

Professor Daniel A. Nathan
AM 233, American Past in Film
TLC 301, TTH 9:40-11:00; M 7:00-10:00
Office: TLC 330 (580-5023)
Office Hours: TTH 1:00-2:30 & by appt.
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+ History = ?

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 It examines Hollywood films as historical documents that reflect (and sometimes reproduce) the ethos or cultural politics of the period in which they were made and first viewed.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*

“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 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, filmmaker

Requirements

Course requirements include two papers (the first will be 4-5 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%
First Paper	15% (due October 3)
Group Presentation	15%
Class Participation	15%
Second Paper	25% (due December 4)
Final Exam	20% (December 16)

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.

Select Supplementary Readings

Barta Tony, ed. *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

Burgoyne, Robert. *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Burgoyne, Robert. *The Hollywood Historical Film*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Dick, Bernard F. *The Star-Spangled Screen: The American World War II Film*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985.

Grindon, Leger. *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

Landy, Marcia, ed. *The Historical Film: History and Memory in the Media*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

McCracken, Trevor and Andrew Pepper. *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

O'Connor, John E. and Martin A. Jackson, eds. *American History/American Film*, New Expanded Edition. New York: Ungar Publishing Co., (1979) 1988.

Rollins, Peter C., ed. *Hollywood As Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, (1983) 1998.

Rollins, Peter C., ed. *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Rosenstone, Robert A., ed. *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Rosenstone, Robert A. *History On Film/Film On History*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2006.

Toplin, Robert Brent. *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002.

Reading Schedule

Getting Started: Assessing Historical Films

- 9/4: Introductions, goals, policies, reading/screening schedule
- 9/9: Lipsitz, "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow"
Scott, "The Lasting Picture Show"
- 9/11: Costanzo, *Reading the Movies* excerpts
Barsam, "What is a Movie?"
- 9/16: Scorsese and Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (film)
Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* excerpts
- 9/18: Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, vii-22
Sklar, "Historical Films: Scofflaws and the Historical-Cop"
Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 1-79
- 9/23: Toplin, "Impact," from *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*
Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* excerpts
- 9/25: 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)
- 10/2: 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"

The Reel Civil War: A Case Study

- 10/7: 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*"
Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War*, 96-150
Stokes, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* excerpts
- 10/9: No Class (Yom Kippur)
- 10/14: Fleming, *Gone With the Wind* (film)
Clinton, "Gone With the Wind," in *Past Imperfect*
- 10/16: Hollywood Spectator, "David Selznick's Film Is World's Greatest"
Moss, "An Open Letter to Mr. Selznick"
Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War*, 183-231
- 10/21: Zwick, *Glory* (film)
McPherson, "Glory," in *Past Imperfect*
- 10/23: Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War*, 276-285
Cullen, "A Few Good Men: *Glory* and the Search for a Just War"

Reading Movies: Practicing Cultural Criticism

- 10/28: Penn, *Bonnie and Clyde* (film)
Crowther, "Run, Bonnie and Clyde"
Cott, "Bonnie and Clyde," in *Past Imperfect*
- 10/30: Comolli and Labarthe, "Bonnie and Clyde: An Interview with Arthur Penn"
Samuels, "Bonnie and Clyde"
Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 127-153

- 11/4: 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*
- 11/6: Hentoff, "Woodstein in the Movies"
 Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 179-201
- 11/11: No Class
- 11/13: 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
- 11/20: Stone, *JFK* (film)
 Karnow, "JKE," in *Past Imperfect*
 Auchincloss, "Twisted History"
 Ansen, "A Troublemaker for Our Times"
- 11/25: Toplin, *History By Hollywood*, 45-78
 Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 120-131
 Carnes, "A Conversation Between Mark Carnes and Oliver Stone," in *Past Imperfect*
- 11/27: No Class—Thanksgiving
- 12/2: TBD
- 12/4: TBD
- 12/9: Conclusions and course evaluations
- 12/16: Final Exam, 9:00-12:00 PM, TLC 301

Screening Schedule

9/15:	<i>A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies</i>	303 TLC
9/29:	<i>Amistad</i>	303 TLC
10/6:	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	303 TLC
10/13:	<i>Gone With the Wind</i>	303 TLC
10/20:	<i>Glory</i>	303 TLC
10/27:	<i>Bonnie and Clyde</i>	303 TLC
11/3:	<i>All the President's Men</i>	303 TLC
11/12:	<i>Mississippi Burning</i>	303 TLC
11/19:	<i>JFK</i>	303 TLC
12/1:	To Be Determined	303 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.