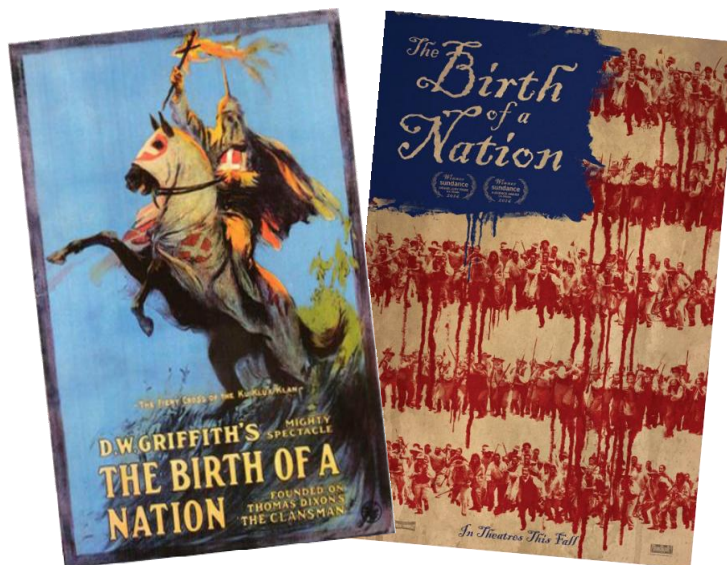


HISTORY 2189A

History at the Movies

Fall 2026



Posters for *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, & *The Birth of a Nation*, 2016

Class: Mondays 1:30-3:30, **location** TBA

Instructor: Prof. Alan MacEachern

Office: Lawson 2268

Office Hours: Mondays 9:30-11:30

Email: amaceach@uwo.ca

>>This is a **DRAFT** syllabus, May 2026.<<

Course Description:

Film is one of the most powerful ways in which we imagine and remember the past. There is no shortage of historical films – both feature films and documentaries – that imaginatively re-create the past while simultaneously raising important questions about that past. And yet historical films are “good” or “bad” in different ways than historical texts are. As a medium for history, film has its own strengths and weaknesses, its own genres and conventions.

His2189 goes to the movies to study events of the past, the history of filmmaking (to a limited degree), and the nature of history itself. We will watch the entirety or snippets of a host of films from more than a century of filmmaking: Hollywood blockbusters, documentaries, Heritage Minutes, and even online

conspiracy videos. As we will see, every historical film represents a dialogue between the time it depicts and the time it was created – so each is doubly a window into the past.

Movies will be available through Western Libraries subscriptions to [Kanopy](#), [Criterion on Demand](#), and [Audio-Cine Films](#), or the [National Film Board](#) or [Internet Archives](#), and students will be expected to watch these on their own time, in advance of the class in which the movie is being discussed.

Note: The films, readings, and class discussion in this course concern historical content involving topics such as war, violence, and racial and gender discrimination. Students may find some of the dialogue or scenes upsetting or offensive. I will attempt to warn students of disturbing content. And I will ask the class to be respectful and sensitive in discussion with one another.

Learning outcomes:

Students completing this course will

- Appreciate and evaluate historical films as both secondary sources (representations and interpretations of the past they describe) and primary sources (representations of the time in which they were created).
- Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of film as a medium for history.
- Become familiar with the history of film.
- Develop historical thinking skills: assessing historical significance, evaluating evidence and accuracy, identifying context and perspective.
- Develop verbal and written communication skills.

Course Materials:

There is no textbook to purchase for this course. Readings are available on the course Brightspace site, through the Weldon Library online system, and/or at the URL given. Students are expected to complete the assigned readings and be prepared to discuss them in class and in the final exam.

Method of Evaluation:

Further information on all assignments will be provided on OWL Brightspace & in class.

- **Course engagement – 15%**

Students are to attend lectures and participate in class discussion; attendance will be taken. It is understood that students may miss the rare class; contact me only if you are or will be absent for an extended period.

- **Film responses – 8 x 4% = 32%**

In advance of class in weeks 2 through 12, students will be asked a question about the assigned film for that class, and they will submit a 250-word response on Brightspace. Your 8 highest grades will

count toward your final mark. Responses are accepted only until the beginning of the class in which the film is being discussed.

- **Historical film review – 13%**

Students' first major assignment will be to write a historical film review. You will choose and watch a film about some historical subject; the film must be made any time before 2016 and not be one we study in class. You will then research and find reviews of this film from when it was released (we will discuss where to find these reviews in class). You will then write a paper of about 1500 words describing both how your film portrays the historical event and also how your film is a product of the historical period in which it was made. You must inform me of your chosen film, via email, by 5 October. The film review is due 26 October.

(This assignment has a built-in, blanket extension: it can be submitted up to 2 November without penalty. Beyond that, there is a 5% deduction per day, including weekends.)

- **Historical film treatment – 20%**

Students' second major assignment is to write a treatment for a proposed historical film. A "treatment" is a pitch for, and synopsis of, a proposed film. You will come up with an idea for a film about a real historical figure or event, research that topic, and write a synopsis of the imagined film you would like to make about this topic in history. Your treatment should be about 2000 words, concisely describing the plot or structure of your imagined film, identifying its main characters and themes, and explaining the argument or statement it seeks to make about the past. The film treatment is due on 30 November.

(This assignment has a built-in, blanket extension: it can be submitted up to 7 December without penalty. Beyond that, there is a 5% deduction per day, including weekends.)

- **Final exam – December exam period – 20%**

The 3-hour exam will cover all lectures, films, and readings from the term, and will consist of short answer and essay questions.

Make-up exams can only be approved by Academic Counselling. Please see the History Department's [Undergraduate Policies and Statements](#) page for procedures and requirements involving make-up exams.

