

INTERDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY AND TEACHING FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM
INTELLECTUAL APPLICATION PROJECT
REPORT

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My Intellectual Application Project (IAP) consisted in the development of a unit for the course MC366, Romancing the Nation: Film, History and Nation taught by Dr. Colleen Tremonte. This unit consisted on a discussion of contemporary history and post-dictatorial cinema in the Southern Cone of America defined here as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. The objective of the unit was to use cinema as a medium to discuss its role in the (re)construction of nations that have been under military dictatorships and that have suffered massive human rights violations. We met for three days between March 3rd and March 24th using the scheduled class hours. In this sense this unit was completely embedded in the syllabus of MC366 and was framed within the topics that the course dealt with.

The approach I took in this unit was to present an interdisciplinary perspective with relation to the recent history of the Southern Cone. I used theories and concepts developed mainly by historians, sociologists, political scientists and archeologists to integrate the different analyses of the period that began in the 1970s onto an examination that was centered in the object of study and not in the different disciplinary backgrounds. I attempted to use movies as cultural artifacts, which were evaluated as representations of a reality that is directly influenced by time (historical and personal) and ideology.

Starting as soon as the Southern Cone dictatorships ended, some moviemakers in this region have focused on uncovering aspects of the military governments related to human rights abuses and cultural changes in order to present interpretations of the countries' recent past. Social scientists (mainly historians, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists) have engaged with this past trying to reconfigure the social spaces that were 'disturbed' or destroyed by the military governments. The main questions that have been proposed are why did the military dictatorship occur; how were they capable of those atrocities; and more importantly, how do we reconstruct the nation, society and

democracy now and for the future. This was the guiding question that defined the unit. In line with the objective of the course, our discussions focused on the role of cinema in the Nation's recuperation from traumas and the role of memory in this process.

The first class was focused on presenting a brief lecture on the period under study from a multidisciplinary perspective. I developed some of the theoretical frameworks that have been used to understand the processes of democratic breakdowns from within the social sciences. I also developed a theoretical analysis of the concepts of trauma and memory as they have been used to understand these processes. I presented a short film, a fragment on Chile from the movie *11'09''01 - September 11* as well as facts and particularities of the military dictatorships in each of the three South American countries. The second session we watched the Argentinean film *La historia oficial* and the final session the movie *Death and the Maiden*. I assigned readings related to questions of memory, space, human rights violations, truth commissions and democratization processes in the Southern Cone. Students had to hand in a reflection paper shortly after the end of the unit focusing their answer in these questions:

- a. Using as a background the films shown in class. What is the role of cinema in developing history(ies) for the future and understanding current history?
- b. How does this intersect with the concepts of national cinema and theories of history?
- c. Comment of the approaches and particularities of the Unit.

The students reacted extraordinarily well to the unit. They actively participated in the discussion session constantly trying to tie the movies and the articles to the whole course. From their comments it is also possible to observe that they did grasp the interconnections and relationships between levels of analysis and perspectives. As an example one of the students wrote the following in the reflection paper:

The chronological step-by-step approach of outlining the history of when the different regimes took power and when the countries finally became democracies really showed me how events took place and what happened on a macro level. What the movie did, however, was really impress upon me how violent and terrible these human rights violations truly were and they inspired me to make sure that such horrible things do not happen in the future; these stories, unlike the written histories, are more on a micro level.

This unit, as well, allowed the students to learn about an area of Latin America that is rarely taught at Michigan State. It also presented them the opportunity to think about their own position within historical processes and the histories that are hidden from the mainstream or official History, as can one of the students pointed out:

All of these readings and films showed a new perspective on the Southern Cone from what is normally taught. It is hard to understand that these things existed during my life because I had not really heard about them. These films and personal stories open up to the audience to represent a truth that is underrepresented and not shown much.

There were as well some good and constructive criticisms that I am surely going to take them into account if I have the possibility of teaching this course again. Most of them were related to watching films in class. Some of the students argued that this did not allow them to digest the films and therefore they could not unpack their thoughts in order to participate actively in class discussion.

I had a great experience with this IAP and teaching this unit. It has allowed me to think about my approach to teaching as well as on the use of alternative technologies and media on the classroom. I will also allow use this opportunity to develop a course on the Latin American history through film.