SCREENING HISTORY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN HISTORY IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS

Short Course Description:
This course explores the ways in which popular Hollywood films construct the historical past, the ensuing battles among historians and the public over Hollywood’s version of American history, and the ways that such films can be utilized as historical documents themselves. We will consider films as products of the culture industry; as visions of popularly understood history and national mythology; as evidence for how social conflicts have been depicted; and as evidence of how popular understanding and interpretations of the past have been revised from earlier eras to the present.

Course Description:
This course explores the ways in which popular Hollywood films construct versions of the historical past, the ensuing battles among historians and the public over Hollywood’s version of the past, and the ways that such films can be utilized as historical documents themselves. Hollywood films are fascinating documents to analyze because they make powerful arguments about how audiences should understand complex historical and contemporary and historical matters, in the guise of entertainment. The films reach mass audiences, they entertain, they mythologize, they produce compelling narratives about the past, they simplify complex problems, and they are highly influential in creating audiences’ historical understanding. They are significant cultural texts, and this course will study them as artifacts of a powerful communications entertainment industry whose visions of the past, and its narratives and arguments about what constituted the legitimate (and illegitimate) social, political, economic order throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century warrants our close examination. We will consider films as historical documents: as industrial products; as visions of popularly understood history and national mythology; as evidence for studying how conflicts in the political, social and cultural arenas were understood and depicted; and as evidence of how popular understanding and interpretations of the past have been revised from earlier eras to the present.

The ideological frameworks of film are crucial to our inquiry. The course examines how American filmmakers have represented (or misrepresented) such social problems as industrialization, urbanization, war, empire, depression and poverty, crime, race, labor and class, and gender conflicts to mass audiences as entertainment. The course analyzes Hollywood films and the presentation of national/collective mythologies, considering such frameworks as narratives of innocence, collective purpose and action, collective trauma and challenge, racial tension and reconciliation, justice and progress, and so on. We will think about these narratives as ideologically-laden tools of both cultural and political orthodoxy and revisionism.
SAMPLE SYLLABUS – This syllabus is provided as a sample. Course content may vary.

Learner Objectives:

1. Define film as valid form of historical discourse; outline how films as documents compare with other kinds of historical documents

2. Analyze films as vehicles for the promotion of ideology, mythology, and political agenda setting

3. Assess the ways in which film engages our emotions, cultivate our interests, instructs us and affect our beliefs about the past;

4. Evaluate what gets represented and what is absent from mainstream films as historical narratives and artifacts.

Evaluation:
Participation 15%
First presentation and paper 25%
Second presentation and paper assignment 35%
Final Exam 25%

Requirements and Grading (percentages subject to change in order to meet needs of course)
Attendance and Participation: 15%
You are expected to arrive on time, having read the assigned materials, prepared to participate meaningfully in class discussions. This course is conceived as an upper level seminar and will ask you to bring your experience, insight, and intelligence to bear on our discussions.

Please inform me in advance if you will be missing class for religious observances, family emergencies, or medical problems.

Presentation and Paper #1: 25%
You will choose a film from our class list (a film we will not be viewing as a class), and will write a 5-7 page paper and offer a brief in-class presentation (10-15 minutes) of that film’s historical context, its narrative, its arguments, and your assessment of the film as an historical artifact and source. Prior to your presentation you will present the professor/class with at least one scholarly article about your film, and at the time of your presentation you must provide a 5-10 item bibliography about the film for the entire class.

Presentation and Paper #2: 35%
You will choose a film from our class list (one we are not watching as a class), and will write a 10-12 page paper about the film and offer a brief in-class presentation (15-20
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minutes) of that film’s historical context, its narrative, its arguments, and your assessment of the film as an historical artifact and source. Prior to your presentation you will be required to present the professor and class with two complementary/competing scholarly articles about your film, and at the time of your presentation you must provide a 5-10 item bibliography about the film for the entire class. These bibliographies are for the professor’s and students’ cumulative intellectual understanding of the film as a historical artifact.

