

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

Edward Cohn
Mears 315 (X3107)

cohned@grinnell.edu
Office hours: MW 1:15-3:00,
TTh 10:00-11:00, or
by appointment

Course description

In March 1915, when he was promoting his film *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith declared that “the time will come, and in less than ten years, when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again.” Griffith’s prediction never came to pass, of course, but it represented an early sense of optimism, a feeling that the development of new technologies would introduce new ways of looking at the human past.

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, ranging from Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* to Oliver Stone’s *JFK*. We will pay particular attention to historical movies like *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *Reds*, in which professional historians played an active role in the work of the film-maker; whenever possible, we will read critiques of historical movies by historians who specialize in the films’ subject matter.

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 work independently to produce a paper discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the vision of history that appears in the films they have chosen.

Required texts

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*
Joan Neuberger, *Ivan the Terrible: The Film Companion*

Grading and course assignments

There are two main requirements for this course: class participation and the completion of a 20-30 page seminar paper analyzing a film, a small group of films, or a historical theme as it has appeared on film. These two course requirements will count roughly equally toward your final grade. Your course participation grade, moreover, will reflect both your involvement in class discussion and your work on several assignments leading toward the completion of the seminar paper:

Step 1: Find a topic. You will need to send a one-page paper proposal to the entire class by noon on Thursday, February 14. (What better way is there to celebrate Valentine's Day?) In that paper, briefly go over the film or films you want to analyze, the questions you expect to ask, and any secondary sources you think will help you in writing your paper. You will have plenty of time to modify your paper topic, but you should have at least a general idea of what you want to do by this date. (You should, at this point, have moved beyond the stage of thinking about interesting historical topics and have begun looking at historical films.)

Step 2: Write a 5-page analysis of one of the films you will look at in your seminar paper. Please circulate this paper to the entire class by noon on Thursday, February 28, and be ready to present your argument (for about five minutes) in seminar. We will devote most of class on February 28 to discussing film analyses.

Step 3: Write a problem paper. Over the course of the seminar, we will discuss how to focus your research and writing around a historiographical or analytical "problem," and this paper will be an analysis of the main issues you expect to discuss in your paper. A draft of the problem paper will be due before you leave on break. I will then discuss your papers (and your overall progress) with you at an individual meeting after you get back, and you will present a revised version of your paper to the class during the week of April 7.

Step 4: Write a ten-page draft section of your paper. You will circulate this draft to the class by 5:00 PM on Friday, April 18; we will discuss your draft in seminar the following week.

Step 5: You will need to complete a draft of your paper, as close to its full length as possible, by 5:00 PM on Friday, May 2.

Step 6: The final paper will be due by 5:00 PM on Friday, May 16.

Keep in mind that there are two reasons for each of the exercises listed above. First, and most obviously, these steps are designed to help you make progress throughout the semester toward the completion of your research paper. Second, we will spend time as a group discussing each written document that you produce, partly for your benefit and partly to help the class as a whole better understand how to produce an effective academic paper. Handing in late work, then, can get in the way of a good class discussion and make things more difficult for your classmates (who'll have less time to read and digest your paper); therefore, I will not generally give extensions on these assignments, and I may ask you for a revision of any of these documents if it seems underdeveloped. I am also happy to read drafts or partial drafts of your papers at any time, although the sooner in advance you let me know that you'd like me to read a draft, the faster I'll be able to give you feedback.

Course Schedule

NOTE: I will arrange a weekly film screening throughout the first half of the semester, typically on Thursday evening. You are not required to attend that screening, but if you don't make it on Thursday, you will be expected to watch the film on your own in the listening room of Burling Library before we discuss it in class.

Tuesday, January 22: Introduction to the Course

Reading: Donald F. Stevens, "Never Read History Again?: The Possibilities and Perils of Cinema as Historical Depiction," in *Based on a True Story*, pp. 1-12
Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *Yale Review* 76:4 (1987), pp. 457-82
Robert Rosenstone, *Film on History/History on Film*, ch. 1-2 (pp. 1-31)

**FILM SCREENING: *THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE* (DANIEL VIGNE, DIR.)
TUESDAY, JANUARY 22, AT 7:00 PM**

Thursday, January 24: Microhistory on Stage and Screen

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

**FILM SCREENING: *THE LAST SUPPER* (TOMAS GUTIERREZ ALEA, DIR.)
THURSDAY, JANUARY 24, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, January 29: Cuban Slavery on Film

Reading: Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (entire)
Dennis West, "Slavery and Cinema in Cuba: The Case of Gutiérrez Alea's *The Last Supper*," in *Western Journal of Black Studies* 3:2 (1979), pp. 128-33
John Mraz, "Recasting Cuban Slavery: *The Other Francisco* and *The Last Supper*," in *Based on a True Story*, pp. 103-122
Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The Sugar Mill*, pp. 9-11, 47-62

Thursday, January 31: Slavery on the Silver Screen: Larger Trends?

