New York University
Department of Media, Culture, and Communication

MCC-GE 2171 Screening History: The Construction of American History in Hollywood Films

Spring 2013
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Office Hours by Appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION
This course explores how popular Hollywood films construct versions of the historical past, and can be utilized as historical documents themselves. The films reach mass audiences, they entertain, they mythologize, they produce compelling narratives about the past, they simplify complex problems, and they have been influential in creating audiences’ historical understanding. Hollywood films are significant and complex cultural texts, and this course will study them as artifacts of a powerful communications entertainment industry whose visions of the past and arguments regarding social, political, economic order throughout the 20th century and into the 21st centuries warrants our close examination.

COURSE BACKGROUND
We will consider films as historical documents: as products of an industry whose purpose has always been the generation of profit; as visions of popularly understood history and national mythology; as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.

Among the topics this course will consider: immigration and identity, urban life and culture, war and empire, violence and crime, race and power, labor and class conflicts, sexuality and gender. It will examine Hollywood’s construction of national/collective mythologies, considering such frameworks as narratives of innocence, narratives of collective purpose and action, narratives of collective trauma and challenge, narratives of racial tension and reconciliation, narratives of justice and progress, narratives of national peril and imperial overreach, and narratives of national triumph and decline. We will think about these narratives as instruments of cultural and political orthodoxy and also as revisionist challenges to those orthodoxies.

The course will also examine how historians, journalists, sociologists, political scientists, film critics, and other scholars have examined Hollywood’s films as ideologically laden artifacts that frame our collective stories about and try to make sense of the past and present. We will consider how scholars and writers from those different disciplines have examined film as evidence, what their standards of evaluation have been, the kinds of assertions they’ve made, and the kinds of methodological tools students need to develop to become serious analysts of entertainment film as historical artifacts.
LEARNING OUTCOMES
Students will be able to:

• Discuss film as a valid form of historical discourse: how do films as documents compare with other kinds of historical artifacts, as primary documents and interpretative frameworks?
• Analyze films as vehicles for the promotion of ideology, mythology, and political agenda setting.
• Examine the ways in which film engages our emotions, cultivate our interests, instructs us and affect our beliefs about the past.
• Assess what gets represented and what is absent from mainstream films as historical narratives and artifacts.
• Synthesize meaning from a cluster of films and engage in their own analysis of the films as complex artifacts.

REQUIRED TEXTS

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

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

Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, The Inquisition in Hollywood, University of Illinois Press

Marita Sturken, Thelma & Louise, British Film Institute (2008)

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.

A few notes on Viewing Films:
I will place all the required films for the course (and a few more) on reserve at Avery Fischer Center at Bobst Library.

Additionally, I will schedule at least one screening of each assigned film at Avery Fischer every week, prior to when we will discuss the films in class. If students are unable to make that time, it will their responsibility to view the film – I will suggest that students subscribe to Netflix as it will give them additional flexibility in viewing our assigned films.
I have listed additional related films for each week, and between readings, lectures, students presentations, and brief clips I will endeavor to bring some of those additional films into our discussion of the main film assigned for that week.

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

ASSIGNMENTS
*percentages subject to change in order to meet needs of course

Attendance and Participation: 20%
You are expected to arrive on time, having read the assigned materials, prepared to participate meaningfully in class discussions. This 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: 30%
You will choose two films from our class list (films we will not be viewing as a class but part of the thematic focus), and will write a 6-8 page paper and offer an in-class presentation (10-15 minutes) of those film’s historical contexts, their narratives, and your analysis and critique of the films as artifacts. (It might be useful, for example, to consider films from two different periods, or films with different interpretations of similar events). Prior to your presentation you will present the professor/class with at least one scholarly article about each film, and at the time of your presentation you must provide an outline of your presentation and 10 item bibliography. These bibliographies are for the professor’s and students’ cumulative intellectual understanding of the film as ahistorical artifact.

Final Research Paper and Presentation: 50%
Your final research paper and presentation will require you to consider a cluster of films (4-6) in a genre, or a thematic area, or a historical time period, and to consider those films as your central evidence in asking the question, How have Hollywood films treated the subject X? (For example: the American west and Native Americans, the enduring meaning of WWII, the single woman in urban America, Vietnam and the lessons of empire, the tradition of Hollywood anti-war, slacker films and masculinity, race and the ideals of American equality, female sexuality and the problem of censorship, when queer is visible, film noir and Cold War anxiety, paranoia in the films of Oliver Stone, the American courts as instruments of justice, and so on…) The goal of this assignment is to explore Hollywood film around a more concentrated topic, and to consider the ways in which this topic has been treated, the dominant themes that have emerged, the tropes, the narrative solutions, the variations within the genre, etc.
You will give a 10-15 minute presentation of your argument, and submit a 15-20 page research paper. Prior to your presentation you need to submit to the entire class at least one article for all of us to read, and at the time of your presentation you need to submit a working bibliography and outline of your presentation.

