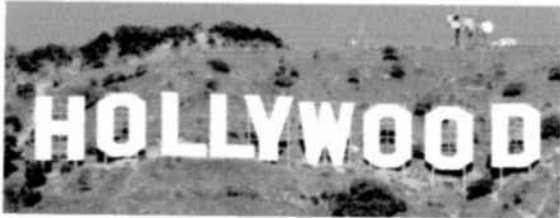


Professor Daniel A. Nathan
AM 233, American Past in Film
TLC 303, TTH 9:40-11:00; M 7:00-10:00
Office: TLC 300 (580-5023)
Office Hours: TTH 1:15-3:00 & by appt.
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What happens when



produces history?

“Much as they may deplore the fact, historians have no monopoly on the past and no franchise as its privileged interpreters to the public.”

—C. Vann Woodward, historian

“A century after the invention of motion pictures, the visual media have become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture.”

—Robert A. Rosenstone, historian

“If historical accuracy were the thing people went to the movies for, historians would be the vice presidents of studios. Every studio would have two or three historians.”

—John Sayles, independent filmmaker

Course Description & Objectives

Films powerfully influence how many people understand the past. “For many,” writes historian Mike Wallace, “because cinematic modes of perception seem so real, moviepast *is* the past.” This course critiques how Hollywood filmmakers have represented American history. It examines Hollywood films as historical documents that reflect (and sometimes reproduce) the ethos or cultural politics of the period in which they were made and first viewed. The intent of the course is *not* to critique films as straightforward history or to assess their accuracy and reliability. After all, most feature films do not make bold “truth” claims about their subjects; they are usually content to remain loosely—sometimes very loosely—connected to their historical referents. Moreover, it would be foolish to expect Hollywood to provide moviegoers with historical truth when myth and fantasy are so much more profitable. Rather, the course encourages students to engage in a dialogue between the past and the present, and to consider the ways in which one particularly vibrant form of popular culture informs (and sometimes obfuscates and subverts) historical understanding. The course will begin by outlining criteria by which to evaluate historical films. Thereafter, we will examine and critique specific films that depict the American past.

The course will heavily stress class discussion, centering upon considerations of the assigned readings (texts should be brought to class) and moving outward to broader questions of interpretation and cultural meaning. Discussions are collective endeavors that demand everyone’s preparation, attendance, and participation. Learning to participate in a discussion involves social and intellectual skills that are an essential part of one’s education. These include: listening to others and learning to absorb and synthesize their remarks; learning to respond constructively and analytically to others’ ideas; learning to develop and articulate positions of one’s own; responding to criticism; and learning to modify or discard an argument as one comes to see another, more satisfactory one. Students are expected to come to class eager to share their ideas about the topics under consideration and to question our readings and one another.

At the end of the course, I expect that we will have learned some critical skills and interdisciplinary modes of analysis, noted connections between the past and the present, and gained a better understanding of some of the ways historical films reconstruct the past and why they matter.

Books

Mark Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*
Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film*
Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*
Robert Brent Toplin, *History By Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*

Films

Victor Fleming, *Gone With the Wind*
D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*
Alan Pakula, *All the President's Men*
Alan Parker, *Mississippi Burning*
Arthur Penn, *Bonnie and Clyde*
Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*
Steven Spielberg, *Amistad*
Oliver Stone, *JFK*
Edward Zwick, *Glory*

Requirements

Course requirements include two papers (the first will be five pages and the second will be 8-10 pages), a group presentation, active class participation and in-class writing assignments, and a final exam. You must complete all assignments in order to pass this course. The break down of grades is as follows:

In-class Writing Assignments & Quizzes	10%
Class Participation	10%
First Exam	10% (October 7)
First Paper	15% (due October 15)
Group Presentation	15%
Second Paper	20% (due December 3)
Final Exam	20% (December 15, 6 PM)

Attendance & Participation

Because the success of the course depends upon your participation, attendance is mandatory. More than three absences will adversely affect your final grade. Active participation requires that you attend class regularly, that you come to class prepared (i.e., having carefully read and thought about the assigned material), and that you share your perspectives, ideas, and questions.

