

Hist 410: European Film in the Age of Dictators

Fall 2017, (Wed. 3:00-5:45pm)

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Course Description

“The Age of Dictators” refers to the quarter-century, ending in 1945, in which fascist, Bolshevik and authoritarian regimes towered over European affairs. These governments, along with their democratic counterparts in Britain and North America, led in forging the techniques and conventions we associate with modern propaganda, and cinema was central to this project. In examining this history, we will focus especially upon Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union, looking at each country’s movie industry and the bid by leading artists – sometimes reluctantly, often enthusiastically – to carry out their state’s propagandistic agendas. Above all, we will examine the movies themselves, identifying and evaluating the techniques, imagery and scenarios by which film-makers sought to make Nazi, fascist or Bolshevik ideology consistent with the highest callings of patriotic duty and heroic action.

Course Readings (required)

Susan Tegel, *Nazis and the Cinema* (2007)

Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (2008)

Additional readings via Blackboard (see schedule, below)

Recommended reading

Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda. Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (1998)

David Williamson, *The Age of Dictators: A Study of the European Dictatorships 1918-53* (2007)

Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (2004)

Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1945* (2015)

Course Requirements

For most people, watching a movie requires less effort, and is thus “easier,” than reading a book. “Reading” a movie, on the other hand – interpreting the movie-watching experience, understanding how film works on its own terms – is perhaps harder than it looks, requiring as it does an active eye as well as a critical, self-aware subjectivity informed by film and other cultural criticism. This truism applies all the more when the movies in question function as primary historical “documents” – texts, that is, to be evaluated and contextualized. My intention here is that we all, to the greatest degree possible, strive to experience these movies much as they were experienced by their intended audiences, and that we bring this historical perspective to our critical evaluations and interpretations.

To this end, the most important course requirement will be

- a) a series of short essays, critical engagements with in-class film showings, exercising precisely these analytical skills. These essays, two to three pages in length, will address the movie shown the previous week, presenting some combination of your critical responses with your understanding of the historical context and propagandistic intentions

of the film-makers (the question of intention, as we shall see, is itself a contested matter, as these movies often bear the mark of several authorial hands). Each student is required to write *eight* such essays over the length of the semester. Altogether these will make up 30 percent of your course grade.

- b) A final exam, which will focus more on the historical context surrounding these movies, the leading artistic and political personalities behind them, and/or questions of a more comparative nature (e.g. Stalinist versus Nazi cinema). The final contributes 30 percent to your course grade.
- c) A research paper, due on Monday of Week Fourteen (November 27). As you will quickly see, in this course we will only scratch the many surfaces of our topic. I have proposed, in a separate handout, some possibilities for research projects that address other national cinemas during this period (e.g. British, French), other film genres, or directors etc. These projects will require additional film viewings on your own (some of which I will provide via library reserve) as well as additional research into the relevant literature. The paper should come in at 10-12 pages, with a separate bibliography. You will also need to submit a research proposal no later than week five. Finally, I ask that you provide oral presentations of your research (ten minutes each maximum!) in our final class session (December 6). All of this combines for another 30 percent of your course grade.
- d) Class participation accounts for the remaining 10 percent; I intend this course very much as an ongoing conversation regarding the intersections of art and politics; artists and political authorities; and artists and audiences. Your presence and contributions will be duly noted and appreciated.

Course Schedule

Note: although we meet once per week, class time will typically be divided into halves, as indicated by the a) & b) scheme below. Most class sessions will include one "feature" film showing; these are the movies you will address in your short reviews, to be submitted in class the following week. These "features," thirteen in all, are indicated in boldface below.

Week One Getting Started

- a) Propaganda, Film and Dictatorship, an Introduction.
- b) The War and its Legacies. Excerpts from Abel Gance's *J'Accuse!* (1919)

Week Two Soviet Film

- a) Bolshevism and the Arts. Kenez, 1-46; lecture
- b) To the Masses! Soviet cinema's heroic age. Kenez, 47-88. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925, 73 min.). Excerpts from other Soviet films of 1920s.

Note: the Art Institute of Chicago opens an exhibit "Revoliutsiia! Demonstratiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test" which, commencing Oct. 29, promises to include "a rotating program of Soviet cartoons and documentaries shown in a space that evokes an agitprop train." I have contacted the curators for this exhibit about trying to arrange viewing opportunities for our class. We can talk about this as the exhibit opening draws near.

