Screening History: The Construction of American History in Hollywood Films

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historians and the public over Hollywood’s version of American history, and the ways that such films can be utilized as historical documents themselves.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.

I have chosen films from 3 different categories: 1) those that are expressly historical in focus – that is, they are trying to present a history of the past, and present themselves as attending to the historical record; 2) those that are especially conscious of trying to capture the present moment they are in, and are aware of the historical drama of their moment; 3) and those that are particularly good embodiments of social transformations, cultural upheavals, ideological moments, and are therefore rich documents for us to use think about reading the past through Hollywood’s films.

Required Readings:
All of the assigned readings this semester will be posted on NYU Classes, except for those readings that you provide for your presentations.

A few notes on Viewing Films:
You should subscribe to Netflix if you haven’t already done so. This will give you additional flexibility in watching films, and on your schedule. I have tried to select films that are available on Amazon for a nominal fee, and trusting your interweb ingenuity, I assume you can get your hands on these films.

I will place all the required films for the course (and a few more) on reserve at Avery Fischer Center at Bobst Library, where you may check them out at your convenience.

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

1/29: National Mythologies
Course introduction, administrative matters, and in-class screenings:
*Stagecoach, Young Mr. Lincoln, They Died With Their Boots On, Little Big Man

2/5: Myths of Innocence and the Civil War
Readings:
Thomas Cripps, “The Making of The Birth of a Race,” in The Birth of Whiteness
Robert Burgoine, “Race and Nation in Glory”

Films:
*Birth of a Nation    *Glory

Films to consider:
The General (Buster Keaton)    Gone with the Wind    The Red Badge of Courage
Cold Mountain    Gods and Generals    The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
The Horse Soldiers    Shenandoah    Gettysburg    The Beguiled

Young Mr. Lincoln (John Ford), Lincoln (DW Griffith), Abe Lincoln of Illinois

Student Presentations:

2/12: Making the World Safe for Democracy? World War I and its Lessons
Readings:
Pierre Sorlin, “Cinema and Memory of The Great War;”
Leslie M Debauche, “The United States Film Industry and World War One;”
Gaile McGregor, “The War Film as Men’s Magic and Other Fictions about Fiction”

Films:
*All Quiet on the Western Front    *Paths of Glory

Films to consider:
The Big Parade    Sergeant York    What Price Glory?    The Dawn Patrol
Hearts of the World    Johnny Got His Gun    The Lost Patrol (1934 version)

Student presentations

2/19: Capturing Modernity: Urban life, the New Woman and the hazards of the machine age
Readings:
Richard Butsch, “Going to the Movies: Early Audiences,”
Steven Ross, “Fantasy and Politics: Moviegoing in the 1920s,”
Lawrence Levine, “Progress and Nostalgia: The Self-Image of the Nineteen Twenties”
Marybeth Hamilton, “Goodness Had Nothing to Do With It: Censoring Mae West;”

Films:
*Red Headed Woman    *Modern Times

Films to consider:
City Lights    I’m No Angel    The Crowd    The Wild Party
Baby Face    She Done Him Wrong    The Front Page    The Public Enemy    The
Roaring Twenties  Little Caesar  Thoroughly Modern Millie  The Great Gatsby
The Sting  Reds  Ragtime  Matewan

Student presentations

2/26:  The Depression-era Crisis of Order
Readings:
Lary May, “Confronting the Great Depression: Renewing Democracy in Hard Times,”
Lawrence Levine, “Hollywood’s Washington: Film Images of National Politics During the Great Depression”

Films:
*Grapes of Wrath* or *Sullivans Travels* or *Bonnie and Clyde*

Films to consider:
*Our Daily Bread*  *Scarface (1932)*  *Gabriel Over the White House*  *Stella Dallas*
*Mildred Pierce*  *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*  *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*
*Ironweed*  *Road to Perdition*  *Cinderella Man*  *Cradle Will Rock*

Student Presentations

3/5  Making the World Safe for Democracy, Again: World War II
Readings:
George Roeder, “War as a Way of Seeing”
David Slocum, “Cinema and Civilizing Process: Rethinking Violence in the World War II Combat Film”
Thomas Schatz, “World War Two and the Hollywood War Film”

Films:
*They Were Expendable*  *Saving Private Ryan*

Films to consider:
*Casablanca*  *From Here to Eternity*  *Bataan*  *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*  *The Longest Day*  *Mission to Moscow*  *Song of Russia*  *North Star*  *Patton*  *The Great Escape*  *Thin Red Line*  *The Dirty Dozen*  *A Midnight Clear*  *Flags of Our Fathers*  *Iwo Jima*

Presentations

3/12:  The Western and American Triumphalism: Conquest over Natives
Readings:
Englehardt, *End of Victory Culture*, chs 1-3
Downing, “The Imperiled American”
Burgoyne, “Native America, Thunderheart, and the National Imaginary”

Films:
*The Searchers   *Thunderheart

films to consider:
Red River    Rio Grande    Rio Bravo    She Wore a Yellow Ribbon    Fort Apache
How the West Was Won    Cheyenne Autumn    Little Big Men    Dances with Wolves    Pow Wow Highway