Readings: Robert A. Rosenstone, "Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?" *History and Theory* 41:4 (December 2002): 134-44

Screening: (in class) scenes from other films discussed in *Slaves on Screen*

**FILM SCREENING: *GLORY* (EDWARD ZWICK, DIR.)
THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, February 5: The Civil War on the Silver Screen

Reading: Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, ch. 3-4 (pp. 32-69)
James McPherson, "The 'Glory' Story," *The New Republic*, January 8 and 15, 1990, pp. 22-28
Robert Burgoyne, "Race and Nation in *Glory*," in *Film Nation*, pp. 16-37
Ira Berlin, "Glory Be," *Radical History Review* 53 (Spring 1992), pp. 141-148
Gerald Horne, review of *Glory*, *The American Historical Review* 95:4 (1990), pp. 1141-1143

Thursday, February 7: Ancient Rome and the Movies

Reading: Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past* (excerpts)
Martin Winkler, ed., *Gladiator: Film and History* (excerpts)

Screening: (in class) clips from films on Rome

**FILM SCREENING: *REDS* (WARREN BEATTY, DIR.)
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, February 12: American Radicals and Russian Revolutionaries

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, February 14: Experimental Films on History

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

Screening: (in class) clips from *Walker* (Alex Cox, dir.)

Assignment: Circulate a one-page statement summarizing your proposed seminar paper topic to the rest of the class by noon on February 14

**FILM SCREENING: *SCHINDLER'S LIST* (STEVEN SPIELBERG, DIR.)
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, February 19: Spielberg's Holocaust

Film: *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, dir.)

Reading: Omer Bartov, "Spielberg's Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil"
Michael Wildt, "The Invented and the Real: Historiographical Notes on
Schindler's List," *History Workshop Journal* 41 (1996), 240-49
Frank Manchel, "A Reel Witness: Steven Spielberg's Representation of the
Holocaust in Schindler's List," *The Journal of Modern History* 67 (1995):
83-100

Thursday, February 21: The Representation of the Holocaust

Reading: Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation* (excerpts)

**FILM SCREENING: *IVAN THE TERRIBLE* (SERGEI EISENSTEIN, DIR.)
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 21, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, February 26: Eisenstein's Ivan

Reading: Joan Neuberger, *Ivan the Terrible: The Film Companion* (entire)

Thursday, February 28: Discussion of Film Analyses

Assignment: Circulate a 5-page film analysis to the class by noon on February 28

**FILM SCREENING: *JFK* (OLIVER STONE, DIR.)
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, March 4: History as Distortion?

Reading: AHR Forum on JFK, *American Historical Review* 97:2 (April 1992), pp. 487-511
"Forum: Oliver Stone's *JFK*," *Journal of American History* 79:3 (1992), pp.
1262-1268
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, March 6: Oliver Stone as a Historian

Reading: Robert Brent Toplin, *Oliver Stone's America*, pp. 3-65 (chapters by Toplin,
Rosenstone, and Stone)

**FILM SCREENING: *THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS* (GILLO PONTECORVO, DIR.)
THURSDAY, MARCH 6, AT 7:00 PM**

Tuesday, March 11: Fiction and Reality on Film

Reading: David Prochaska, "That Was Then, This Is Now: *The Battle of Algiers* and After,"
Radical History Review 85 (2003), pp. 133-149
Edward Said, "The Quest for Gillo Pontecorvo," in *Reflections on Exile and
Other Essays*
Joan Mellen, "An Interview with Gillo Pontecorvo," in *Film Quarterly* 26:1
(1972), pp. 2-10

Thursday, March 13: The Pseudocumentaries of Paul Greengrass

Reading: Aileen Blaney, "Remembering Historical Trauma in Paul Greengrass's *Bloody
Sunday*," in *History and Memory* 19:2 (2007), 113-138

Screening: (in-class) scenes from *Bloody Sunday* and *United 93*

Assignment: Send me a 5-page "problem paper" by 5:00 PM on Friday, March 14

SPRING BREAK: MARCH 15-30

Tuesday, April 1: Summing It All Up

Reading: Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, ch. 7-9 (pp. 111-164)
AHR Forum: *American Historical Review* 93:5 (December 1988), 1173-1227

Week of April 7: Presentation of problem papers

[After the week of April 7, the class will break down into two groups of 6-7 students each; one will meet on Tuesdays and the other on Thursdays in weeks when we meet as a class.]

Week of April 14: **TEN-PAGE DRAFT IS DUE BY FRIDAY, APRIL 18 AT 5:00**

Week of April 21: Discussion of draft sections in seminar; individual meetings

Week of April 28: **FIRST DRAFT OF PAPER IS DUE BY FRIDAY, MAY 2 AT 5:00**

Week of May 5: Discussion of papers in seminar; individual meetings with me.

FRIDAY, MAY 16: FINAL DRAFT OF SEMINAR PAPER IS DUE