

## FIL 2400

### THE NEXT STAGE: 1940s AND 1950s

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As America became an important part of the global economy and political landscape, the question of *who* America really was came more and more to the forefront. As the “popular” medium of entertainment, movies stepped forward to answer that question. The late 1930s through the 1950s were the “Glory Days” of the American cinema, a time before television when entertainment and news came through the movie theatre. All of your films this week come from that time period and reflect several basic elements of the culture in which they were made. This week, I want to ask you to look at those films in term of the cultural trends they reflect.

Again, you may need to do some research. You WILL need to do some serious critical thinking.

#### Stagecoach – Dir. John Ford (1939)

Stagecoach represents one of the 2 truly American genres of film – the Western. There is something just inherently *American* in the Western. It represents many of the values that came to define what “America” meant in the minds of Americans, both in 1939 and now. As you watch Stagecoach, I want you to think about 2 things:

1. What is the relationship between man and nature/the wild? Where do you see this in the film? Watch the mise en scene as well as the actual events of the film – the landscape and framing of the movie is an important part. Some critics have actually suggested that the landscape is a character in the film.
  - Who/what is the hero (protagonist) and the enemy (antagonist) in the film?
  - How does the tension between civilization and the “uncivilized” show up in the film?
2. What does the film say about what is truly “American”? What characteristics are praised in the movie? If the Western is the vision of what makes America great and what defines us...what makes us great and defines us?

**Your other 3 choices are all tied into different parts of culture in their era...pick ONE and answer its questions.**

**His Girl Friday - Dir. Howard Hawks (1940)**

His Girl Friday is one of the great generation of “talkies” that relied on quick, witty dialogue and situation comedy. If you don’t want to pay close attention, this is not the movie for you. The film retains its humor 68 years later because of its breakneck pace and its intelligence. Answer 2 questions for me regarding what the film says about the larger culture of the time:

1. What does the film tell you about the reliability of the news and the people who write it? Tell me how you got that answer.
2. Gender roles play a really big part in this film. Tell me about the gender roles in the film. What is attractive to whom? In the end, what definition of gender is “blessed” or encouraged by the film?

**Singin’ in the Rain – Dir. Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly (1952)**

Okay. It’s a musical. But it’s a bit more than that as well...

This movie is reflexive – it’s a movie about the movie industry. Consider the 2 questions below in that context:

1. Why would a 1952 film be interested in looking back at the film industry of 25 years earlier? (yeah...that’s an open ended question. You better be able to back up what ever you tell me)
2. The film focuses on the differences between appearance and reality- one of the greatest themes of literature. Pick one instance of the appearance vs. reality theme and describe it to me. How does this theme play out...in other words, which one “wins” in the end – appearance or reality?

**Vertigo – Dir. Alfred Hitchcock (1958)**

Ahhh...Hitchcock. Vertigo is just a weird film. There’s no way around it. Many people consider it the best film Hitchcock ever made. It’s disturbing on a variety of levels.

1. Hitchcock is the master of Mise en Scene. Watch how he manipulates the placement of his actors and the environment around them to create a mood or a tone. Choose one scene in the film and tell me how the mise en scene brings out the theme of the film. (Please notice, you need to know what mise en scene is *and* what the themes of the film are to do this)
2. The real fear and horror in Vertigo isn’t about your typical knife-wielding homicidal maniac. It’s about something far more insidious. What is the true horror in Vertigo, and how could it be tied

into the culture of the time. (*You might want to check out a guy named Joseph McCarthy before you answer that*).