Public Health in Film and Fiction

Narrative works often provide dramatic insight into the multifaceted nature of public health problems, the complex circumstances giving rise to them and to societal responses to them, and to the personal experiences of those affected. Through the lens of film and fiction this course will examine the influence and impact of social, economic, and political circumstances (e.g., gender relations, globalization, militarism) on the health status of particular population groups. We will consider the interrelatedness of issues and influences, their local and global manifestations, and the manner in which they are affected by broader economic and political circumstances.

Our exploration will be conducted through film screenings, readings of fictional and scholarly works, student presentations, and extensive class discussion. Students are expected to attend all sessions and to actively participate in class discussions. To facilitate an analytic perspective on the public health issues and their cinematic presentation, students will be provided with an outline of questions to consider regarding the film and the public health issues raised in it. Referencing one of the screened films, students are required to submit a written response (in outline format) to the questions posited. Students should select a film other than the one their presentation is related to.

Each student will also be expected to make a brief and cohesive presentation regarding a public health issue (or aspect of one) raised in one the films screened. Films and related subject topics will be assigned at the first class. The class presentation should be based on assigned readings as well as additional material relevant to the assigned subject. Students are required to submit a written version (3-5 pages) of their presentation. The presentation and paper should provide factual background and information of the issues under consideration. References should be cited in the bibliography. In addition, following the screening of each film, students, working in teams of 3-4, will be expected to lead a critical discussion of the film and the significant public health issues raised. The team should come to class with at least 3 issues or questions for class discussion. These should be emailed to me by 9AM of the day of the presentation.

Students are also expected to read Philip Caputo’s Acts of Faith and to write a review from a public health perspective. The review is due at the last class. Many different approaches can be taken. For example you could discuss Caputo’s view of the relationship between public health and religion, ideology, war, and humanitarian assistance; the impact of gender relations and health in the circumstance described; his portrayal of the complex nature of the aid industry with regard to the diversity of organizations, motives, assumptions, constraints, and methods; the ethical issues and consequences (intended and unintended) of public health activities described in the book; his understanding of the cultural, political, and economic aspects of providing public health and humanitarian assistance in an international context and/or in regions of conflict; etc.
There will be no final examination. Course grade will be based on class participation (25%), individual class presentations and accompanying paper (20%); team questions and discussion (20%); film question outline (15%); and the review on Acts of Faith (20%).

Assigned Readings: Many of the recommended readings are available in War and Public Health, 2nd ed., Barry Levy and Victor Sidel, eds., available at the NYU bookstore, as is Philip Caputo’s Acts of Faith. Readings not in either book are available online (denoted by a § in the syllabus) or in the course packet (denoted with an * in the syllabus.)

You are requested to bring to the second class a passport size photo of yourself with your name legibly printed on the back; a Xerox of your NYU ID would be ideal.

If you wish to get in touch with me, please email me at: aj11@nyu.edu

Course Objectives
Students will be able to:

1. Identify through the lens of film the key factors influencing the perception of various public health problems, their causes and societal responses.

2. Develop insight into the personal as well as the social dimension of contemporary public health issues through films and narrative work.

3. Examine how film makers and fiction writers have understood and attempted to elucidate the complex dynamic between local conditions, broader economic and political circumstances and public health.
Syllabus

May 20 & 22  Public Health Concepts, Institutions and Methods

Film:  
Panic in the Streets  
96 min  
VCA12059

Readings:

May 27  US Public Health Service Research: The Tuskegee Syphilis Study

Film:  
Susceptible to Kindness  
45 min  
VCA 4945


May 29 & June 3  Globalization and Medical Research

Film:  
The Constant Gardener  
129 minutes  
DVD 4130

Readings:

June 5 & 10  Culture, Gender and Health: Female Circumcision vs Female Genital Mutilation

Film:  
Moolaade  
124 min  
VCA 14901
Readings:
§http://www.who.int/topics/female_genital_mutilation/en/

June 12 – 24 Militarism & Public Health

Readings (Overview):

June 12 & 17 The Case of Iraq

Film: The Three Kings 115 min VCA 12240
Lessons of Darkness DVD 1042 pt.1,2

Readings:
Optional:
§ Kurds background - http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq203/crossroads03.html

June 19 & 24 Impact of War on Civilian Populations: The Special Case of Women

Film: Paradise Road 132 min DVD 967

Readings:
Optional:

June 26  Humanitarian Assistance

Readings:
*Acts of Faith*