

History 352: Film and Historiography
Fall 2008
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:15 to 4:05

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Office hours: MW 3:00-4:00,
TTh 10:00-11:00, or
by appointment

Course description

Since 1915, historians have often been harshly critical of the ways that film-makers portray the past, and many film-makers have justified historians' low opinion of their work. But is this culture clash inevitable, and in what ways can the medium of film further our understanding of history? In this seminar, we will examine the ways that film-makers interpret the past and the advantages and pitfalls inherent in a cinematic vision of history. Our goal will not be to discuss how "good" a film is or to focus on the anachronisms and factual errors within it, but to ask a series of broader questions about the possibilities and drawbacks of producing history for the silver screen. To what extent is it possible to create a historical film that is "true," "accurate," or "authentic"? What can movies tell us about the past that cannot be conveyed as effectively by the written word? And what are the limitations of film as a medium of exploring the past? We will examine questions like these by looking at historical films from Hollywood and around the world, focusing (whenever possible) on movies in which a historian played a role in the creative process.

The result will not be a course in cinematography, movie history, or film theory, but a seminar examining what might be termed "historiography through alternate media" and an investigation of how we can best understand the past. Like most seminars at Grinnell, History 352 will culminate in the writing of a major research paper, between 20 and 30 pages in length; this course, however, will focus more on historiography than on primary research. During the first half of the seminar, we will view a series of historical films and read analyses of those films by historians and film scholars; at the same time, each student will narrow in on a film that seems worthy of detailed historical analysis, a small body of films, or a historical theme that has been dealt with in the movies on a number of occasions. In the second half of the course, students will produce a paper discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the vision of history that appears in the films they have chosen.

Required texts

The following books are on reserve at Burling Library and are available for purchase in the campus bookstore:

Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*
Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*
Robert Rosenstone, *Film on History/History on Film*

Grading and course assignments

There are three main requirements for this course:

- a) **The seminar paper** (50% of your final grade.) This should be a 20-30 page analysis of how a historical event, issue, or theme is portrayed by one particular film (or group of films). The final paper will be due at 5:00 PM on **Thursday, December 18**, and I have included a timetable for completing it in a separate hand-out.
- b) A series of **short written assignments** (25% of your total grade). Over the first six weeks of the class, you will need to hand in one 5-page analysis of a historical film of your choice (ideally one you plan to look at in your seminar paper) and three 2-page analyses of films we're discussing in class. For the latter assignment, I will post 1-2 questions to Pioneerweb on Thursday afternoon about the film of the week; you will then write a two-page paper answering one of those questions (or another question of your devising) for Tuesday's class. (Every student will analyze the first film we look at in this course, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, but you are free to pick any two other films that you want.) The 5-page paper will be due on September 25, October 2, or October 9; three students will hand in their paper on each of those days and will then give an 8-10 minute presentation based on it.
- c) **Class participation** (25% of your grade). This part of your grade will be based on attendance, the regularity and insightfulness of your participation in discussion, your participation in peer review sessions in the weeks after break, and your timely completion of a series of preliminary assignments connected to the seminar paper (including a 2-3-page proposal, a 5-page "problem paper," a 10-page draft, and a full draft.)

Your participation grade will include one final component: beginning on September 9, two students will quickly introduce the film of the week each Tuesday and suggest several questions for the class to consider. When it's your turn, you and your co-facilitator should meet with me on Monday to discuss your reaction to the film and the readings and to prepare for Tuesday's class.

Course Schedule

Thursday, August 28: Introduction to the Course

Reading: Robert Rosenstone, *Film on History/History on Film*, ch. 1-2 (pp. 1-31)

Tuesday, September 2: Microhistory on Stage and Screen

Film: *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Daniel Vigne, dir.)

Reading: Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*

Ed Benson, "Martin Guerre, The Historian and the Filmmakers: An Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis," *Film & History* 13:3 (September 1983), 49-65

Assignment: first two-page paper is due

Thursday, September 4: Authenticity, Accuracy, and Historical Film

Reading: Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *Yale Review* 76:4 (1987), pp. 457-82
Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, ch. 1-3, 5
Robert A. Rosenstone, "Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?" *History and Theory* 41:4 (December 2002): 134-44

Tuesday, September 9: Slavery by Spielberg

Film: *Amistad* (Steven Spielberg, dir.)
Reading: Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, ch. 4
Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Amistad (1997): Steven Spielberg's 'true story'," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21:1 (2001), pp. 77-96
Robert Harms, "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Cinema," in *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen*, pp. 59-81
Warren Goldstein, "Bad History is Bad for a Culture," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 April 1998, p. A64
Simon Schama, "Clio at the Multiplex," *The New Yorker*, 19 January 1998, pp. 38-44

