

RYERSON UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

**History Through Film: I**

HST 119

Fall 2010

**This is a one term lower level liberal studies course.**

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Office Hours are as posted on my office door. If you are not free at any of the posted times, we can make alternative arrangements.

**Course Description**

Following the emergence of the nation state the Old European Empires extended into the Americas, the West Indies and South Asia from the turn of the 15th century. The imperialists were motivated by everything from wanderlust to greed to the desire to spread their cultural and spiritual beliefs which they regarded as superior to those of the people they conquered. In the early 19th century, these imperial visions gave way to a new kind of imperial expansion; one which used cultural superiority more as a rationalisation of than a motivation for expansion. This course uses film as another device through which to examine this fascinating period in world history. We will see how European imperialism has been portrayed on film, using a selection of works produced by descendants of colonizers and colonized alike.

Our study begins with *La Otra Conquista*, Salvador Carrasco's (1998) film about the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire and its aftermath as told from an Aztec perspective. It examines the conquest in its many forms. *Cabeza da Vaca*, Nicholas Echevarria's 1990 film about the wanderings of Spanish conquistador Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca (1991) in what is today, the southern United States and Mexico. The film examines early encounters between a few shipwrecked Spaniards the local people they meet. Bruce Beresford's 1991 film, *Black Robe*, is set in 17th century New France and probes the role of religion in imperial conquest. *Burn* (1970) and *The Last Supper* then move our gaze to the West Indies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries. Here we see the same themes of religion, economic exploitation and political competition at play. These films tackle the relationship between slavery and imperialism. The last film, *Walker, a True Story* takes an off-beat look at American imperialism in Central America in the mid- 19<sup>th</sup> century, drawing interesting parallels between this and 20<sup>th</sup> century American involvement in the same region.

The course not only examines the concepts of imperialism and colonial encounters, but it also asks how film can be used to explore the past. Do filmic representations of history differ significantly from other types such as academic papers, original documents and the like? How do economic, cultural and political considerations inform the making of films and affect their value as historical representations?

## Teaching Modes

The course will employ a number of different teaching modes. Each film will be introduced by a number of lecture hours pertaining to the historical period. After in-class viewing of the films, we will meet in small group "tutorial" sessions to discuss the films in conjunction with lecture material and additional assigned tutorial readings. **Students are required to attend at least three of the five tutorials or receive an automatic zero for that portion of the mark (15%).** We will examine the films critically in light of historical evidence and the particular ideological bias of directors, screen writers and production companies. So, the films will be examined for what they tell us about the historical period covered by the film but also for what they tell us about the historical context in which films are made (and indeed, viewed).

## Method of Evaluation and Marking Scheme

Essay:	30%
Mid-term test	20%
Tutorials:	15%
Final Examination:	<u>35%</u>
	<u>100%</u>
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There will be an in class mid-term test and a final examination. The final will be written in the examination period at the end of term. **Please do not make end of term travel plans until after the exam timetable has been posted.** An essay will also be assigned. Deadline, length requirements and topic information will be distributed early in the term.

## Grades

The following is an explanation of the grading scheme followed by the History Department. Your marks will be based on these standards.

A+ A A-

An outstanding performance. A student must demonstrate a full knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, show a good ability to analyze and to criticize the analyses of others, organize material well and explain issues clearly, be able to discuss issues in their broader context, and demonstrate some originality.

B+ B B-

A good, above average performance. A student must demonstrate quite a full knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, show a good ability to analyze issues, and some ability to be critical of the analyses of others, organize material and explain issues reasonably clearly and be able to discuss issues in a broader context.

C+ C C-

An adequate, average performance. A student must demonstrate a fair understanding and knowledge of the subject matter, organize material and explain issues fairly clearly, and show some ability to analyze issues involved in the material under study.

D+ D D-

A minimum passing grade. A student must be able to demonstrate some knowledge of the subject matter, some ability to organize material and explain issues, and some realization of what aspects of the subject under study are relevant to the questions asked.

