the use of fantasy in film.

A thematic analysis of each film will allow students to develop familiarity with “perspectives, techniques and attitudes that can be used in the further study of the arts and humanities and suggest ways of continuing to examine such issues.”

Assignments: Written discussions on historical study of the period portrayed in the film, or the point in history in which the film was produced.

General Studies Objectives:

Objective 5: Ability to write and speak effectively and persuasively.

Assignments: Writing assignments; f2f and online discussions; critical analyses of others’ works.

Objective 8: Appreciation and understanding of artistic experiences as reflections of the depths and quirks of the human spirit.

Assignments: Analyses of characters in films and their transformations; creative project.

Objective 11: Awareness of the achievements and perspectives of people of different nations and cultures, and of different races, genders and ethnicities.

Assignments: Online and f2f discussions on racism and sexism in films and portrayal of mental or physical illness.

IDEA Goals: Essential and Important

Developing skills in expressing oneself orally or in writing.

Assignments: Online and f2f critical discussion of films; certain online discussions will be open to critical analysis by other students in the class.

Developing creative capacities (writing, inventing, designing, performing in art, music, drama, etc.)

Assignment: Creative project, such as writing film scenes involving characters from the films we watched or characters from the students' own imaginations, or producing a video (or other creative project of the student's design).

Gaining broader understanding and appreciation of intellectual-cultural activity (music, science, literature, etc.)

Assignments: Discussions on specific films' treatment of racism, sexism, scandal; analysis of themes in films as literature, characters and their renaissance.

Course Content Goals:

Understanding how film is a product of its time and place in history.

Assignments: Review of classical theorists on sociology of knowledge and discussion of how films are a cultural artifact; discussion of baseball films and whether or not they represent cultural artifact.

Learning how to identify themes in baseball films.

Assignments: Online and f2f discussions of themes in each film and how characters and plot serve to illustrate them.

Understanding the portrayal of social problems in baseball films (e.g., racism and segregation, World War II, women in baseball).

Assignments: Viewing films in which such social problems are portrayed; discussions of social problems during the historical period of the film's setting and a writing assignment on one of these.

Improving writing skills, and knowing how and when to cite sources.

Assignments: Online and f2f critical discussion of films. Classroom instruction on citation with tools such as instructional videos and online tutorials on avoiding plagiarism.

Attribute Goals:

W2

Baseball in Film merits the W2 designation because students will be writing assignments of different lengths throughout the course, and they will receive feedback on each. Students will be instructed in different types of writing, through example (excerpts of published pieces that will illustrate the specific type of writing for each assignment) and class discussion of such. Students review excerpts from some of the best baseball novels, poetry, histories, research, biographies, and short stories, and analyze critically what makes the writing strong (or not).

Students will be required to view the Stockton Library's video tutorial, "Plagiarism 101" <http://intraweb.stockton.edu/eyos/page.cfm?siteID=86&pageID=382> and at least one online tutorial on avoiding plagiarism: Indiana University Bloomington's How to Recognize Plagiarism https://www.indiana.edu/~istd/plagiarism_test.html; Purdue Online Writing Lab

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/1/>; University of Southern Mississippi
<http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php>; Rutgers University
<http://library.camden.rutgers.edu/EducationalModule/Plagiarism/>. Additionally, I will spend time instructing the students on citation in class. Approximately 20% of the course will be devoted to writing instruction.