Thursday, September 11: The Civil War on the Silver Screen

Film: watch clips of *Glory* (on Pioneerweb)
Reading: Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, ch. 3
James McPherson, "The 'Glory' Story," *The New Republic*, January 8 and 15, 1990, pp. 22-28
Ira Berlin, "Glory Be," *Radical History Review* 53 (Spring 1992), pp. 141-148
Alan A. Stone, "Glory: A Failure of Reconstruction," *Reconstruction* 1 (1990): 42-48
David Nicholson, "What Price 'Glory'?", *The Washington Post*, 21 January 1990

Tuesday, September 16: American Radicals and Russian Revolutionaries

Film: *Reds* (Warren Beatty, dir.)
Reading: Robert Rosenstone, "Reds as History," in *Visions of the Past*, pp. 83-108
Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, ch. 6 (pp. 89-110)
Christine Stansell, "Reds," in *Past Imperfect*, pp. 192-96

Thursday, September 18: Gladiatorial Combat on Film

Viewing: Clips from *Spartacus*, *Gladiator*, *Rome* (on Pioneerweb)

Assignment: Come to class prepared to discuss the historical issues raised by these films and the questions you would try to answer if you planning to write a research paper on this subject, and do a little research into how accurate the films were.

Tuesday, September 23: Experimental Films on History

Film: *Walker* (Alex Cox, dir.)

Reading: Sumiko Higashi, "Walker and Mississippi Burning: Postmodernism Versus Illusionist Narrative," in *Revisioning History*, pp. 188-201
Robert Rosenstone: "Walker: The Dramatic Film as (Postmodern) History," in *Revisioning History*, pp. 202-213
Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, ch. 4

Thursday, September 25: Documentaries and Pseudocumentaries

Reading: Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies*, ch. 6
Rosenstone, ch. 5

Assignment: 3 students will hand in a film analysis and give a ten-minute presentation

Tuesday, September 30: Docudramas and Pseudo-documentaries

Film: *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, dir.)
documentary on the making of the film

Reading: Aileen Blaney, "Remembering Historical Trauma in Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday*," in *History and Memory* 19:2 (2007), 113-138
Richard Kelly, "It Won't Go Away, You Know," *Critical Quarterly* 44:2 (July 2002), pp. 73-83

Thursday, October 2: Patrice Lumumba on Film

Reading: David Moore, "Raoul Peck's *Lumumba*: History or Hagiography?," in *Black and White in Colour*, pp. 223-239
Julia Watson, "Raoul Peck's *Lumumba*: A Film for Our Times," *Research in African Literatures* 33:2 (Summer 2002), pp. 230-235

Assignment: 3 students will hand in a film analysis and give a ten-minute presentation

Tuesday, October 7: Filming Hitler

Film: *Downfall* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, dir.)

Reading: Ian Kershaw, "The Human Hitler"
David Cesarani and Peter Longerich, "The Massaging of History"
Jürgen Pelzer, "'The Facts Behind the Guilt'? Background and Implicit Intentions in *Downfall*"
Tudor Georgescu, "Hitler's Downfall Revisited"

Thursday, October 9: The Holocaust on the Silver Screen

- Film: watch clips of *Schindler's List* (on Pioneerweb)
Reading: Omer Bartov, "Spielberg's Oscar: Hollywood Tries Evil"
Sara Horowitz, "But is it Good for the Jews? Spielberg's Schindler and the Aesthetics of Atrocity"
Assignment: 3 students will hand in a film analysis and give a ten-minute presentation

Tuesday, October 14: Oliver Stone as a Historian

- Film: *JFK* (Oliver Stone, dir.)
Reading: Robert Brent Toplin, "JFK: Fact, Fiction, and Supposition," in Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, pp. 45-78
Edward Jay Epstein, "JFK: Oliver Stone's Fictional Reality," *The Atlantic Monthly* 271:3 (March 1993), pp. 89-94

Thursday, October 16: Summing It All Up

- Assignment: 2/3-page proposal with a bibliography

FALL BREAK

During the second half of the course, we will meet as a class only once (to discuss "problem papers" in week 9); we will then meet in smaller groups to discuss your drafts. I will hold extra office hours during our usual class time for people in the seminar to discuss their work, and I will expect each student to meet with me during week 8 to discuss your progress.

- Week 8: Individual meetings with me to discuss progress; 5-page "problem paper" due to me by email by Friday at 5:00 [NOTE: You should have watched each of the films you plan to analyze by the time you hand in your problem paper]
- Week 9: Small-group meetings to discuss your research; be prepared to make a short presentation outlining the historiographical or historical problem you'll be working on and explaining the next steps in your work
- Week 10: By Friday at 5:00 PM, send me (and the other members of your discussion group) a 10-page draft, a one-page statement of your thesis, and a short description of how this draft fits into your larger paper
- Week 11: Small group discussion of draft sections
- Week 12: Individual meetings with me, as needed; Thanksgiving break

Week 13: Short small-group meetings; full draft of paper due by 5:00 PM on Friday

Week 14: Small-group discussion of papers

DUE DATE: A COMPLETED DRAFT OF YOUR PAPER WILL BE DUE AT 5:00 PM ON THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18