

History at the Movies

Instructor: Daniel Loss

Course description

Can movies help us understand history? Since the earliest days of cinema, filmmakers have looked to the past for inspiration. From cinematic classics like *October* and *Gone With the Wind* to more recent hits like *The Help*, historical films have long captivated and inspired movie-going audiences. Historians have often been skeptical of movies' ability to present an accurate picture of the past. But in recent years, more and more historians have embraced film for its potential in deepening our understanding of the past. In this course, we will ask the big questions of history. What forces drive change in politics, society, and culture? Is it possible to get inside the heads of people who lived centuries ago? How can we explain unspeakable acts of evil like the Holocaust? We will seek answers to these questions by watching and discussing an array of different films that use and represent the past.

Course objectives

The goals of this course are to:

- Introduce you to the idea of history as an interpretive and analytic project that can be pursued through film as well as more traditional media
- Develop your skills in analyzing historical films
- Improve your written and verbal communication skills
- Introduce you to the skills and habits essential to a successful undergraduate career

Course format

As a seminar for first-year students, this course will meet each week for three hours for in-depth discussions of the week's film and readings. In addition to the scheduled class time each, there will also be an on-campus screening of that week's film. You are encouraged to attend these screenings but you are also free to watch the film on your own.

Throughout the semester, we will be discussing and practicing the habits and skills that will help you enjoy a successful four years in college.

Assignments and requirements

The major expectation of this course is that you come to class each week prepared to discuss the week's film and readings. Discussion and the sharing of your own ideas are hallmarks of the liberal arts education – it is not enough, therefore, simply to sit passively during the films. Each student will help lead the class discussion at least once during the semester.

As a writing-intensive first-year seminar, this course has regular written assignments. Throughout the semester, you will write three 2-page response papers to the week's films. In addition these response papers, you will write a 5-page review of a film of your choice that we are not watching in class and an 8-page paper in which you compare the representations of a particular historical event or development offered by a historical film (or several films) with an historian's written interpretation of the same event. The last two weeks of the class will be devoted to student presentations on your final paper topic. Guidelines for each of these assignments will be given out throughout the semester.

There will be no exams. The breakdown of your grade will be as follows:

- 20% - Participation and discussion-leading
- 10% - Response paper #1
- 10% - Response paper #2
- 10% - Response paper #3
- 20% - Film review - due by the end of week 8
- 30% - Final paper and presentation - due by the end of exam period

Course policies

Academic honesty and plagiarism - I expect that all work you submit will be your own work and written specifically for this class. You must acknowledge the work and ideas of others through citations. I recommend that you consult a style guide: the *Chicago Manual of Style*, now in its 16th edition and available in both electronic and print version, is favored by historians.

You should familiarize yourself with the college's policy on plagiarism. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about what constitutes proper citation and attribution.

Attendance - I expect that you will attend every class session and take attendance each day. However, I know that unexpected things are bound to come up during the semester. So you are allowed to miss one class session without any penalty or explanation. If you expect to miss class for a legitimate reason (illness, family emergency, field trip for another class, etc.), please let me know as soon as possible so we don't wait for you to start class.

Late papers - Papers must be e-mailed to me by 5:00 PM on the due date. Papers will be marked down one letter grade for each day past the due date.

Disabilities - Students with documented disabilities should contact the office of disability services to set up necessary arrangements for this course.

Books

The following books are required and are available at the campus bookstore:

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New ed. London: Penguin, 2007.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Other readings (marked with an asterisk in the course calendar) will be available on the course website.

Calendar

Week 1: Introduction

Readings:

- * Davis, Natalie Zemon. “‘Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead’: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity.” *Yale Review* 76 (1987): 457–482.
- * Rosenstone, Robert A. “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film.” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1, 1988): 1173–1185.
- * Simon Schama, “Clio at the Multiplex,” *New Yorker* (January 19, 1998)

Week 2: Authenticity and Uncertainty

Film: *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982)

Readings:

- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- * Benson, Edward. “The Look of the Past: Le Retour De Martin Guerre.” *Radical History Review* 28-30 (1984): 125–135.
- * Guneratne, Anthony. “Cinehistory and the Puzzling Case of Martin Guerre.” *Film and History* 21, no. 1 (February 1991): 2–3.

