First Year Seminar

Debating the French Colonial Past in Film

Recent debates in France about citizenship, racism, the integration of religious minorities, and the legacy of the colonial past are often presented as a relatively new phenomenon, as if globalization’s impact has only recently been felt in France. In fact, such debates have been a part of French culture since the beginning of the modern period, and the traces of these discussions are easily found in all aspects of French culture.

This course explores the way in which twentieth-century cinema treated the question of the French empire, both as a contemporary phenomenon, in the case of films made during the colonial period, and as a historical legacy, in the case of films made after most French colonies gained their independence. We will view a selection of films made by French filmmakers as well as several films made by directors from former French colonies. Selected films will include works of fiction as well as documentaries, and will be supplemented with readings about the history of French colonialism, colonial cinema, and 20th-century French popular culture.

Requirements

Films. There will be one film per week. Occasionally we will screen all or part of a film in class, otherwise it is the student’s responsibility to go to the Askwith Media Library on the second floor of the Shapiro Undergraduate Library to arrange for a screening on the monitors that are available there. The films are on reserve for this class during the week prior to our discussion.

Readings. The required readings are available in .pdf form on a C-Tools website that I have set up for members of the class. No book purchases are necessary for this class.

Papers. Every student will be required to write a short paper each week, prior to our Monday meeting. The paper should be your critical response to the film and the reading. I will not be expecting a particular point of view, though I do expect you to have one.

The requirements for the paper are as follows: one page, single-spaced. No margins, no title, no page number, no footnotes, no name on the printed side of the paper. Just your words, organized coherently into several paragraphs that contain an argument. Write your name lightly in pencil on the back, so that I will not be able to identify you until after I have read the essay.
As a way of getting started, I might suggest a few questions that you could ask as you approach these films:

- What is this film trying to do?
- How is it trying to do it?
- Is the film motivated by a question? Or is it motivated by a specific message?
- Who is/are the audience(s) for this film? What response(s) does it seek to incite in this/these audience(s)?
- Who does it ask us to sympathize with (if anybody)? Who does it ask us to judge? How do you know this?
- What situation does it want to explain? What does it seem willing to leave out?
- What assumptions does the film make about its characters, the situations that they find themselves in, and the spaces that they occupy?
- Does the film open itself up to more than one interpretation? Or does it insist on a relatively straightforward reading? Is it ambiguous? Why? Why not?

Obviously you will not be able to answer all of these questions in every case. I just throw them out to help you begin.

A portion of our discussion each week will be devoted to discussions of student papers. Each week I will select several of the papers, photocopy the FRONT side only (the side without your names) and we will read through them and talk about ways to improve the clarity and organization of the argument.

**Attendance and Participation.** I expect all enrolled students to attend all class meetings and participate actively in discussion. If you are shy or uncertain about speaking in public, please come speak to me in my office hours about ways to overcome this reluctance. Remember, too, that one of the best ways you can contribute to a seminar is to ask a good question. Try and think of one or two questions to ask each day we have discussion, and don’t worry if you can’t answer them yourself.

All unexcused absences to section or lecture will negatively affect your grade. Medical excuses will only be accepted with a certified doctor’s note. Three or more unexcused absences will result automatically in a zero participation grade. **If you have an illness that necessitates more than three excused absences, it is your responsibility to contact me early on in order to find some solution.**

**Grades.** The papers will be graded on a 9 point scale. 9 = excellent, 8=very good, 7=shows real promise, 6=on the right track but needs work, 5=elements of a good argument but lacking in coherence, 4 and lower = come see me in my office hours to work on your writing. Please see also the “WritingHints” I have included in the Resources section of the C-Tools site.

75 percent of your final grade will be based on your written work for the class. 25 percent will be based on your attendance and participation in discussion. There is no final exam.
Schedule of Classes, Films, and Readings

Week 1 (Sept 14)  **Introduction: The French Empire and Colonial Culture in France**


Week 2 (Sept 21)  **The Colonial Film in the Silent Era**

*L’Atlantide* (1921), Jacques Feyder


Week 3 (Sept 28)  **The Colonial Film in the 1930s**

*Pépé Le Moko* (1937), Julien Duvivier


Week 4 (Oct 5)  **Decolonization**

*The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Gillo Pontecorvo


Week 5 (Oct 12)  **African Film in the 1960s**


Week 6 (Oct 19)  NO CLASS – FALL STUDY BREAK
**Week 7 (Oct 26) African Film in the 1970s**
*Touki-Bouki* (1973), Djibril Diop Mambêty


**Week 8 (Nov 2) The Resurgence of Colonial Memories in France 1**
*Chocolat* (1983), Claire Denis


**Week 9 (Nov 9) The Resurgence of Colonial Memories in France 2**
*Fort Saganne* (1984), Alain Corneau


**Week 10 (Nov 16) Colonial History Retold in African Film**
*Camp de Thiaroye* (1987), Ousmane Sembène


**Week 11 (Nov 23) The Documentary Film and Colonial Memory**
*Drowning by Bullets* (1992), Philip Brooks and Alan Hayling


**Week 12 (Nov 30) Postcolonial Romantic Comedy**
*Métisse* (1993), Mathieu Kassovitz


**Week 13 (Dec 7) Postcolonial Realism**
*Hate* (1995), Mathieu Kassovitz

**Week 14 (Dec 14) Postcolonial Fairy Tales**  
*Salut, Cousin* (1996), Merzak Allouache