F

A failing grade. The student has failed to meet the minimum standards outlined above, has failed to complete/submit a piece of work or has submitted a piece of work which bears little relation to the task assigned.

### **Text and Other Readings**

Tutorial readings are all available on Blackboard. I will also post announcements there and a host of other good things like essay writing guides, a copy of the course outline, assignment instructions and so on. There is no course textbook – ALL readings are available through Blackboard electronically.

### **Lectures, Film Presentations and Tutorial Schedule**

The way it works ...

Since the sections are too large for small group discussion, tutorials will be held in the one hour time blocks on alternate weeks. These small group discussions based on the readings, films and lecture materials will be led by me and/or a TA depending on your group assignment. I will draw up these tutorial lists as soon as we have settled and will post them on Blackboard. So, everyone must attend the two hour blocks (either lectures or films) every week, and attend a one hour tutorial session every other week. All students will write the mid-term test in the one hour slot on Friday, October 22 in class room KHE225 from 10-11 (for Section 1) and in KHE239 from 1-2 (for Section 2). The following is a tentative schedule of films lectures and tutorials.

### **The Schedule**

Week One: September 9 & 10: Introduction to the course. Lecture in all three hours

**Readings:** Robert Rosenstone, "History on Film," *History on Film, Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.: 2006), 1-10; Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any resemblance to

persons living or dead': film and the challenge of authenticity," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Volume 8, 3 (1988): 269-283 AND Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review*, 93,5(December 1988): 1173-1185.

Issues raised in these readings will be discussed in lectures and throughout the course. They will also form the basis for the mid-term test questions. You are advised to READ THEM as soon as possible. They are posted on Blackboard under the RED headings

**NOTE: HEREAFTER, PLEASE FOLLOW THE TUTORIAL READINGS AS ASSIGNED IN THE TUTORIAL HANDOUT SHEETS POSTED ON BLACKBOARD. THE ACCOMPANYING READINGS ARE ALSO THERE. IDEALLY, YOU WILL WANT TO HAVE READ THE MATERIAL BEFORE SEEING THE FILMS IN CLASS AND YOU MUST HAVE READ THEM BEFORE ATTENDING TUTORIAL.**

Week Two: September 16 & 17: Lecture in all three hours.

Week Three: September 23: Film: *La Otra Conquista*  
Beginning of the tutorial rotation with:  
September 24: Tutorials Groups "A"

Week Four: September 30: Lecture  
October 1: Tutorials Groups "B"

Week Five: October 7: Film: *Cabeza da Vaca*  
October 8: Tutorial Groups "A"

Week Six: October 14: Lecture  
October 15: Tutorial Groups "B"

Week Seven: October 21: Film: *Black Robe*  
October 22: **In Class Mid-term Test (room assignments as on original schedule)**

Week Eight: October 28: Lecture  
October 29: Tutorial Groups "A"

Week Nine: November 3: Film: *Burn!*  
November 5: Tutorial Groups "B"

Week Ten: November 11: Film: *The Last Supper*  
November 12: Tutorial: Group "A"

**Note: Friday, November 12 is the last day to drop this course without academic penalty**

Week Eleven: November 18: Lecture

November 19: Tutorial: Group “B”

Week Twelve: November 25: Film: *Walker. A True Story*

November 26: Tutorial Groups “A” and “B” because next Friday is Monday!

Week Thirteen: November 28: Review and Examination Preparation

ANY CHANGES TO THE TUTORIAL AND LECTURE SCHEDULE WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN CLASS BEFORE HAND AND POSTED ON BLACKBOARD.

Additional Information

Students are advised that any alterations to the course assignments, tests, marking or evaluation scheme as noted in this course outline will be announced in class prior to implementation. Faculty Course Surveys will be administered towards the end of term. I will provide particulars pertaining to the timing and mode of administration in class. Students are also advised to consult the following website for the University’s policy on examinations: <http://www.ryerson.ca/senate/policies/pol135.pdf> and on plagiarism and other types of academic misconduct, please see: <http://www.ryerson.ca/academicintegrity>. Please activate **Ryerson e-mail accounts** as soon as possible.

