

The Meaning of Movies

Thursday, January 9 to March 13, 2025 – 10am to 12 noon

On Zoom

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Presenter: Shlomo Schwartzberg

Course overview: While many people love and respond to movies as pure entertainment, governments and various groups have often seen them as a threat, or, conversely, as a rallying cause for activists seeking justice and progressive change. Whether they be the daring films of Weimar Germany or the surprisingly frank American cinema of the freewheeling late 20s and early 30s, some movies have been labelled damaging to a nation's moral fabric. We'll learn about key movies and filmmakers who made a difference in the cultural consciousness of Asia and the West, help some changing society for the better, and why some movies have come to matter in a way that their makers may not have intended - or expected.

Thursday, January 9: Introduction, Part 1

D.W. Griffith's frankly 1915 racist **The Birth of a Nation** simultaneously, helped establish cinema as an indelible American art form but also emboldened white supremacists and even contributed to the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. In contrast, the groundbreaking films of pioneering African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux (**Within Our Gates, Body and Soul**), many now lost to posterity, did offer a truthful and non-stereotypical rejoinder to Griffith's racist, revisionist epic.

Thursday, January 16: Introduction, Part 2

Bestor Cram and Susan Gray's riveting 2017 documentary **Birth of a Movement** tells the story of African American newspaperman William Monroe Trotter's immediate efforts to stop **The Birth of a Nation** being shown in the nation's cinemas. In his prescient 1989 **Do The Right Thing**, a film which continues to grow in stature and influence, African American filmmaker Spike Lee challenged America's racism.

Thursday, January 23: A Moral Threat?

In the early days of Hollywood, movies were surprisingly very open in dealing with such subjects as prostitution, adultery, homosexuality and drug addiction. Alarmed that filmgoers flocked to see those daring movies, the Catholic Church and civic leaders began to agitate for government bans. The 2008 documentary **Thou Shalt Not: Sex, Sin and Censorship in Pre-Code Hollywood** examines this tumultuous time which led Hollywood to censor itself by adopting and enforcing the infamous Hays Code for more than three decades.

Thursday, January 30: Societal Influences

Since the beginnings of cinema, movies have exposed audiences to hidden injustices, be they the brutal reality depicted in Mervyn Leroy's **I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang** (1932), the plight of the newly homeless in Ken Loach's English drama **Cathy Come Home** (1966) or the societal prejudices faced by the victims of AIDS in Jonathn Demme's' award-winning drama **Philadelphia**. After **I am a Fugitive**

from a **Chain Gang**, new laws ameliorating the harsh penal conditions depicted in the film proved that sometimes cinema can be a force for good in the world.

Thursday, February 6: Film as Propaganda and the Responses to it

German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's infamous documentary, **Triumph of the Will** (1935), portrayed Hitler at the 1935 Nazi Nuremberg Rally as if he were the equivalent of a glamorous contemporary rock star. In contrast, a courageous Charlie Chaplin mocked Hitler and fascism in his 1940 comedy film **The Great Dictator**, a movie self-financed at a time of rampant antisemitism in isolationist America. Nearly 60 years later, American Jewish filmmaker Steven Spielberg's 1993 **Schindler's List** brought the realities of the Holocaust to the fore.

Thursday, February 13: Films from Weimar Germany

Prior to the rise of Nazi Germany, Weimar Germany in the 1920s and early 30's was a liberal beacon in a conservative Western world. It was home to a thriving gay community, fully accepting of the Jews in its midst and remarkably tolerant of sexual freedoms for women. German Expressionism, pioneered in such silent classics as **The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari** (1920), **Nosferatu** (1922) and **Metropolis** (1927), influenced filmmakers for years to come. **Pandora's Box** (1929) and **The Blue Angel** (1930) brought sexually forthright female stars, Louise Brooks and Marlene Dietrich, respectively, to worldwide screen fame.

Thursday, February 20: Political Films Strike a Blow and Experience Blowback

Political films and documentaries provoked the establishment by exposing the lies obscuring a country's history and suffered the consequences. Jean - Luc Godard's **Le Petit Soldat** (1965), Marcel Ophuls' 1968 **The Sorrow and the Pity**, Chilean Patricio Guzmán's **The Battle of Chile**, and Iranian Jafar Panahi's **The Circle**, **Offside** confront issues their governments sought to keep hidden. Chinese filmmakers Zhang Yimou's **To Live**, Chen Kaiges' **Farewell My Concubine** and Tian Zhuangzhuang's **The Blue Kite** have been censored or banned under government edict.

Thursday, February 27: Personal Movies, Too Personal for Some

Sometimes strong artistic visions created controversy that rebounded against filmmakers. After an outcry over a rape and a murder ostensibly patterned on his violent film adaptation of Anthony Burgess's **A Clockwork Orange** (1971), Stanley Kubrick asked to pull the film from circulation in Britain. Sam Peckinpah's revisionist violent 1969 Western **The Wild Bunch** ran into censorship issues in America, and Ralph Bakshi's animated satire **Coonskin** (1975) and William Friedkin's psychological thriller **Cruising** (1980) led to protests from the Black and gay communities, respectively. Both Ken Russell's **The Devils** (1971) and Monty Python's **Life of Brian** (1979) brought wide condemnation from the religious communities in the U.K. and U.S.

Thursday, March 6: More Than Just a Film

Movies are not just movies when their behind-the-scenes dramas come to dominate the actual qualities of the project. William Randolph Hearst's attempts to stifle Orson Welles' classic **Citizen Kane** (1941), the breathless reporting on setbacks afflicting Francis Ford Coppola's **Apocalypse Now** (1979), and the financial excesses incurred in making Michael Cimino's **Heaven's Gate** (1980) overshadow the very films. To this day, **Cleopatra** (1963) is most often examined through the lens of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton's adulterous affair, and rarely does anyone get past their obsession with the explicit sexual content of Paul Verhoeven's **Showgirls** (1995). These blinkered views are as illuminating as any critic's film review.

Thursday, March 13: Touchstones (Spielberg and Scorsese)

Our final lecture looks at the meaning of movies as refracted through the careers of two of the world's best-known filmmakers, Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese. What films first influenced them as filmgoers, which themes carried forward into their own later works, and what films do they return to again and again? Spielberg speaks most often about the influences of Billy Wilder's satire **Ace in the Hole** (1951), David Lean's epic **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962) and François Truffaut's French New Wave classic **The 400 Blows** (1959). For Martin Scorsese, the ravishing ballet drama **The Red Shoes** (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948), Alfred Hitchcock's psychological drama **Vertigo** (1958) and any number of Italian classic films, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's **Madea** (1969) are his cinematic lodestars.

Biography

Shlomo Schwartzberg is a Toronto-based critic, teacher, and programmer. He teaches film at the U of T School of Continuing Studies and has lectures on cinema and television at Toronto Metropolitan University's Life Institute (formerly Ryerson), the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, the Prosserman Jewish Community Centre, and various venues around the city as well as in cities like London, Ontario.

He was Director of Programming for the Toronto Jewish Film Festival from 1996 to 2004 and Chair of the Toronto Jewish Film Society from 2008 to 2011. He has written for a number of publications, including the New York Times, The Jerusalem Report magazine, the South China Morning Post, The Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail.

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