

Title: Millennium Movies: Cinema and Culture from 1999 to 9/11

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Overall: This course revisits landmark films released in the U.S. and around the world between 1999 and 2001—movies that, with twenty years of hindsight, already reveal different facets and implications. Cinema itself changed around this period, evolving from a principally photographic medium to an increasingly digitized one. Hollywood showed unusual boldness with narrative form. National film cultures from Mexico to Iran surged with renewed vitality. Meanwhile, the dawn of a new millennium prompted complex blends of nostalgia, anxiety, and creative speculation, regarding topics that still preoccupy us today: thin lines between truth and illusion, resurgent threats of fascism, and fluidities of gender and racial identity. Near the end of this mini-era, the events of 9/11 forced another kind of global introspection. In that dark hour, movies reminded us of how we see and what we recall differently from country to country, but also expanded our perspectives and, hopefully, our empathies.

Jan 12: *American Beauty* (USA, 1999, dir. Sam Mendes, 122 min.)

The final Best Picture winner of the 20th century was an atypical choice—not a period piece or sweeping epic, but a quasi-satiric drama, blending familiar archetypes of U.S. suburbia with contemporary fixations: homophobia, neo-Nazism, and new, voyeur-friendly technologies. With a flamboyant style that asks us to “look closer” at every image, this polarizing blockbuster joined other American movies from its year (including *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Election*, *Office Space*, and *Magnolia*) in depicting middle- and upper-class white men in millennial free fall, straining comically and not-so-comically to recover forms of power and contentment that seemed to slip through their fingers.

Jan 19: *All About My Mother* (Spain, 1999, dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 105 min.)

While U.S. movies centered men in varying stages of mid-life crisis, Spain’s most famous director celebrated women as paragons of resilience, individually and collectively. Like many other 1999 movies, from *Being John Malkovich* to *The Talented Mr. Ripley* to *Boys Don’t Cry*, but more buoyantly than most, *All About My Mother* upends notions of individual identity—including through its calico approach to structure and style. Moreover, well before “transgender” became a household term, Almodovar’s movie was one of many Y2K films suggesting that in the 21st century, strict male/female binaries might become relics of the past.

Jan 26: *Fight Club* (USA, 1999, dir. David Fincher, 139 min.)

David Fincher's opus about capitalism and schizophrenia, petty mischief and domestic terrorism, was the first studio flop to become a blazing success on the brand-new DVD format. This is no coincidence: *Fight Club*, like its sibling *The Matrix*, pushes the celluloid-based motion picture to new extremes of digital enhancement. Meanwhile, the growth of its cult following mirrored actions in the movie, spreading semi-secretly among lone viewers and avid undergrounds. As with *The Matrix*, the movie's reception evolved in dangerous directions. Do alt-right adherents today distort the messages of these innovative trailblazers, or are they speaking these films' language?

Feb 2: *Bamboozled* (USA, 2000, dir. Spike Lee, 135 min.) — *substitution, Jan 2021*

At the turn of the new millennium, Spike Lee released one of his career-defining projects, a *Network*-style satire that demonstrates how century-old legacies of anti-Black stereotyping and minstrel performance remained alive and well—in some ways, more popular than ever—in the modern media landscape. In addition to studying this technically innovative, thematically provocative film, we will examine how other, contemporaneous films stoked their own highly charged debates about Black representations in U.S. cinema (including the Oscar winners *Monster's Ball* and *Training Day*) and see short clips of local and international features that offered less hidebound, more emancipated visions of the pasts, presents, and futures of Blackness.

Feb 9: *Children of Heaven* (Iran, 1997, dir. Majid Majidi, 89 min.)

While so many movies in and beyond Hollywood exploited new technologies and unsettled narrative forms, a great deal of Iranian cinema went back to neo-realist basics and elevated the poetry of everyday life, minimally embellished. The child-driven, Oscar-nominated crowd-pleaser *Children of Heaven*, released in the U.S. two years after its debut in Iran, exemplifies that thread in the country's rich and diverse cinematic tapestry, seldom available to Americans before the turn of the millennium. Despite sensationalist depictions of Iran in U.S. media, its movies became a cause célèbre for an art form that seemed to be changing irrevocably.

Feb 16: *Amélie* (France, 2001, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 122 min.)

As “foreign film” markets withered in America, *Amélie* raised hopes that non-English movies could still become global hits. Nonetheless, this sprightly, inventive romance stoked controversy: was this gleaming, suspiciously all-white vision of France recognizable to anyone who lived there—any more so than the phantasmagoric Paris of *Moulin Rouge*? Was its cheerfully fabricated setting coincidental to its mode of production, as digital fakery now saturated every genre, even in the country that pioneered cinematic realism? *Amélie* was one of many movies that inspired scholars to ask if “film” remained a coherent term, as our lives became more digitally animated.

Feb 23: *Y tu mamá también* (Mexico, 2001, dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 106 min.)

After years of artistic dormancy, Mexican cinema roared back to life post-2000, promising at last to portray the “real Mexico.” One game-changing title was Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también*, a giddy, erotic road movie that juxtaposes idealized, adolescent views of the nation against grimmer realities. *Y tu mamá también* itself, touted as Cuarón’s homecoming after unhappy years in Hollywood, is an ambivalent symbol of the new globalization, an “authentic” Mexican film reliant on U.S. funds and thoroughly tailored to transnational corporate demands... while somehow still emerging as a frisky, subversive artifact hailed around the world for its independent vision.

Mar 2: *In the Mood for Love* (Hong Kong, 2000, dir. Wong Kar-wai, 98 min.)

As movies ceded more cultural standing to TV and other media, and the world evolved in unbeautiful directions, Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* made a sumptuous case for swoony, old-fashioned cinematic pleasures. As reliant as *Y tu mamá también* on transnational funding and global marketing, *In the Mood for Love* proved that even the most aesthetically lush, export-ready cinemas can still furnish socially and politically trenchant stories, rooted in specific times and places. Meanwhile, Wong emerged as a leading figure in the East Asian cinema that, like those of Iran and Mexico, seemed poised to reignite the medium.

Mar 9: *11'09"01* (Miscellaneous, 2002, eleven directors, 135 min.)

Premiering on the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, *11'09"01* anthologized eleven shorts from eleven countries, each one eleven minutes and nine seconds in length, approaching the event however the directors saw fit. The chapters from Iran, Burkina Faso, and Japan model divergent aesthetics that guarantee we will “see” 9/11 differently in each. Each poses challenges to our cinematic, historical, and moral literacy, but none in the same way. While some suggest hard limits in our comprehension, beyond or within our own cultures, other films suggest that perceptual leaps and new understandings are still possible.