

Historical Film Nights

Once again this coming spring, Phi Alpha Theta, the history honorary society, will screen a series of WUmester-themed movies. Screening dates tentative; room assignments to be determined; so watch for posters.



Thursday, January 23, 6:30 p.m. *Peterloo* (2019)

Mike Leigh's epic film above all else leads toward the culminating massacre, the brutal dispersal of a peaceful demonstration that E. P. Thompson famously labeled "a formative experience in British political and social history." But Leigh's focus is on the context for that explosion of violence: the demands for parliamentary reform and universal suffrage urged by middle-class reformers and working-class people of industrial Manchester, in the midst of the economic hard times that followed the close of the Napoleonic wars. Leigh is deeply attuned to the rhetoric of reform, and to the competing rhetoric of ruling elites who saw all such reforming ideas as subversive and revolutionary. "Talk, talk, talk," Nellie, one of Leigh's working-class figures, complains, and yes, there's a lot of that. But the talk closely follows the period's debates, rooted in historical record.



Wednesday, February 12, 7 p.m. *Selma*

A key moment in the Civil Rights struggles of the mid-1960s, the historic march led by Martin Luther King, Jr., from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in March 1965, played a central part in forcing the hand of President Lyndon Johnson to speed the push for the Voting Rights Act. Ava DuVernay's film *Selma* (2014) recounts the story of the tumultuous months leading up to that march: King's negotiations with the White House, the work on the ground to organize the march, the brutal police response as nonviolent marchers sought to cross Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the successful second march when the nation's eyes were on Selma. The film is at once the story of a hero, King (brilliantly played by David Oyelowo), and of a grassroots movement, built from the bottom up (and represented in the film by a stellar ensemble cast).



Monday, March 2, 7 p.m. Suffragette

Sarah Gavron's *Suffragette* (2015) offers a cinematic account of a working-class woman's recruitment and activism in the suffrage movement in Britain on the eve of World War I. The film features a careful construction of class dynamics, an atypically direct approach in dealing with tactics of direct action, and astute insights on the ways patriarchal power works systemically (and how different variations support each other, how boss backs up state and husband reinforces boss). This is a period piece with multivalent contemporary resonance that still gets the details right. The movie features Meryl Streep in a near cameo as Emmeline Pankhurst and Helena Bonham Carter in a supporting role, but the show is really all about Carey Mulligan, who is just brilliant as the working-class woman recruited to activism.

IRON JAWED ANGELS



Wednesday, March 25, 7 p.m. *Iron-Jawed Angels* (2004)

The historical (and cinematic) Alice Paul returned from London radicalized and determined to shake up the American suffrage movement. Hillary Swank (playing Paul) leads a powerful ensemble cast (including Anjelica Huston, Lois Smith, Margo Martindale, Vera Farmiga, and Brooke Smith) in director Katja von Garnier's account of the tactical debates and struggles among American feminists fighting for the vote in the years before the 19th Amendment. Paul, pushing for more forceful nonviolent action, broke with the older, established National American Women's Suffrage Association to found the National Woman's Party: a national instead of local campaign featuring demonstrations before the White House, and hunger strikes when protesters get arrested.



Loi

Thursday, April 9, 7 p.m. *Divine Order* (2017)

As is widely known, it was in the wake of World War I that one country after another in the West embraced women's suffrage: Britain, Ireland, Germany, and Austria in 1918, Belgium and Luxembourg in 1919, the U.S. and Czechoslovakia in 1920, Switzerland in 1971.... Wait, 1971?? (Ok, to be totally fair, France wasn't too quick about it either, finally getting around to women voting in 1944, but still, 1971?) So what took Switzerland so long? Petra Volpe's film about the suffrage struggle in Switzerland doesn't quite answer that question, but it does pose the interesting other question: what happens if the struggle over women's suffrage in a conservative, religious Swiss village happens in the 1970s, the era of new sexual freedom, bra burning, women's consciousness raising, and Betty Friedan?



Monday, May 4, 7 p.m. *Unda* (2019)

You think hanging chads are difficult? Try securing a fair election in a province beset by a Maoist insurgency when you've only got eight bullets left. That's the story told in Khalid Rahman's *Unda* ("Bullet"), a Malayalam-language Indian black comedy based on a real story about the 2014 election in the province of Chhattisgarh. Deepa Antony of the *Times of India* writes: "*Unda* is an unbridled entertainer with a heart that makes you root for the Kerala Police. It opens your eyes to the gap between the administration, the bureaucracy, and the working force. It opens your eyes to the fact that the police force is but made of men with human needs, feelings and flaws. And that all the shortcomings and flaws withstanding, they too give up lot for the state machinery to function."



Wednesday, May 13, 7:00: *Election* (1999)

Starring Reese Witherspoon (in her breakout role) and Matthew Broderick (as something like Ferris Bueller grown up and become the teacher), Alexander Payne's dark comedy about a student election, the too-perfect candidate for class president, and the teacher determined to stop her hilariously turns high school into not just the battleground high school always is, but a metaphor for broader politics. Roger Ebert wrote of the film: "What he's aiming for, I think, is a parable for elections in general--in which the voters have to choose from among the kinds of people who have been running for office ever since high school." Alexander's sharply witty script adapts the novel Tom Perrota penned while obsessed about the 1992 election on the one hand, and a pregnant girl running for class president on the other.