

English 414a:
American Film to 1945
Fall 2022

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Course Description:

The critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin regarded film, then an emergent phenomenon, as the medium that best reflected the “shock” and cultural dislocation of twentieth-century modernity. Film, Benjamin argued, enacted the breakdown of the “aura” of artistic tradition, but its unique technological qualities also offered the possibility of new analytical and political

vision. American cinema has proven Benjamin correct, in some respects: early films played on the potential of shock, often using what Tom Gunning has called “the trick” to appeal to their new audiences, largely composed of immigrants in the early years. Over time, as continuity narrative became the dominant mode of twentieth-century film production, new questions arose as to whether Hollywood’s industrial-scale cinema had finally dulled the political edges Benjamin had theorized. This course will offer a survey of pre-1945 feature films and shorts in a range of genres to explore such questions related to the birth and development of American cinema.



Josef von Sternberg, Docks of New York (1928) (public domain)

Proposed Assignments:

- Viewing responses (20%)
- Article summary and response (10%)
- Annotated bibliography (10%)
- Thesis and introduction draft (10%)
- Research paper (30%)
- Final exam (20%)

Proposed Texts (partial list):

- D. W. Griffith, “A Corner in Wheat”
- Lois Weber, “Suspense”
- Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times*
- Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*
- Buster Keaton, *Sherlock Jr.*
- F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*
- Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*
- Maya Deren, “Meshes of the Afternoon”