Romancing the Nation: Film, History, and the Nation

Course Description
Film critic and historian Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has written that “[t]he history of the cinema is the history of the twentieth century. Cinema is embedded deep into what one might call the external histories of the century—those of economics and politics for example—but even more deeply into the history of modern subjectivity” (160). As such, the emotional impact and visual authority of films give them a power to frame and concretize accounts of historical events and ‘figures’ in ways similar to other texts. In so doing, film has often participated in the enterprise of ‘nation building’ (we need only think of any number of films—Birth of a Nation, Gallipoli, or, Black Hawk Down—to see this). But film is also different from other texts in that moving-images seem deceptively transparent, particularly in the twentieth-first century.

This course challenges us to rethink the parameters, forms, styles, and subject matter of historical representation and nation building so as to include film. More specifically, it investigates the relation of film and cinema to nationalism, nation building, and national identity construction, and to history and historical representation. In particular, it examines the ‘role’ of domestic and international feature and documentary films in the formation of local, national, and global identities. Special attention will be given to the ways in which films from Australia, Chile and Argentina, and China have represented major ‘historical’ ruptures, such as colonization, war, and revolution, and to the political and ideological work of these representations and cultural memory. To this end, it will investigate the place of national cinemas in the more general and more complex web of cultural politics and global economics, querying the power of these representations within the context of film production, distribution, and reception (in translation). In so doing, we will trace the changing construction of the film history and historical representations.

We will begin by reading widely in theories of the moving-image and on the rhetoric of the image, and in theories of history and historiography. We will use these theoretical frames to query the power of film both to narrate and to construct notions of nation and of national identity within the context of specific historical events (e.g. wars and revolutions) and within the context of specific film genres. We will then turn to a number of seminal essays from film studies and discourse studies specific to the politics on national cinemas. Throughout the semester, we will put these readings in conversation with the select films and documentary texts from the Australia, Chile and Argentina, and China that are under study.

Course Objectives
The main objectives of the course are

- To develop an appreciation for the complexity of film as both historical artefact and artifice.
- To develop an appreciation for the complexity of film as a cultural text contributing to the representation and construction of the nation and national identity.
- To demonstrate the connections between the study of film and culture more generally to the study of history and national and international politics.
- To become familiar with critical approaches for examining the aesthetics and politics of film.
- To acquire visual competency, thus acquire or hone the literacy skills necessary to view and critique any moving-image text.

1 “On History and the Cinema,” Screen 31.2 (Summer 1990).
**Required Texts**
The following texts and a course pack are available through the Student Book Store (Grand River).


Course pack.

**Required Films**

**Course Format**
To meet these objectives this course relies heavily on collaborative pedagogy. Since successful cooperative learning cannot occur unless all class members are regularly present and engaged, it is ESSENTIAL that all students come to class prepared to discuss materials and to interact with one another. You will be expected to work in formal and informal groups, sharing your interpretations and critical assessments of films and the readings. In addition, to help foster an extended learning environment, you will be expected to conduct regular ANGEL dialogues with one another, engaging in conversation about the films, about viewing, about theory—and any other intersecting issues of interest.

**Course Assignments**
The final course grade will be determined as follows:

**Informed Participation**: Meaningful participation is evidenced by sustained contribution to class discussions, sustained contribution to group discussions, sustained engagement with peers in various structured and non-structured ways (including informal written assignments, film exercises, collaborative work on questions that carry over from one class to another, and facilitating large-class discussions). Because of the heavy emphasis on student participation and interaction, and on the viewing experience (of watching films together), anyone with more than two unexcused absence will not receive a final course grade higher than 1.0. Informed participation is worth 15% of final course grade.

**ANGEL Dialogues**: The purpose of ANGEL dialoguing is to improve understanding of the readings and the films for the first half of the semester. Students will be divided into dialogue groups: one student will be assigned to “kick off” the exchange and others will respond, raise issues or questions, and add information (e.g. readings, films, situating the text materials). Everyone must post at least one time in response to the kick-off post; and while there is no magic number of posts per dialogue, please be advised that one post per dialogue will not earn you a 4.0, and that you may continue to post after the 12:01 am deadline. ANGEL dialogues are expected to be substantive and detailed, drawing in specific textual references and making cross-references to other readings, films, or materials. I may provide a question or prompt to help groups generate discussion, but the dialogues can and should go well beyond the initial prompt. There will be a total of three dialogues. This assignment is worth 20% of total course grade.

**Visual Rhetorics Essay**: This individual assignment asks you to write select one of (or a combination of) the critical approaches to film discussed in the Hill and Gibson text, and analyze one of the following films in light of it: *Letters from Iwo Jima* or *Gallipoli*. This assignment is worth 15% of total course grade.