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:
Participation 20%
First presentation and paper 30%
Final presentation and research paper 50%

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

**COURSE POLICIES**

**Absences and Lateness**
More than two unexcused absences will automatically result in a lower grade. Chronic lateness will also be reflected in your evaluation of participation. Regardless of the reason for your absence you will be responsible for any missed work. Travel arrangements do not constitute a valid excuse for rescheduling exams. There are no extra credit assignments for this class.

**Format**
Please type and double-space your written work. Typing improves the clarity and readability of your work and double-spacing allows room for me to comment. Please also number and staple multiple pages. You are free to use your preferred citation style. Please use it consistently throughout your writing. If sending a document electronically, please name the file in the following format Yourlastname Coursenumber Assignment1.doc

**Grade Appeals**
Please allow two days to pass before you submit a grade appeal. This gives you time to reflect on my assessment. If you still want to appeal your grade, please submit a short but considered paragraph detailing your concerns. Based on this paragraph I will review the question and either augment your grade or refine my explanation for the lost points.

**General Decorum**
Slipping in late or leaving early, sleeping, text messaging, surfing the Internet, doing homework in class, eating, etc. are distracting and disrespectful to all participants in the course.

**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;
• 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.
**Course Schedule and Assigned Readings**
*readings and scheduling are subject to modification to meet the needs of the class

**Week 1: National Mythologies in Hollywood Cinema**
Course Introduction: What Does Film Tell Us About Historical Truth?
In-class screening:
*Stagecoach

**Week 2: 2/1 Narratives of whiteness and the idea of American innocence**
Readings:
Selected chapters from *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History*, Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig.

Robert Burgoyne, ch 1, *Film Nation*


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


Robert Brent Toplin, “Mississippi Burning: ‘A Standard to Which We Couldn’t Live Up,’” in *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the Past*

**Films (*denotes the assigned film(s) for the week)*

*Birth of a Nation  Mississippi Burning  Rosewood  
The Jazz Singer  Gone with the Wind  Intolerance  
Amistad  Glory  Do the Right Thing  
Blackboard Jungle

**Week 3: The New Medium and Immigrant Audiences**
Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation’s History*, selected chapters

Robert Rosenstone, introduction and part I, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*

Ross, Ch 2, “Visualizing the Working Class,” in Working Class Hollywood

Ross, Ch 7, “Fantasy and Politics: Moviegoing in the 1920s,” in Working Class Hollywood

Lawrence Levine, “Progress and Nostalgia: The Self-Image of the Nineteen Twenties” in Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History

**Films**

* Modern Times  *The Crowd
Our Daily Bread  Intolerance  City Lights  Reds  Matewan

**Presentations begin**

**Week 4: Making the World Safe for Democracy? World War I and its Lessons**

Readings:
Claire, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, selected chapters

Pierre Sorlin, “Cinema and Memory of The Great War,” from The First World War and Popular Cinema, ed Michael Paris

Leslie M Debauche, “The United States Film Industry and World War One, “ from The First World War and Popular Cinema, ed Michael Paris

Robert Brent Toplin, “If that is Propaganda, We Plead Guilty,” in History by Hollywood

**WWI Films**

*All Quiet on the Western Front  *Sergeant York
What Price Glory?  Paths of Glory
Hearts of the World  Johnny Got His Gun

**Presentations**

**Week 5: Disorderly Women, Gangsters, Okies, and the Depression-era Crisis**

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

Robert Sklar, “The Making of Cultural Myths: Walt Disney and Frank Capra,” in Movie-Made America

Lary May, “Confronting the Great Depression: Renewing Democracy in Hard Times,” in Ross, Movies and American Society

Robert Brent Toplin, “Bonnie and Clyde: Violence of a Most Grisly Sort,” in History by Hollywood

