The Strike in Film : Syllabus 37:575:391:01

Spring, 2014, March 26th – April 23rd, 9:50am – 12:50pm
College Avenue Campus, Murray Hall, Rm. 211.
LSER, School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers, the State University of NJ

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STRIKE - a concerted stopping of work or withdrawal of workers’ services, as to compel an employer to accede to workers’ demands or in protest against terms or conditions imposed by an employer.

The Strike has become a symbol in our culture of worker power or worker threat. Portrayals of labor union life in film and on television feature strikes as a major form of union activity, even though statistically few unions these days actually go out on strike. The Strike has become a vehicle through which major filmmakers dramatize their vision of working class life (Sayles, Kopple, Eisenstein), a plot device used by science fiction television to safely tell stories about class division (Battlestar Galactica, ST: Deep Space Nine, Babylon 5), and even a hook for singing (The Simpsons) and dancing (Newsies, Pajama Game).

This brief course will give us an opportunity to view some of these films and television shows, analyze how they communicate their vision of The Strike, and discuss how our definitions of work and unions are shaped by popular culture.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

Learn a framework with which to critically analyze films, television, and other visual media. Acquire knowledge about the history of significant labor films and about the economic, social, and racial issues that they explore. Become aware of how working people and unions are portrayed in popular culture.

Attendance and Grading

Attendance is critical. All absences must be excused and you will be responsible for making up the work and getting class notes. If you miss a film screening, you will be responsible for viewing the film on your own.

Grades will be based on:

1. Attendance (including promptness) . All Cell Phones turned off in class. No
social media.

2. Contributions to class discussion (quantity AND quality). You will be expected to listen to and respond to other student comments and questions as well as articulating your own views.

3. Film Analysis (writing assignment). The analysis will be graded on content and writing quality.

4. Presentation of film analysis to class. The presentation of your analysis will be based on content and originality. Originality means how well you use visual content (film clips, stills) to illustrate your presentation.

5. Short Exam. There will be a brief exam (no essays) on the last day of class to test your comprehension of the readings and class discussions.

If you feel that your final grade should be changed, please submit this request by email with a detailed explanation as to why it should be changed.

Required Readings:

Readings will be available on Sakai or handed out in class. Readings will be taken from film studies and labor studies literature. In addition, Tom Zaniello’s book on labor films, Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Expanded Guide to Films About Labor (ILR Press, 2003) will be on Reserve at the SMLR Library.

Film Analysis

View a film on workers and unions not viewed in class (a list of possible titles will be provided). Write a critical analysis of the film, focusing on how it portrays workers and worker organizations. The paper should be 3–5 pages long, double-spaced.

This is NOT a research paper, I am interested in what you have to say. It is acceptable to read articles about the background and history of the film and filmmaker(s). Please do not read reviews. If you do use any articles, web sites, etc., they should be documented according to MLA or APA style sheets.

Be prepared to present your analysis at the last class (or next to last class, depending on number of students in course).

The paper should include:

Film basics (year, studio, director, major actors, anything else important). BRIEF summary of plot/narrative. Description of theme (different than plot). Does the film employ stereotypes, and if so, how?

Analysis of how director communicates the theme through the film process; this can include characterization, setting, props, music, camera angles, editing, use or non-use
of stereotypes. You do not need to write on ALL of these topics (that would take much more than 5 pages!); select one to three.

You may include as part of your analysis: background information on the subject of the film or the director’s previous work. This is optional. If you do any research of this type, it must be documented.

**Suggested Films:** (These titles should be available through Netflix, Amazon.com, or other film sources. Some are available for in-library viewing at the Carey Library.) If you have a film in mind not listed here, you must get the instructor’s approval.

American Dream (documentary, Kopple)
American Standoff (documentary, Jacobson Billy Eliot  Black Fury
Bread and Roses (fictional view of organizing, based on Justice for Janitors)
FIST  (fictional Teamsters)
Harlan County War (fictional treatment of Harlan County miners)
Hoffa (biopic)
The Killing Floor (organizing)
Made in Dagenham (fictional treatment of 1968 strike by women in England)
Matewan (Sayles)
The Molly Maguires  (Irish miners and Sean Connery)
Newsies (Disney musical)
Norma Rae (fictional treatment of organizing in the south)
On the Waterfront (longshoremen and Brando)
10,000 Men Named George (fictional portrayal of A. Philip Randolph’s efforts to organize the sleeping car porter)
With Babies and Banners (documentary on the role of the Women’s Emergency Brigade in the Flint sit-down strike)

**Class One Viewing Films + Strike Animated**

View In Class:
Alice’s Egg Plant (Disney) (YouTube or other online sources: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLwPQIEdjU)

Last Exit to Springfield, The Simpsons

Black Fury trailer (http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/index.jsp?cid=34900)

Assignment for Week 2:

(1) Readings:


Rosenfelt, *Salt of the Earth*: Commentary, pp. 93-109, 117-135 (optional)

Borda, Jennifer L. Rising Up Against the Dominant: The Multiple Transgressions of Salt of the Earth, from *Women Labor Activists in the Movies* (McFarland, 2011)

(2) Select film title for Film Analysis.

**Class Two: The Strike as Fiction Salt of the Earth**

View in Class: *Salt of the Earth*, directed by Herbert Biberman, 1954, 94 min. (This film can be downloaded from the Internet Archive, http://www.archive.org/details/salt_of_the_earth, and other web sites.)

How to watch a film critically. History of Salt of the Earth, only film to be blacklisted in the United States.

**Assignments for Week 3:**

1 - Readings

Zaniello, 175 – 176 (Sakai).


Phillips, Ch. 9: Alternatives to Live-Action Fictional Films, pp. 299 – 317 (Sakai, Docfilms).

2 – Obtain Film for Film Analysis assignment (see list above). View it.
Class Three: The Strike as Documentary Harlan County, USA

View in class: Harlan County U.S.A., directed by Barbara Kopple, 1976, 103min.

What is a documentary? Compare fictional and documentary portrayals of The Strike.

Assignments for Class Four:

1 - Outline of written Film Analysis, to be e-mailed to instructor by 12:30pm, April 16th.

2 – Additional readings to be assigned, depending on number of presentations scheduled for class four.

Class Four: Student Presentations or The Strike in Science Fiction.

Depending on the number of students in the course, this class will either be the first of our Student Presentation days or will focus on how women are portrayed in labor films.

Assignments for Class Five

1- Review notes and readings for short exam.

2- Finish Film Analysis, to be handed in electronically by e-mail by 5pm, 4/23. Documented should be in Word format, sent as an attachment.

3- Reading: Borda, Jennifer L. Fifty Years of Female Labor Activism in Film: Mapping the Retorical Tensions, from Women Labor Activists in the Movies (McFarland, 2011)

Class Five:

Short Exam.

Student Presentations.