**Theory Exam**: This exam is designed to help you synthesize theoretical and conceptual readings and visual analysis. The exam will consist, then, of both a written and a visual component. It is worth 15% of final course grade.
Situating the Texts: This is a collaborative assignment due after spring break. Students will be divided into groups and asked to situate one of the following films, and the historical ‘event’ upon which it centers: Death and the Maiden, Raise the Red Lantern, and Hero. You will be asked to learn about the production context of the film, and the initial and subsequent reception of the film, both in respect to reviews and critical essays; you will also be asked to learn about the ‘event’ at the center of the filmic construction of ‘history’, which will include locating other accounts of the historical event. The group will be responsible for preparing a short ‘report’ (to be uploaded on ANGEL) of its findings. The group will NOT present its findings to the class during our discussion; rather, it will provide the class with this information ONE week in advance to the discussion of the film. This assignment is worth 15% of final course grade.

Screening the Nation Project: This collaborative or individual assignment asks analyzes the way film (or a series of films within a national cinema) engages in the construction of “history,” “nation,” and “national (or transnational) imaginaries.” You are to draw on the theoretical and conceptual literature of the course, as well as conduct research. This project (paper and presentation) is worth 20% of final course grade.

Evaluation is based on the following criteria; in instances of collaborative work, students will be involved in both self and group assessment.

4.0—Your work is excellent relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements; it is probing, perceptive, “original” and well expressed.
3.0—Your work is good relative to the level of course requirements; it demonstrates very good command of the materials, is well written and insightful.
2.0—Your work meets requirements of the assignment and is fairly well expressed.
1.0—Your work meets minimum requirements for credit but shows definite weaknesses in thought and expression.
0.0—Your work is unsatisfactory for credit because of major problems in thought or expression.

Course Schedule
Section I: Film, History, and Representation
Critical introduction to the course: readings in film rhetorics and film genres; history; nation and national cinema (Hayward, Jenkins, Sobchack, Barthes, Benjamin.); viewing of Letters from Iwo Jima. Assignments: Visual rhetorics essay, ANGEL dialogues.

Section II: Down Under? Australian History and Film
Viewings of Gallipoli and Rabbit Proof Fence; readings from Schlesinger, Higson, Hughes-Warrington, McFarlane and Mayer. Assignments: Theory exam; ANGEL dialogues.

Section III: The Southern Cone? Chilean and Argentine History in Film
Viewings of Death and the Maiden and The Official Story; readings from Foster, King, Szuchman. Assignments: Situating the text; ANGEL dialogues.

Section IV: Sinascapes? Chinese History on Film
Viewings of select films, including Raise the Red Lantern and Hero; readings from Zhang, Xu, Chow, Hill and Gibson. Assignments: Situating the text; ANGEL dialogues.

Section V: The Persistence of Vision
Screening the nation projects.

Honors Option: Students may pursue an H-option in this course. In order to earn an H in the course, students must earn a course grade of at least 3.5. This year we will work film The Killing Fields, and the case of genocide (Cambodia) with which it is concerned. If interested in participating, please let me know by Wednesday, January 27th.
Course Schedule
CP denotes readings in course pack; A denotes reserved readings on ANGEL.

Section I: Film, History, and Representation

January 13
Introduction to class.

January 20
Film: Letters from Iowa Jima (please view before class).

January 27
Due: ANGEL dialogue #1 [by 12:01am].

Section II: Down Under? Australian History and Film

February 3
Film discussion: Gallipoli (please view before class)

Monday, February 8: Visual rhetorics essay due by 5:00pm to ANGEL drop box.

February 10
Due: ANGEL dialogue #2 [by 12:01am].

24  **In-class theory exam.**

**Section III: The Southern Cone? Chilean and Argentine History in Film**


**Friday, March 5** Declarations of groups and topics for Screening the Nation projects due by 5:00pm to ANGEL drop box

March 8-12  **Spring Break**


**Friday, March 19** Self- and group-assessment of ANGEL dialogues due by 5:00pm (via email).

Film: *Death and the Maiden* (view before class).
Guest lecturer: Professor Cristian Dona-Revco

Section IV: Sinascapes? Chinese History on Film

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<th>Date</th>
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<td>31</td>
<td>In-class workshop on Screening the Nation Projects—bring drafts. Due: Situating the text reports—<em>Raise the Red Lantern</em></td>
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<td>April 7</td>
<td><strong>Readings:</strong> All situating the text material on <em>Raise the Red Lantern</em> posted on ANGEL. Rey Chow’s “Introduction” to <em>Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films.</em> New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pages 1-25. (CP) Film: <em>Raise the Red Lantern</em> (view before class) Due: Situating the text reports—<em>Hero</em>.</td>
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Section V: The Persistence of Vision

| 21    | In-class workshop on Screening the Nation projects. Completed rough draft due. |
| Friday, April 23 | Self- and group-assessment of collaborative situating the texts projects due by 5:00pm. |
| 28    | In-class presentations of Screening the Nation projects. |
| Friday, April 30 | Final drafts of Screening the Nation projects due by 5:00pm to ANGEL drop box. |
| Monday, May 3 | Self- and group-assessment of screening the nation projects due by 5:00pm. |