

## On the Big Screen in the Great, Great Plains: How We Talk to Each Other in North Dakota

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I'm just a singer of simple songs  
I'm not a real political man  
I watch CNN but I'm not sure I can tell  
You the difference between Iraq and Iran.

-Alan Jackson

*I am grateful for conversations about our film program over the past two years at film events in Belfast, Belgrade, Abu Dhabi, Ndjamena, and Lagos, and above all to my students at Minot State University and the audience for our MSU International Film Series.*

When we started the Minot State University International Film Series in January 2005, only one student showed up for a screening and discussion of *Lost Boys of Sudan*. Our promotion depended on the volunteer contribution of a poster by a student in a graphic design class. We hadn't yet learned how to integrate international films into our foreign language and literature classes, nor the importance of reaching out to the city of Minot on the other side of University Avenue from our campus. From there, we experimented with a French Film Series offered by the Consulate of France in Chicago in 2008.

Then in the fall of 2010 we decided to reboot the MSU International Film Series as a monthly campus and community event in the main theater on campus. We became known again for Tuesday evening foreign films, which in the past decades had been popular with students from time to time. We were able to pay a student in the art program to design posters, and pay to have them printed in-house in a variety of sizes and formats. We now work with the editor and writers of the Red and Green, Minot State's student weekly newspaper, and almost always see a feature article accompany an upcoming film on campus.

We list our events with the Minot Daily News, and visit local "international" restaurants in our search for sponsors of gift cards and certificates to be given away as door prizes after each film. We create the feel of a cinema by greeting the audience at the doors with a real movie ticket containing a number. As soon as the film is over, we read the winning numbers in the language of the film to announce the restaurant door prizes. And most important, we manage to retain most of our audience for a 20-minute-maximum discussion led by MSU faculty.

From that one student in 2005 we have grown to a monthly audience of 50. We now offer courses in Hispanic, Arabic, and German film, in addition to Introduction to Film. We have discovered deep and loyal support among residents of the city of Minot, who come to campus for film night and come back for other cultural events: Eid/End of Ramadan potluck celebration, 9-11 commemoration featuring Egyptian food prepared by Arabic 101 students and a discussion of the impact on US-Muslim relations with the leader of the Minot Mosque, and Hispanic Heritage Month concerts and workshops with a Spanish classical guitarist or an Andean musician.

Minot State University is located in the geographically most remote part of the United States outside Alaska, yet we offer instruction in Spanish, French, Arabic, German, and Latin, in addition to specialized courses in linguistics, morphology, and writing systems. We also prepare students to teach Spanish in the primary and secondary schools with a Spanish Education degree. We are the only institution of higher learning in the state of North Dakota to offer the major in Arabic, and for the past three years we have been honored by the US Department of State to host Fulbright Language Teaching Assistants in Arabic, French and Spanish – again, the only college or university in North Dakota to receive this recognition.

Our alignment with the goals of the US State Department is evident in our efforts to foster mutual respect between cultures on campus. The Arabic program in particular establishes a presence on campus – and in the Minot community – for an Arab instructor. We have hosted instructors from Oman, Israel and Egypt. Our students benefit from the presence on campus of these instructors, who teach beginning Arabic, tutor in our language learning center, live in a Minot State dorm, eat in the dining hall, work out in our wellness center, and take courses with other Minot State students. We have also included them in our International Film Series by inviting them to select films they believe would be interesting for our audience, and taking part as leaders of the discussions immediately following the films.

To sum up in a word what we have found is the key to our success – inclusiveness. On several trips to Europe and Africa in the past two years it has been a great pleasure to share the resources we have developed in our film courses and film series. Here is my shortlist of favorites and the rationale behind each selection.

#### **Judas** by Lady Gaga and Laurieann Gibson (2011)

Digital film (and video) form an important part of today's cinematic output. The genre of the music video cannot be ignored, especially in light of the enormous impact of a variety of music on culture worldwide, and not least of all on university audiences. The **Judas** video is a masterpiece of second-by-second images shown in succession – a tribute to the origins of cinema at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when photographs were manually rotated on a drum (5 to 6 per second) to produce the first moving pictures. I start my film course with a study of **Judas** because it shows students the need to look carefully, and to see themselves in the process.