Films
* Grapes of Wrath * Bonnie and Clyde * She Done Him Wrong * Red-Headed Woman * Johnny Guitar * Scarface * Public Enemy * Mr. Smith Goes to Washington * I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang * Road to Perdition * Cinderella Man * Cradle Will Rock

Presentations

Week 6: The Triumph of Men, Machines, and Ideals in World War II
Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, selected chapters

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

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


WWII Films
* Best Years of Our Lives * Saving Private Ryan * From Here to Eternity * Casablanca * North Star * Patton * The Great Escape * Thin Red Line * The Dirty Dozen * A Midnight Clear * Letters from Iwo Jima

Presentations

Week 7: Reds, Blacklists, and Hollywood’s Cold War
Readings:
Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, The Inquisition in Hollywood (selected chapters)
Steven Vaughn, “Political Censorship During the Cold War: The Hollywood Ten,” in Movie Censorship in America, ed. Francis Couvares

Films
*On the Waterfront  *Goodnight, and Goodluck  *Salt of the Earth  The Manchurian Candidate  The Fountainhead  Dr. Strangelove  The Green Berets  My Son John

Presentations

**Week 8: Virgin Lands, Gunfighters, and Nation-building through Conquest in the West**
Readings:
Burgoyne, ch 2, Film Nation
Richard Drinnon, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating, selected chapters
Richard Slotkin, Introduction, and chs 9-11, Gunfighter Nation
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/IndigenousBib.html

Films
*Oxbow Incident  *The Searchers  Red River  Rio Bravo  My Darling Clementine  Fort Apache  They Died with Their Boots On  She Wore a Yellow Ribbon

Presentations

**Week 9: Westerns, part II: Violent men as threat to civilization**
Readings:
Tom Englehardt, End of Victory Culture, selected chapters

Films
*High Noon  *Shane  Cheyenne Autumn  Little Big Men  True Grit  McCabe and Mrs. Miller  The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance  Unforgiven  Dances with Wolves  Pow Wow Highway  Desert Bloom

Presentations 2

**Week 10: Courtroom Dramas and the High Tide of American Liberalism**
Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, selected chapters
Nora Sayre, Running Time: Films of the Cold War, selected chapters

Quart and Auster, “Eisenhower’s America: Prosperity and Problems in the 1950s,” in Ross, Movies and American Society

Films

*Twelve Angry Men*   *Inherit the Wind*   Judgment at Nuremberg   The Caine Mutiny   Anatomy of a Murder   To Kill a Mockingbird   Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House   The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit   All About Eve   Guess Whose Coming to Dinner?   Gentleman’s Agreement   Blackboard Jungle

presentations

**Week 11: Empire Gone Wrong: Vietnam and its Wounded Warriors**

Readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, (selected chapters)

Robert Burgoyne, chs 3 & 5, Film Nation

Rick Berg, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” Cultural Critique, No. 3 (Spring, 1986)


Films

*Apocalypse Now*   *Coming Home*   Platoon   The Green Berets   Dr. Strangelove   The Deer Hunter   M*A*S*H   Born on the Fourth of July   The Killing Fields   Top Gun   Rambo

Presentations

**Week 12: Things Fall Apart: Urban Turbulence, Political Failure, and a Crisis of Confidence**

Readings:
Robert Burgoyne, Introduction and ch 4, Film Nation

Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, (selected chapters)

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


Films
*Taxi Driver*     *JFK*     The French Connection
Easy Rider     Five Easy Pieces     The Graduate     Midnight Cowboy
All the President’s Men     Network     Falling Down
Kramer v Kramer     Dead Man Walking     Shawshank Redemption
Boyz in the Hood     Shaft     Do the Right Thing

Presentations

Weeks 13:  Empire Gone Wrong, part II: Wounded Warriors from the War on Terror
readings:
Clark, Hewitt, and Rosenzweig, Who Built America, (selected chapters)
Garrett Stewart, “Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film,” Film Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Summer 2009)


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

Films
*Wag the Dog*     *In the Valley of Elah*     Three Kings     Black Hawk Down
The Hurt Locker     The Messenger     Restropo

Presentations

Week 14:  Women Gone Bad and, and History Too….
Readings:
Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise*


**Films**

*Thelma & Louise*  *Forrest Gump*  *Boy’s Don’t Cry*  *The Ice Storm*  *Norma Rae*  *American Beauty*  *Revolutionary Road*  *Basic Instinct*  *Nine to Five*  *Kramer v Kramer*  *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*

Presentations

**Final Presentation:** During the Assigned Final Exam Period