Final Exam: 25%
Near the end of the semester I will provide you with a half dozen or so final exam questions. These questions will ask you to think about the main themes developed during the course, to re-examine the readings, and to develop your own framework for thinking about the course materials and the course. We will have an in-class final exam, drawing from those questions.

Late Work:
I will accept late work, but will mark it down for every day it is late. If you know (or fear) your work will be late, please communicate with me in advance.

Format of Written Work:
You may email me copies of your papers, but only as a back up. You must turn in a hard copy of your work. Work must be typed, double-spaced, and paginated. Please staple papers, and don’t use slick plastic covers. You are expected to follow a formal style manual for guidelines on citations, quotations. Style manuals are very useful, and if you don’t have one you should acquire one.

Evaluation Rubric

A= Excellent
This work is comprehensive and detailed, integrating themes and concepts from discussions, lectures and readings. Writing is clear, analytical and organized. Arguments offer specific examples and concisely evaluate evidence. Students who earn this grade are prepared for class, synthesize course materials and contribute insightfully.

B=Good
This work is complete and accurate, offering insights at general level of understanding. Writing is clear, uses examples properly and tends toward broad analysis. Classroom participation is consistent and thoughtful.

C=Average
This work is correct but is largely descriptive, lacking analysis. Writing is vague and at times tangential. Arguments are unorganized, without specific examples or analysis. Classroom participation is inarticulate.

D= Unsatisfactory
This work is incomplete, and evidences little understanding of the readings or discussions. Arguments demonstrate inattention to detail, misunderstand course material and overlook significant themes. Classroom participation is spotty, unprepared and off topic.

F=Failed
This grade indicates a failure to participate and/or incomplete assignments

A  = 94-100
A- = 90-93
B+ = 87-89
B  = 84-86
B- = 80-83
C+ = 77-79
C  = 74-76
C- = 70-73
D+ = 65-69
D  = 60-64
F  = 0-59

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism
The relationship between students and faculty is the keystone of the educational experience at New York University in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. This relationship takes an honor code for granted and mutual trust, respect, and responsibility as foundational requirements. Thus, how you learn is as important as what you learn. A university education aims not only to produce high-quality scholars, but to also cultivate honorable citizens.

Academic integrity is the guiding principle for all that you do, from taking exams to making oral presentations to writing term papers. It requires that you recognize and acknowledge information derived from others and take credit only for ideas and work that are yours.

You violate the principle of academic integrity when you
• cheat on an exam,
• submit the same work for two different courses without prior permission from your professors,
• receive help on a takehome examination that calls for independent work, or
• plagiarize.

Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud. In a community of scholars, whose members are teaching, learning, and discovering knowledge, plagiarism cannot be tolerated.

Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score, and/or other materials that are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following:
• copy verbatim from a book, an article, or other media;
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- download documents from the Internet and insert them into your written work without attribution; (downloading does not in itself constitute plagiarism – is this language taken from some official document? (this language was added to my syllabus by Sandy)
- purchase documents;
- report from other’s oral work;
- paraphrase or restate someone else’s facts, analysis, and/or conclusions; or
- copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you.

The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development imposes heavy penalties for plagiarism in order to safeguard the degrees that the University grants. Cases of plagiarism are considered among the most serious of offenses.

STUDENT RESOURCES

- Students with physical or learning disabilities are required to register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities, 719 Broadway, 2nd Floor, (212-998-4980) and are required to present a letter from the Center to the instructor at the start of the semester in order to be considered for appropriate accommodation.
- Writing Center: 269 Mercer Street, Room 233. Schedule an appointment online at www.rich15.com/nyu/ or just walk-in.