Please activate your **Ryerson e-mail account** as soon as possible. If you don’t check this email account you might miss out on important information .

## History Through the Movies

Film: *La Otra Conquista* (The Other Conquest)

Before seeing the movie, please read the following documents: Extracts from Bartolome de Las Casas, *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, 1542; the *Requerimiento* [1510] and "Spaniards Debate the Morality of Empire".

Bartolome de Las Casas (1484-1576) was born in Seville and participated in the colonisation of Cuba. He was shocked by the barbarity of the conquest. He later entered the Dominican order as a priest and devoted his life to the defence of the Indians. His "Devastation of the Indies" document was read to the Spanish court and influenced the promulgation of the "New Laws" enacted in 1542 to effect colonial reform. He wrote extensively about their plight and participated in a famous debate in 1550 with Juan Gides Sepulveda about the morality of the methods of the Spanish occupation of the New World.

1. What motivated Las Casas to write his "Brief Account" and how does this shape our reading of the document?
2. What was the purpose of the *Requerimiento*?
3. On what basis did Sepulveda justify the colonisation of the New World by Spain? How did he rationalise/justify the takeover?
4. How does Las Casas defend the Indians?
5. Are the views of Las Casas and Sepulveda reflected in the film? How?
6. What is the "other conquest" which the film portrays?
7. Can you identify any characters or things in the film which "stand in" for historical ideas, movements or types?

## History Through the Movies

### Seminar: *Cabeza de Vaca*

Before seeing the film read the extracts from “The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza De Vaca”(1542), Translated by translated by Fanny Bandelier in 1905. The full relacion can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/one/cabeza.htm>

Read also Mariah Wade, “Go between: the roles of Native American Women and Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca in Southern Texas in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century”, The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 112, 445 (Summer 1999), 332-342.

See also the hand drawn map of the Journey – posted on Blackboard

*tune*: prickly pear; league: 2.6 miles; New Spain: Mexico

You might want to consider the following questions while you read:

1. While the film includes few references to place names, does it provide a fair accounting of the journey in general? Is it faithful to certain incidents portrayed in the journal extract? Where has the director “simplified” events for narrative or other reasons?
2. How do De Vaca and his friends “heal” their patients in the film and according to the memoir? What is De Vaca’s attitude to this “skill” at first and later?
3. What was the nature of the relationships De Vaca his shipwrecked fellows to the locals they encountered? How did this differ from the pattern of encounter of other Europeans with the same folk? Why?
4. Why do the Indians convert to Christianity? What is the main impact of European invasion of the lands described?
5. How reliable are memoirs and travelogues as historical sources? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Which medium is more effective in telling about the past in this case? Why?
6. Does Echevarria’s film use any of the techniques mentioned by Natalie Davis in her article on history and film. For example, can you find distancing techniques? Does the film indicate its sources? Does it provide multiple tellings/interpretations of the same event?

## History Through the Movies

### Seminar: *Black Robe*

Before seeing the movie, please read the following:

1. James Axtell, "Through Another Glass Darkly: Early Indian Views of Europeans", from Ken Coates and R. Fisher (eds.), *Out of the Background, Readings on Canadian Native History*, 2nd Edition (Toronto, 1998)
2. "The Jesuit View", a collection of documents selected from Cameron Nish (ed.), *The French Regime, Volume One* (Scarborough, 1965)

The first item is an academic article in which the author tries to reconstruct some of the common views of Europeans held by First Nations peoples. What are some of the challenges posed by such an exercise? Is the paper helpful/convincing? Are some of the common perceptions he describes found in the film *Black Robe*?

