

"History through Film" Syllabus

What is history? It is a body of facts that have been accepted by historians as valid and significant. History is seeing the past through the eyes of today. The main task of the historian is not to record facts, but to interpret and evaluate them. History is the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of facts for the purpose of telling "how it really was."

Like written history, contemporary Hollywood feature films are an interpretation of their society. They too may be considered historical evidence, for they share some properties with written history. Like traditional historical materials such as diaries and newspapers, contemporary films reflect the society that produced them. Twentieth-century films are a record of that time period. Both the filmmaker and historian share a common methodology. They study appropriate sources, then select and arrange facts to tell their story. But neither a single movie, nor a single article or book can be considered the absolute authority on a topic, for both present biased interpretations. Therefore, film evidence, as well as primary documents and journal articles must be evaluated in conjunction with other information on the subject, if a more balanced and truthful interpretation of history is sought.

Many argue that film evidence is invalid because filmmakers are not historians. Their primary goal is to entertain and make money, rather than presenting the truth about the past. These elements are most obvious in historical dramas. Fictional films are complex industrial and social products and how they are made, distributed, exhibited, and received by audiences and critics will be investigated to fully evaluate their roles as historical evidence. Nonetheless, it is the historian's task to separate fantasy from fact. A major goal of this course is determining what is valid in contemporary films and historical dramas and what do these films say about the people who create them, the politics behind their creation, and how they reflect the values, ideas, and larger historical issues of the times in which they were created.

In addition, we will touch on the history of Hollywood and the motion picture industry itself and examine, from time to time, the changes in film technology, techniques, and/or in the "politics" of the business. A wide range of primary source materials will be used for this purpose.

Therefore, this course examines Hollywood feature films and historical dramas as historical evidence. Students view movies on various topics and participate in Inner/outer Socratic seminar discussions, and write essays comparing that film evidence to information in more traditional sources, such as articles, film reviews and critical commentaries. The course is based around six broad questions:

1. Is film a legitimate historical source?
2. To what extent is film evidence legitimate?
3. What determines the legitimacy of film evidence?
4. What determines the illegitimacy of film evidence?
5. Is film evidence ever better than traditional historical sources?
6. Can Hollywood films be used to teach history?

ELEMENTS OF U. S. HISTORY THAT WILL BE STUDIED:

- The American Revolution
- Antebellum America
- Civil War & Reconstruction
- The Western Frontier
- American Exceptionalism
- The Immigrant Experience
- The Rise of Organized Crime
- Prohibition
- The Great Depression
- Pre-World War II Neutrality
- World War II Propaganda
- Hollywood and the Cold War
- McCarthyism
- The Nuclear Age
- The Civil Rights Movement
- The Kennedy Administration
- The Vietnam War
- Watergate
- The Nixon Administration
- Late 20^c Labor Movement

COURSE GOALS:

1. To give students practical experience in critical analysis by evaluating full length feature films as historical evidence.
2. To motivate students in the interrogation of traditional historical sources by exposing them to relevant written material on past events.
3. To use film as a means of motivating students to study selected topics in United States history
4. To improve students' research and writing skills through the assignment of critical essays on selected subjects that use film and traditional sources as evidence.
5. To impart an in-depth knowledge of major topics in U. S. history.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Do all assigned readings, pose your own questions [from the homework assignments] to bring to class for discussion, and to take good notes while viewing films.
2. View all films/shorts/clips, etc., either during the days they are shown in class, or rent them to view at home [or, in some cases, borrow from me for home viewing].
3. Make up all in class tests within of grace period of two class days without penalty [10% of your original grade will be deducted per day, for each day after that grace period—if there are extenuating circumstances, permission must be received from me to extend that original grace period without penalty!].
4. An independent viewing and analysis of another film in one of the categories/historical topics covered will be completed within the first quarter of the term. This will take the form of a short 4-5 page mini-paper. One additional film analysis paper can be done for extra credit [but permission must be given by me before any student can pursue this option].
5. Complete a film project in lieu of a final exam at the end of the course.