Week Three Turning Germans into Nazis

- a) Preaching to the Choir: the *Kampfzeit* films. Reading: Tegel, 49-73. Excerpts from *Hans Westmar* (an SA production, also 1933, much disparaged by Goebbels).
- b) The Professionals take over: *Hitlerjunge Quex* (1933; 95 min.); Eric Rentschler, “Emotional Engineering: *Hitler Youth Quex*”

Week Four Hitler & Film

- a) Leni Riefenstahl’s First Draft: *Der Sieg des Glaubens* (Victory of Faith, 1933). Film excerpts and reading: Tegel, 75-98. *Note, only in viewing this earlier movie, in which Hitler appears, at best, as first among equals, do the radical departures of Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will become obvious.*
- b) *Triumph of the Will* (1935, 105 min.); additional readings on Blackboard
- c) That’s Entertainment! Dr. Goebbels and the German Dream Factory of the 1930s. Reading: Rentschler, “Hollywood Made in Germany: *Lucky Kids* (1936)”

Week Five Targeting the Jews

- a) Intensifying the campaign against the Jews: excerpts from *Die Rothschilds Aktien auf Waterloo* (The Rothschilds’ Shares in Waterloo, 1939) and *Der Ewige Jude* (The Wandering Jew, 1941). Reading: Tegel, 99-168
- b) A warrant for mass murder? Harlan’s *Jud Süß* (1941, 95 min.). Reading: Abbott, “Jud Süß in history” (Blackboard)

Week Six Other Points of View

- a) Fascist Appeals in the U.S. Excerpts from *Gabriel over the White House* (1934)
- b) British war films. *The 49th Parallel* (1941, 121 min.). Reading: Jo Fox on British propaganda films (Blackboard)

Week Seven Pre-emptive Propaganda

- a) Seeing is believing: German newsreels. Selections and lecture. Readings: Tegel, “Third Reich Newsreels – an effective tool of propaganda?”; Hoffmann, “Propagandistic Problems of German Newsreels in World War II” (Blackboard)
- b) A Nazi Critique of British Imperialism: *Ohm Krüger* (1942, 126 min.); Reading: Tegel, 169-90; Richard Taylor, “Uncle Krüger,” from *Film Propaganda* (Blackboard)

Week Eight “Life has become more jolly, comrades!”

- a) The triumph of Socialist Realism. Reading: Kenez, 89-164. Excerpts from *Volga Volga!* (apparently Stalin’s personal favorite)
- b) Eternal Russia and the German danger: Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938; 108 min.); Taylor, “Alexander Nevsky”; Brandenberger, “Popular Reception of Alexander Nevskii” (both at Blackboard)

Week Nine History, Nation and War

- a) Frederick the Great as Nazi Hero: Harlan’s *Der Grosse König* (The Great King, 1942; 116 min.); Abbott, “Frederick the Great as Proto-Führer” ; Trevor-Roper excerpts from *The Last Days of Hitler* (Blackboard)

Week Ten The Great Patriotic War

- a) Stalin's Uneasy Relation to Partisan Warfare. Movie excerpts from Fadeyev's *The Partisans*. Readings: Kenez, 165-84; Youngblood, "A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War" (on Blackboard)
- b) Soviet wartime documentaries. Dovzhenko's *Ukraine in Flames*. Reading: George Liber, "Dovzhenko's War," from *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Soviet Film* (Blackboard)

Week Eleven Armageddon

- a) Dr. Goebbels' dream of Total War. Movie: *Kolberg* (1945; 107 min.). Readings: Peter Paret, "Kolberg as historical film and historical document"; David Culbert, "The Goebbels Diaries and Poland's Kołobrzeg Today" (Blackboard)

Week Twelve Enemies Everywhere

- a) Late Stalinism and Soviet film. Kenez, 187-204
- b) Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944; 99 min.). Joan Neuberger, "Sergei Eisenstein's 'Ivan the Terrible' as history"; exchange between Stalin, Zhdanov and Eisenstein (1947); J. Hoberman on *Ivan the Terrible* (all at Blackboard)

Week Thirteen A Grim Twilight

- a) Mikhail Chiaureli's *The Fall of Berlin* (1949/50; 151 min.). Reading: Kenez, 205-21; Taylor, "The Fall of Berlin"; Abbott, "Chiaureli and the Stalin Film" (all at Blackboard)

Week Fourteen Life Goes On

- a) Reckoning with the Nazi past: Wolfgang Staudte's *Rotation* (1949, 84 min.). Reading: Mückenberger: "The Anti-Fascist Past in DEFA Films"

Week Fifteen Your Turn

Student presentations of research projects

Final Exam (tba)