The next set of readings are extracts of documents written from the Jesuit and Ursuline perspectives. The Ursulines were an order of nuns sent out to New France and the Jesuits were a missionary order of priests also sent there, but also to Africa, Asia and South America. Both were Roman Catholic. The *Jesuit Relations* represent some 73 volumes of reports and letters sent from various missionaries home to France where they were published on an annual basis with an eye toward raising funds for further missionary work. These volumes have provided much of the primary source material for the reconstruction of written histories of the period after 1634 and also informed Brian Moore's novel, *Black Robe*, on which the film is based. What kind of questions might we want to ask of such a source from the outset? What factors might have influenced those who submitted (and later edited) the reports for publication?

Can you find any parallels between the attitudes and beliefs found in the missionary extracts and episodes in the film?

What is the attitude toward Christian martyrdom in the film and in the documents?

Is the film successful in portraying culture contact and cultural "confusion" on both sides in the film?

## History Through the Movies

### Seminar: *Burn!* and *The Last Supper*

Before seeing the movies, please read the following:

Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Ceremony and revolt: *Burn!* and *The Last Supper*', *Slaves on Screen, Film and Historical Vision* (Random House: Toronto, 2000)

Mraz, John, "Recasting Cuban Slavery. *The Other Francisco* and *The Last Supper*", Donald R. Stevens (ed.), *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies* (Wilmington, SR Books 1997), pp. 103-122.

*Burn!* is a fictionalised account of slave insurrection in the West Indies. Given what you know about the historical period, is it plausible?

*The Last Supper* is an interpretation of a real event which took place in Cuba in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when one Count de Casa Bayona actually organised a "last supper" for 12 of his slaves in the same way as in the film. In real life, this also led to a slave insurrection and the execution of all twelve of those who had attended the dinner. Why does the director choose to have one of the slave rebels live?

Did the end of slavery mean the same thing to Jose Dolores as it did to William Walker?

What historical themes was Pontecorvo trying to explore in his film?

Do *Burn!* and *The Last Supper* tell, 'specific' and 'general' histories at the same time as Natalie Davis suggests (p.52)? What about previous films seen in the course?

How is the relationship between capitalism and slavery explored in each film?

## History Through the Movies

Seminar: *William Walker, A True Story* (1987)

Before seeing the film, please read the following documents:

1. "The Monroe Doctrine"
2. O'Sullivan on "Manifest Destiny"
3. Ernesto Cardenal "With Walker in Nicaragua" from E. Cardenal, *With Walker in Nicaragua and Other Early Poems, 1949-1954* (Wesleyan Press, 1985).
4. Robert Rosenstone, "Walker: the Dramatic Film as Historical Truth," *Historia* 2,1 (1992), 3-12 and compare this with Robert E. May's rather less admiring review of the film in *Journal of American History* 77, 3 (1990), 1105-1106.

There are also a couple of websites which outlines some more contemporary events which help to explain more recent historical parallels being drawn in the film pertaining to US intervention in Nicaragua and Panama:

<http://www.webcom.com/pinknoiz/covert/irancontra.html> click on "Summary" at this site

<http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/dd/dd-contents.html> This site is an electronic version of Noam Chomski's book, *Deterring Democracy*. Check out chapter five sections 3 and 4.

By now, you know the drill for tutorials. The Monroe Doctrine is a foreign policy document written by John Quincy Adams but attributed to the Presidency of James Monroe. It is the foreign policy equivalent of the economic strategy coined the "American System". O'Sullivan the journalist coined the term "manifest destiny." The third reading is a long poem written by one of Latin America's most important modern poets which deals with the life of William Walker and his exploits in Nicaragua. Rosenstone argues that Walker is an excellent example of a post-modern film which "does" history well and Robert E. May, another historian, has a more qualified response.

As always, write down questions about the readings and the film as they occur to you.

Questions:

What was "manifest destiny"?

Account for the "historical anachronisms" found in the film. What is the director trying to do?

Account for May's reaction to the film. What are his biggest objections? Do you agree?