Required Books:

Movies and American Society, ed. Steven J. Ross

Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II, Thomas Doherty

Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History, vol II, American Social History Project: Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig

History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past, Robert Brent Toplin

The Inquisition in Hollywood, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund

Thelma & Louise, Marita Sturken

Easy Riders, Raging Bulls, Peter Biskind

Articles on Blackboard (see weekly readings):
We will read many articles this semester which I will post on blackboard. They are listed under the assigned readings for each week as pdf.
A Note on Viewing Films:
I will attempt to get as many of these films as possible on reserve at the Avery Fischer Center at Bobst Library. Each week we will have an official screening of one of the films indicated on the syllabus. If you are unable to make that time, it will be your responsibility to view the film, either at Avery Fischer or by renting it. I have listed additional related films for each week, and between the readings, my lectures, and student presentations, we will endeavor to discuss others of the films listed for that week.

Students should plan on 2-3 hours per week viewing films, outside of our lecture and discussions. Along with the film viewed in full as a class, we will watch excerpts of other films in our regularly scheduled classes.

*The syllabus notes each week’s main film; the others listed will be used for in-class clips.

Beginning with the 3rd week we will build in time for at least 2 student presentations of additional films each week.

Course Schedule and Assigned Readings
Week 1
Silent Cinema, the Civil War, and Re-birth of a Nation
Readings:

Selected chapters from Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History, Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig.

Pierre Sorlin, “How to Look at an ‘Historical’ Film,” in The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media, ed., Marcia Landy (pdf)


Recommended Reading:


Films
Early Visions
*Birth of a Nation (viewed in full)
Week 2
Working Class Hollywood: Industrialization, Labor, and Class Struggles
Readings:

Selected chapters from Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History, Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig

Steven J. Ross, Working-Class Hollywood, (selected chapters), (pdf)

Robert Brent Toplin, “Norma Rae: A Female Rocky,” in History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the Past

Recommended Reading:


Marnie Hughes Warrington, History Goes to the Movies, (selected chapters) (pdf)

Films
Early Visions
*Modern Times (viewed in full)
Revisions
Matewan
Norra Rae

Week 3
Working Women, Wanton Women, and the “Problem” of Feminism
Readings:


Marybeth Hamilton, “Goodness Had Nothing to Do With It: Censoring Mae West,” in Movie Censorship and American Culture, ed., Francis Couvares, (pdf)

Marita Sturken, Thelma & Louise (excerpts)

Ross and Faludi, “Reagan’s America: The Backlash Against Women, and Men,” in Ross, ed., Movies and American Society

Recommended Reading

Leonard Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, “Dead End” and “Gone with the Wind,” in The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship & the Production Code, (pdf)
Steven Ross, 1920s Film Audiences article in Movies in American Society

Films
Early Visions
She Done Him Wrong
Red-Headed Woman

Revisions:
Nine to Five
*Thelma & Louise (viewed in full)

Week 4
The Depression and the Crises of Capitalism and Democracy
Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, selected chapters

Ross and May, “Confronting the Great Depression: Renewing Democracy in Hard Times,” in Movies in American Society,” ed. Steven J. Ross


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Films
Early Visions
*Grapes of Wrath (viewed in full)
Scarface
Revisions:
Bonnie and Clyde

Weeks 5 & 6
Making the World Safe for Democracy in WWI and WWII: The Triumph of American Men, Machines, and Ideals

Readings:
Selected chapters from Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History, Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig


Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II, by Thomas Doherty (selected chapters)

Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits & Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies, Clayton Koppes and Gregory D. Black (selected chapters), (pdf)


WWI Films
Early Visions
Hearts of the World
What Price Glory?
Revisions:
*All Quiet on the Western Front (full)
Paths of Glory

WWII Films
Early Visions
*Casablanca (full viewing)
From Here to Eternity
The Great Escape
Revisions:
Patton
Saving Private Ryan

Week 7
Reds, Blacklists, and Hollywood’s Cold War
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Readings:
Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood* (selected chapters)

Dalton Trumbo, “The Time of the Toad,” in *The Time of the Toad and Other Essays*, (pdf)