Special Needs

Anyone who has a disability which may require some modification of seating, testing, or other class requirements should see me after class or during my office hours so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Reading Schedule

Getting Started: Assessing Historical Films

- 9/7: Introductions, goals, policies, reading/screening schedule
9/9: No Class—Rosh Hashanah
- 9/14: Lipsitz, “Popular Culture: This Ain’t No Sideshow”
Scott, “The Lasting Picture Show”
- 9/16: Barsam, “What is a Movie?”
Scorsese and Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (film)
- 9/21: Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, vii-22
Sklar, “Historical Films: Scofflaws and the Historical-Cop”
Toplin, “Impact,” from *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*
- 9/23: Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 1-79, 226-246
- 9/28: Foner, “A Conversation Between Eric Foner and John Sayles,” in *Past Imperfect*
West, West, and Dezio, “Film and History: Questions to Filmmakers and Historians”
- 9/30: Spielberg, *Amistad* (film)
- 10/5: Adjaye, “*Amistad* and the Lessons of History”
Thornton, “Liberty or Licence?”
Ansen and Samuels, “*Amistad*’s struggle”
Alter, “The long shadow of slavery”
Foner, “Hollywood Invades the Classroom”
Fontenot, “Black Misery, White Guilt, and *Amistad*”
Lemisch, “Black Agency in the *Amistad* Uprising: Or, You’ve Taken Our Cinque and Gone”
- 10/7: Examination

The Reel Civil War: A Case Study

- 10/12: Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (film)
Litwack, “The Birth of a Nation,” in *Past Imperfect*
Parkhurst, “The Birth of a Nation”
Cobleigh, “Why I Oppose *The Birth of a Nation*”
- 10/14: Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War*, 96-150
Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation* excerpts
- 10/19: Fleming, *Gone With the Wind* (film)
Clinton, “Gone With the Wind,” in *Past Imperfect*
- 10/21: Hollywood Spectator, “David Selznick’s Film Is World’s Greatest”
Moss, “An Open Letter to Mr. Selznick”
Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War*, 183-231
Haskell, Molly. *Frankly, My Dear: Gone with the Wind Revisited* excerpts
- 10/26: Zwick, *Glory* (film)
McPherson, “Glory,” in *Past Imperfect*
- 10/28: Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War*, 276-285
Cullen, “A Few Good Men: *Glory* and the Search for a Just War”
Group presentation

Reading Movies: Practicing Cultural Criticism

- 11/2: Penn, *Bonnie and Clyde* (film)
Crowther, "Run, Bonnie and Clyde"
Cott, "Bonnie and Clyde," in *Past Imperfect*
- 11/4: Comolli and Labarthe, "Bonnie and Clyde: An Interview with Arthur Penn"
Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 127-153
Samuels, "Bonnie and Clyde"
Scott, "Two Outlaws, Blasting Holes in the Screen"
Group presentation
- 11/9: Pakula, *All the President's Men* (film)
Canby, "'President's Men', Spellbinding Film"
Dahlberg, "A Degrading Fabrication"
Leuchtenberg, "All the President's Men," in *Past Imperfect*
- 11/11: Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 179-201
Hentoff, "Woodstein in the Movies"
Group presentation
- 11/16: Parker, *Mississippi Burning* (film)
Chafe, "Mississippi Burning," in *Past Imperfect*
- 11/18: Cha-Jua, "Mississippi Burning: The Burning of Black Self-Activity"
Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 25-44
Group presentation
- 11/23: Stone, *JFK* (film)
Karnow, "JKF," in *Past Imperfect*
Auchincloss, "Twisted History"
Ansen, "A Troublemaker for Our Times"
- 11/25: No Class—Thanksgiving
- 11/30: Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 45-78
Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 120-131
- 12/2: Carnes, "A Conversation Between Mark Carnes and Oliver Stone," in *Past Imperfect*
Burgoyne, "The Metahistorical Film: *JFK*"
Group presentation
- 12/7: TBD
- 12/9: TBD
Conclusions and course evaluations
- 12/15: Final Exam, 6:00-9:00 PM, TLC 304

Screening Schedule

9/15:	<i>A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies</i>	304 TLC
10/4:	<i>Amistad</i>	304 TLC
10/11:	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	304 TLC
10/18:	<i>Gone With the Wind</i>	304 TLC
10/25:	<i>Glory</i>	304 TLC
11/1:	<i>Bonnie and Clyde</i>	304 TLC
11/8:	<i>All the President's Men</i>	304 TLC
11/15:	<i>Mississippi Burning</i>	304 TLC
11/22:	<i>JFK</i>	304 TLC
12/6:	To Be Determined	304 TLC

Films will be shown at 7 PM. Note: You are *not* required to attend these screening sessions, but you are required to have watched the films in question before we discuss them in class.