Presentations:

3/19  Spring Break: no class

3/26: Violent Men and the threat to civilization
Readings:
Michael Rogin, “’Make My Day!’ Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics”
Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, ch 9-12 and Conclusion
Reading on Clint Eastwood films tbd

Films
*High Noon   * Ox-Bow Incident

films to consider:
Shane    My Darling Clementine    The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance    The Outlaw
Joey Wales    High Plains Drifter    The Wild Bunch    Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid    McCabe and Mrs. Miller    Hang Em High    The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
Unforgiven    True Grit

Presentations

4/2: The American System at High Tide: Reasonable Men Battling Unreason
Readings:
Alan Brinkley “Legacies of World War II”
Steven Vaughan, “Political Censorship During the Cold War: The Hollywood Ten,”
Nora Sayre, Running Time: Films of the Cold War
Sonya Michel, “Danger on the Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Disabled Veterans”

Films
*Twelve Angry Men   * On the Waterfront

Films to consider:
4/9 Making the Crooked Places Straight: The Civil Rights Era
Readings:
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* excerpts
Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, excerpts;
Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, ch. 9
Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time* ch 5

Films:
*Mississippi Burning*  *Malcolm X*

Films to consider:
*The Long Walk Home*  *Rosewood*  *Raisin in the Sun*  *Sounder*  *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? A Soldier’s Story*  *Ghosts of Mississippi*  *In the Heat of the Night*

4/16: Conspiracies, Skepticism and a Crisis of Confidence
Readings:
Sturken, “Renactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History in Oliver Stone’s Docudramas”
Janet Staiger, “Cinematic Shots: The Narration of Violence,”
Robert Burgoyne, “Modernism and the Narrative of Nation in *JFK*”
Maland, “*Dr. Strangelove*: Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus”

Films
*Dr Strangelove*  *JFK*

Films to consider:
*Missing*  *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)  *Advise and Consent*  *Network*  *The Candidate*  *All the President’s Men*  *Desert Bloom*  *Nixon*  *Easy Rider*  *Fat Man and Little Boy*  *Wag the Dog*

4/23: Empire Gone Wrong: the Quagmire of Vietnam
Readings:
Broyles, “Why Men Love War”
Burgoyne, “National Identity, Rescue Identity and the Rescue Fantasy in *Born on the Fourth of July*”
Robert Eberwein, “*Platoon and Full Metal Jacket*”
Ryan and Kellner, “Vietnam and the Crisis of American Power”

Films
*Apocalypse Now*  *Platoon*
films to consider:
*The Green Berets*  *Dr. Strangelove*  *Coming Home*
*The Deer Hunter*  *M*A*S*H*  *Born on the Fourth of July*
*The Killing Fields*  *Cutter’s Way*

Presentations

**4/30: Rebuilding Warrior Culture, from Vietnam to the War on Terror**
readings:
Weschler, “Valkeryies Over Iraq”
Melani McCalister, “A Cultural History of War Without End”
Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, chs 5 & 6
Lynda Boose, “Technomuscularity and the ‘Boy Eternal’: From the Quagmire to the Gulf”

Films
*The Messenger*  *In the Valley of Elah*

films to consider:
*Top Gun*  *Delta Force*  *Wag the Dog*  *Three Kings*  *Black Hawk Down*  *Jarhead*
*The Hurt Locker*  *The Messenger*  *Top Gun*  *Rambo*  *Restrepo*

Presentations

**5/7 Women Gone Bad and, and History Too….**
Readings:
Greenberg et al, “The Many Faces of Thelma and Louise”
Ross and Faludi, “Reagan’s America: The Backlash Against Women, and Men,”
Wang, “A Struggle of Contending Stories: Race, Gender and Political Memory in *Forrest Gump*”
Burgoyne, “Prosthetic Memory/National Memory: *Forrest Gump*”

Films
*Thelma & Louise*  *Forrest Gump*

Films to consider:
*Boy’s Don’t Cry*  *Norma Rae*  *All About Eve*  *Basic Instinct*  *Johnny Guitar*
*Nine to Five*  *Working Girl*  *Nine to Five*  *Network*  *Foxy Brown*

Presentations

**Final Exam:** Structure and Date tba. You will have a choice to have either an in-class final or a take-home final. You will vote on the matter as we get closer to the end of the semester, and everyone will be examined in the same way.
**Evaluation:**
Participation 15%
First presentation and paper 25%
Second presentation and paper assignment 30%
Final Exam 30%

**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 (15-20 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 #1 must take place by 3/26)

**Presentation and Paper #2:** 30%
You will choose a film from our class list (one we are not watching as a class), and will write a 7-8 page paper about the film and offer a presentation (20-25 minutes) of that film’s historical context, its narrative, its arguments, and your assessment of the film as an historical artifact and source.

**Final Exam:** 30%
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. Our final exam will draw from those questions.

**Late Work:**
I will accept late work, but will mark it down. 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, unless circumstances prevent getting me a hard copy. 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.

**Additional Sources:**

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