Week 3: Historical Film as Propaganda

Film: *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928)

Readings:

- * Briley, Ron. “Sergei Eisenstein: The Artist in Service of the Revolution.” *The History Teacher* 29, no. 4 (August 1996): 525–536.
- * Eisenstein, Sergei. “The Montage of Attractions” (1923)
- * Selections from Taylor, Richard. *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998.

Week 4: Race in American cinema I

Film: *Gone With the Wind* (1939)

Readings:

- * Selections from Campbell, Edward D. C. *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981.
- * Clark, G. Glenwood, review of “Gone With the Wind” in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (January 1937): 131-134.

Week 5: Race in American cinema II

Film: *The Help* (2011)

Readings:

- * Jones, Ida E., Daina Ramey Berry, Tiffany N. Gill, Kali Nicole Gross, and Janice Sumler-Edmond. “An Open Statement to the Fans of The Help.” *Association of Black Women Historians*, n.d.
http://www.abwh.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2%3Aopen-statement-the-help.
- * “‘The Help’ Draws Audiences, And Ire.” *NPR.org*, August 18, 2011. [Audio available at: <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/18/139755308/the-help-draws-audiences-and-ire>]
- * Selections from Clark-Lewis, Elizabeth. *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

Week 6: Transplanting Place, Transplanting Time

Film: *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Readings:

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New ed. London: Penguin, 2007.
- * Greene, Naomi. “Coppola, Cimino: The Operatics of History.” *Film Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Winter -1985 1984): 28-37.
- * Kinder, Marsha. “The Power of Adaptation in ‘Apocalypse Now’.” *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Winter -1980 1979): 12-20.

Week 7: Reimagining the American West

Film: *Unforgiven* (1992)

Readings:

- * Selections from Buscombe, Edward. *Unforgiven*. London: BFI, 2004.
- * Keller, Alexandra. “Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns Since the Reagan Administration.” *Film & History* 33, no. 1 (2003): 47-54.

- * Langford, Barry. "Revisiting the 'Revisionist' Western." *Film & History* 33, no. 2 (2003): 26-35.

Week 8: Epic Film, Epic History

Film: *Cleopatra* (1963)

Readings:

- * Introduction, Chapters 3-4 in Santas, Constantine. *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "'Surge and Splendor': A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic." *Representations*, no. 29 (January 1, 1990): 24-49.

Film review due by the end of week 8

Week 9: Laughing at the Past

Film: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)

Reading:

- * Selections from *The Pythons Autobiography*. London: Orion, 2003.
- * Selections from Salmi, Hannu, ed. *Historical Comedy on Screen: Subverting History with Humour*. Bristol and Chicaco: Intellect, 2011.
- * Selections from Jones, Terry. *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*. London: BBC, 2004.

Week 10: Beyond Realism

Film: *Marie Antoinette* (2006)

Readings:

- * Ebert, Roger. "Marie Antoinette." *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 20, 2006.
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061019/REVIEWS/610190303>.
- * White, Hayden. "Historiography and Historiophoty." *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1, 1988): 1193-1199.

Week 11: The Holocaust and Historical Fiction

Film: *Schindler's List* (1993)

Readings:

- * Classen, Christoph. "Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg's 'Schindler's List' Among History, Memory, and Popular Culture." *History and Theory* 48, no. 2 (May 2009): 77-102.

- * Gellately, Robert. "Between Exploitation, Rescue, and Annihilation: Reviewing Schindler's List." *Central European History* 26, no. 4 (January 1, 1993): 475-489.
- * Hansen, Miriam Bratu. "'Schindler's List' Is Not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (January 1996): 292-312.

Week 12: Documenting the Holocaust?

Film: *A Film Unfinished* (2010)

Readings:

- * Buruma, Ian. "The Twisted Art of Documentary." *The New York Review of Books*, November 25, 2010. www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/25/twisted-art-documentary/.
- * Rabinowitz, Paul. "Wreckage Upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory." *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (May 1993): 119-137.
- * Kushner, Tony. "Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting." *Oral History* 29, no. 2 (Autumn 2001): 83-94.

Week 13: Final presentations

Week 14: Final presentations

Final paper due by end of exam period