Steven Vaughn, “Political Censorship During the Cold War: The Hollywood Ten,” in *Movie Censorship in America*, ed. Francis Couvares, (pdf)


**Films**
- Early Visions
  - *Mission to Moscow*
  - *On the Waterfront (full viewing)*
  - *High Noon (excerpts)*

  **Revisions:**
  - *Goodnight, and Goodluck (excerpts)*

**Weeks 8 & 9**
**Conquest in the West: Virgin Lands, Indian Country, and Regeneration through Violence**

Readings:
Robert Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America* (selected chapters), (pdf)

Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (selected chapters), (pdf)

Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating* (selected chapters) (pdf)


**Films (two weeks)**
- Early Visions
  - *They Died with Their Boots On*
  - *Stagecoach*
  - *Fort Apache*
  - *Shane (full viewing)*

  **Revisions:**
  - *Little Big Man (full viewing)*
  - *Unforgiven*
  - *Dances with Wolves*
  - *Pow Wow Highway*
  - *Desert Bloom*
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Week 10: Legal Justice and the Triumph of American Liberalism
Readings:
Running Time: Films of the Cold War, Nora Sayre, (pdf)

Films
Early Visions
Inherit the Wind
Judgment at Nuremberg
*Twelve Angry Men
To Kill a Mockingbird

Revisions:
The Ox-Bow Incident
Kramer v. Kramer
Dead Man Walking

Week 11
Suburbanization, Mass Society, and Anxieties of Affluence
Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, (selected chapters)
Quart and Auster, “Eisenhower’s America: Prosperity and Problems in the 1950s” in Ross, ed., Movies and American Society

Films
Early Visions
Best Years of Our Lives
Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House
The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit

Revisions:
The Ice Storm
*American Beauty
The Truman Show

Weeks 12 & 13
Vietnam and its aftermath from Central America to Iraq
Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, (selected chapters)

Marita Sturken, “The Wall and Screen Memory,” and “Reenactment and the Making of History: The Vietnam War as Docudrama,” in Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering, (pdf)


Recommended Reading

Marita Sturken, chs 4, “Spectacles of Memory and Amnesia: Remembering the Persian Gulf War,” in Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering. (pdf)

Films (two weeks)

Early Visions
The Green Berets
The Deer Hunter
Top Gun
Rambo

Revisions:
Coming Home
*Apocalypse Now
M*A*S*H
Born on the Fourth of July
The Killing Fields
Platoon

Black Hawk Down

Wag the Dog
*In the Valley of Elah
The Hurt Locker
The Messenger
Week 14
Legacies of the 1960s & 70s: Urban Turbulence, Political Failure, and Enduring Crisis of Confidence
Readings:
Peter Biskind, Easy Riders, Raging Bulls (selected chapters)


Ed Guerrero, “Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film,” in Ross, ed., Movies and American Society

Recommended Reading

Films
Early Visions
The Graduate
Easy Rider
Taxi Driver
All the President’s Men

Revisions:
Forrest Gump
Mississippi Burning
*Do the Right Thing
Falling Down
Boyz in the Hood

Week 15
The Post-Human Future (or) After Civilization as We Know it
Readings:
Kaja Silverman, “Back to the Future” Camera Obscura, (pdf)

Scott Bukatman, Blade Runner, (selected chapters), (pdf)

Recommended Films to review
Dr. Strangelove
A Clockwork Orange
Mad Max
The Terminator
*Blade Runner
Avatar
Suggested Additional Readings:

The Columbia Companion to American History on Film, ed. Peter Rollins

An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood, Neil Gabler

Hollywood vs. Hard-Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry, Jon Lewis

Blacklisted: The Film Lovers Guide to the Hollywood Blacklist, eds. Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner

Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film, eds. Richard Francavaligia and Jerry Rodnitzky

Red Star Over Hollywood: The Film Colony's Long Romance with the Left, Ronald Radosh and Allison Radosh

Seeing Through Movies, ed. Mark Crispin Miller