Course-specific policies:

- The Faculty of Social Science's policy statement on plagiarism and the use of plagiarism detection software is outlined in the History Department's [Undergraduate Policies and Statements](#) page.
- Students are to submit all assignments through the course Brightspace page. Please submit them in Microsoft Word, preferably with a file name "[Last name], [assignment] – ex. "Smith, proposal." There is no need to submit a paper copy.

- All course assignments must be completed to pass the course, and all must be submitted by 7 December.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

As the linguist Emily M. Bender has noted, teachers don't ask students to write essays because the world needs more student essays. The point of writing essays is to strengthen students' critical-thinking skills; in the same way that lifting weights is useful no matter what sport an athlete plays, writing essays develops skills necessary for whatever job a college student will eventually get. Using ChatGPT to complete assignments is like bringing a forklift into the weight room; you will never improve your cognitive fitness that way.

~ Ted Chiang, "[Why AI Isn't Going to Make Art](#)," *The New Yorker*, 2024.

A principal goal of an undergraduate course such as this is to help you improve your research and writing. If you let generative AI do the work in your place, you will not learn, and you will never do the work as well as AI does – which itself can be a low bar.

In this course, while it is recognized that you may be using AI to brainstorm, generate outlines, proofread your drafts, etc., **the writing submitted must be your own**. If you do use generative AI, you are expected to reference it and describe its use in your foot/endnotes. Failure to do so will be considered a breach of academic integrity and a form of academic misconduct. If you have questions about this policy, please speak to me.

I encourage students to take the [Academic Integrity Tutorial](#) on Brightspace to understand Western's expectations around academic integrity.

Draft Course Schedule –Topics, screenings, & readings:

1. 14 September Trailers

- To read:
 - Pierre Sorlin, "The Film in History," in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *The History on Film Reader* (2009), 15-16.

2. 21 September What time does to film & what film does to time

- To watch: *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (Bill Morrison, 2016) – [Kanopy](#)
- To read:
 - Mary A. Doane, "The Representability of Time," in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *The History on Film Reader* (2009), 75-84.

3. 28 September The history of film

- To watch: *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) – [Criterion on Demand](#)
- To read:

- Godfrey Cheshire, “Why No One Is Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Feature Film,” *Southern Cultures* (Winter 2015), 28-37.

4. 5 October Historical film as secondary & primary source

- To watch: *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) – [Criterion on Demand](#)
- To read:
 - Charles Thomas Samuels, Review of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Hudson Review* (Spring 1968), various pages.
 - Arnon Gutfeld, “Nostalgia, Protest and Tradition in the 1960s: History as Reflected by *Bonnie and Clyde*,” *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* (2009), 5-34.

Fall reading week – no classes

5. 19 October Text & film

- To watch: *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Daniel Vigne, 1982) – [Kanopy](#)
- To read:
 - Excerpts from Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983): preface, introduction, 42-47, 60-1, and 76.
 - Robert Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” *American Historical Review* (1998), 553-71.
 - Natalie Zemon Davis, “On the Lame,” *American Historical Review* (1998), 572-603.

6. 26 October The Documentary

- To watch: *The Valour and the Horror – Bomber Command* (Brian McKenna, 1992) – [National Film Board](#)
- To read:
 - Selections from David J. Bercuson and S.F. Wise, *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* (1994):
 - Wise and Bercuson, “Introduction,” 3-11.
 - Wise, “The Valour and Horror: A Report for the CBC Ombudsman,” 13-30.
 - William Morgan, “Report of the CBC Ombudsman,” 61-72.
 - Brian McKenna and Terence McKenna, “Response to the CBC Ombudsman Report, November 10, 1992, Galafilm Inc.,” 73-88.

7. 2 November Is It OK to Laugh?

- To watch: *The Last Laugh* (Ferne Pearlstein, 2016) -- [Kanopy](#)
 - *Optional*: It would help to watch *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997) – [Criterion on Demand](#)
- To read:
 - Lawrence Baron, “Serious Humor: Laughter as Lamentation,” in *The History on Film Reader* (2009), 122-32.

8. 9 November The Biopic & The Bechdel Test

- To watch: *On the Basis of Sex* (Mimi Leder, 2018) – [Audio-Cine Films](#)
- To read:

- Dennis Bingham, “The Lives and Times of the Biopic,” in *A Companion to the Historical Film* (2013), 233-54.

9. 16 November **Black Stories, White Saviours**

- To watch: *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988) – [Audio-Cine Films](#) and *Selma* (Ava DuVerney, 2014) – [Criterion on Demand](#) (*You will be asked a question in advance about only one.*)
- To read:
 - Matthew Hughey, “The Savior Trope and the Modern Meanings of Whiteness,” in *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, & Consumption* (2014), 1-17.

10. 23 November **History & Conspiracy**

- To watch: *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991) – [Criterion on Demand](#)
- To read:
 - Marita Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone’s Docudramas,” *History & Theory* (1997), 64–79.

11. 30 November **The Act of Witnessing**

- *Note:* Last day to drop His2189, resulting in a grade of withdrawn, without academic penalty.
- To watch: Selections from *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) and *The Look of Silence* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014).
- To read:
 - Oki Rahadianto Sutopo, “*The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*: A Critical Reflection,” *Crime Media Culture* (2017), 235-43.

12. 7 December **The Future of History on Film**

- To watch: *They Shall Not Grow Old* (Peter Jackson, 2018) – [Criterion on Demand](#)
- To read:
 - Lawrence Napper, “*They Shall Not Grow Old* and the Elephant in the Room,” *LAmHist.Net* (2018).
 - Jessica Meyer, “Sound and Silence in Peter Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old*,” *American Historical Review* (2019), 1789-92.

Additional information:

Please review the Department of History’s shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.