We focus on the set-up of individual frames: the gaze of Jesus that never catches the camera's lens, floating distantly on a focus of its own definition, fitting the character who is (captured in image) and is not of this world; Gaga patting Peter on the back (“I've learned love is like a brick/ You can build a house” and then pointing to herself (“...or sink a dead body”); the iconic image of Jesus kissing Gaga at 4:52 amid the clamoring crowd, hands raised in anguish, and in performance (the video itself an enactment of an anachronistic rock show in biblical-era Jerusalem); and the stoning of Gaga the (bride of) Christ who sacrifices her own life to save Judas, a tear fleeing down her cheek.

Did I mention that Jesus is Hispanic?

**Ararat** by Atom Egoyan (2002)

Armenia may be at the extreme of Europe, but it is easy to see on a map how it became the first nation to adopt Christianity as an official state religion in 301; the 700 miles from the Holy Land to Yerevan (via Damascus, Antioch and Edessa, in today's Turkey) are shorter than the distance between New York City and Chicago (and less than half the distance between Istanbul and London). **Ararat** is the story of a documentary film crew who hire an art history professor as a consultant for details about the painter Arshile Gorky, who fled the Armenian Genocide as a child and eventually committed suicide in the US in his forties. How to ascertain the truth in a documentary?

As the film reveals the many obstacles to the making of the fictional documentary (it only exists in Egoyan's **Ararat**), we as viewers become intimately involved in its creation. We witness versions of the Armenian Genocide through the act of watching the filmmakers dissect and even discard pieces of history. The cans of film on the customs desk at the Toronto airport are "what's on the table" in this negotiation of who holds authority to interpret. The contents of the cans matter less than the action taken by the customs officer. Showing this film in class or in a film series can help viewers establish a framework for new ways of seeing, and seeing themselves in film.

**Silent Light** by Carlos Reygadas (2007)

A Mexican film with the majority of dialogue in Mennonite German challenges our concepts of who is a Mexican and what a "national" film is capable of achieving. Set in northern Mexico in the state of Chihuahua, *Silent Light* is the story of marital infidelity within a Mennonite community that left Saskatchewan for Mexico during the wheat depression of the 1920s. Johan has a beautiful family yet is somehow able to fall in love with another woman. The ensuing tragedy shows the essential loneliness of the Mexican which Octavio Paz so poetically describes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

The resurrection scene is as good as Dostoevsky's and points towards a subsequent filmic resurrection in *Women without Men* (Shirin Neshat, 2009). The natural environment of the Mennonite ranch in Chihuahua becomes another character in this film of long takes and photographic stillness. As the clock ticks in the family dining room, Johan's wife Esther tells us that turning back time is the one thing we cannot do.

A list of our films in the past two years: *Silent Light*, *Cool!*, *The Battle of Algiers*, *Ararat*, *Waiting for Happiness*, *Promises*, *Monsieur Ibrahim*, *The Lemon Tree*, *Hatred*, *The Dinner Game*, *Grizzly Man*, *Kolya*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Women without Men*, *A Man in our House*, *Arab Spring Documentaries*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Kandahar*, *Japan*, *Whale Rider*, *Honey*, *Welcome*.

Alan,

Generally speaking the Arab world ends at the Iraq-Iran border. Most Iraqis are Arabs whereas most Iranians are Persians. Significant minorities exist in both Iraq and Iran, and indeed there are Iraqis of Persian descent just as there are Iranian Arabs. It is important to stress the difference between the Arab world and the Muslim world: the Arab world stretches from Morocco in the west across northern Africa to Egypt and then through the Middle East and Gulf (Persian or Arab depending on which side is writing the map), ending with Iraq. But the Muslim world extends beyond the Iraq-Iran border into Iran itself and much further, for indeed the Muslim world is everywhere.

There are Muslims in Minot, North Dakota.

I look forward to having you in class.

Su Professor,

Scott Sigel

Scott Sigel is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Minot State University. He is the author of **The Baroque Poetry of Fernando de Herrera, 1554-1597: Decoro in the Spanish Poetry of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries** (Mellen, 2007) and **Music for This Room**, a featured column on Dynamic Rock (Toronto, 2001-2003). He completed his undergraduate work at Harvard in Romance Languages and Literatures (Spanish and French) and his doctorate at Stanford in Spanish and Classics.