

The Reagan Era: Six Films (1971-1990)

As in the other courses I've done for OLLI at Cal, my emphasis in "The Reagan Era: Six Films" is on film as shared fantasy and social myth. We'll be looking at movies that explicitly articulated ideas that the American community perhaps only *felt*--films that emanated from the nation's dream life in the age of the political domination of President Ronald Reagan. These movies then returned to help *shape* that nation's dream life.

The six films I've chosen are all well-made and entertaining. But they are also revealing of the society that created them. They exist as collective cultural fantasies.

Ronald Reagan was a hugely successful politician. He was elected governor of California twice (1966; 1970), and President of the United States twice (1980; 1984). But he was more: Reagan saw himself as the agent of cultural counter-revolution against the 1960s. Reagan used his personal

charisma to frame a nostalgia evoking American dominance and stability. His view of the past and of the present was: 1950s normality; 1960s deviance and trauma; 1970s hangover and weakness; 1980s return to health and glory. This was a narrative aimed at a largely white male audience. But it was also an increasingly successful narrative in general. When candidate Reagan in August 1980 called the Vietnam War “a noble cause”, there was a firestorm from the elite press; when President Reagan repeated that same claim in August 1988 there was almost no public dissent.

Reagan’s attacks on the cultural revolution of the 1960s included asserting traditions of law and order; traditional patriotism; the threat of Communism, both internationally and internally; capitalism as the great engine of human progress and happiness; and freedom from regulation. A conservative agenda! And yet, when Mikhail Gorbachev emerged as a revolutionary liberal reformer in the Soviet Union, Reagan welcomed him heartily and did much to end the Cold War.

Our films reflect the culture war of the era when Reagan dominated American politics. It's not that Hollywood in the 1980s stopped producing occasional left-wing or countercultural movies, as it had done in the 1970s; it's that these films were financial failures. The mass audience of the 1980s, perhaps in reaction to what Jimmy Carter called the malaise of the 1970s, favored vigorous "Reaganism." The two most popular shows on tv were *Family Ties*, with its teenage Reagan-worshipping hero who made fun of his hippie parents, and *The Cosby Show*, with its happy view of race relations in America.

President Ronald offered to appear on *Family Ties*. Nancy and Ronald Reagan were of course themselves products of Hollywood careers, and inveterate film-watchers on the weekends. Movies were their business. Our list includes three of their favorites: *Dirty Harry*; *Red Dawn*; *Ghostbusters*.

The course has six sessions and meets once a week, every Monday at 10:30 a.m., for 90 minutes. It's one session for each film. In the first half of each session, I'll lecture on the movie and its cultural and political context—and sometimes on the difficulties in Hollywood of getting any movie made at all. In the second half, we'll open up the session for questions and comments from the participants.

Participants in the course, if they haven't seen these movies recently, should see each film in the week *before* the lecture-discussion session! The films are all easily available online, either free or for a small rental fee.

Schedule of Films:

Week I, Sept. 16: *Dirty Harry* (1970; dir. Don Siegel; starring Clint Eastwood): Law and order!

Week II, Sept. 23: *The Right Stuff* (1983; dir. Phil Kaufman, starring Ed Harris and Sam Shepherd): Traditional patriotism!

Week III: Sept. 30: *Red Dawn* (1984; dir. John Milius, starring Patrick Swayze, Jennifer Grey, Lea Thompson): The threat of Communist invasion!

Week IV: Oct. 7: *Ghostbusters* (1984; dir. Ivan Reitman; starring Dan Akroyd, Bill Murray, and Sigourney Weaver): Yes, it's a silly comedy; but it's also a free enterprise and anti-government regulation statement!

Week V: Oct. 15: *Wall Street* (1987, dir.: Oliver Stone, starring Michael Douglas, Charlie Sheen, Daryl Hannah, Martin Sheen): Angry reaction to Reaganism: anti-capitalist, "Greed is good!"

Week VI: Oct. 22: *The Hunt for Red October* (1990, dir. John McTiernan, starring Sean Connery and Alec Baldwin): Suddenly: American triumphalism in the Cold War!

Again, all these films (no matter how disturbing some of us may find their ideology) are well-made, well-acted, and entertaining. It should be fun.

--Art Eckstein

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