

Celluloid Government: Politics Through the Eyes of Film
FSEM-1111-48
Autumn 2007
Professor Seth Masket

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Course Description

This course is an examination of popular culture's views toward American politics. The primary medium through which it examines popular culture is film. We will view ten films – some classic, some modern – throughout the course and discuss them at length.

Class discussions will focus on such questions as:

- What does the film tell us about the values we seek in our elected officials and political institutions?
- What does the film get right about actual political behavior and government institutions? What did it get wrong?
- What does the film say about the political environment of the era in which it was made?
- How does the film reflect our fears of and hopes for politics and government?
- What does the film tell us about human behavior that we might not learn by just following politics?

The main book for this class is Giglio's *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film & Politics*. There will be additional readings to set historical contexts and provide real-life examples of the phenomena the film is depicting. This is not designed to be an easy course. Not only is attendance at class discussions mandatory, but there will be frequent written assignments, requiring you to synthesize films, class discussions, course readings, and current events into coherent essays.

This course will take advantage of the DU VAGA (Visual Arts Gallery Application – <http://vaga.du.edu>) technology. Films will be viewable on-line, which will allow you to re-view parts of the film to better inform papers and class discussions.

Basic Course Procedure

Each Monday, we will view a film, as listed in the syllabus below. You should bring your laptop computer to class on these days, as you are expected to keep a brief running journal during the film. You should write a short Word document in which you note scenes or techniques that struck you as interesting or warranting class discussion. Then you should e-mail this file to me immediately after the film viewing so that I can review it. Failure to send this to me will result in a grade penalty on your next paper.

Wednesday will be the day that we discuss the film shown on Monday. Discussions will be wide ranging, including an examination of filming techniques, political messages and implications of the film, comparisons of the film and real life events, and incorporation of the course readings. Laptops are not required for Wednesday classes.

Graded Material

You will be graded on five short (3-5 pages each) essays over the course of the quarter. Each of these papers is worth 20 percent of your final grade. Papers are due as indicated in the syllabus. Late papers will be penalized ten percent for each day late. (For example, the highest score you can get on a paper that is two days late is 80.)

Attendance at class discussions is mandatory. You are allowed to miss one of these Wednesday discussion sections without penalty. After that, a missed discussion day will result in a ten percent penalty on your next paper.

I will grant medical excuses for absences and late papers only if you produce documentation from a health care provider.

Etiquette

During class discussions, you are encouraged to use your personal experiences and perspectives, as well as your understanding of the course material and current events. Direct personal attacks against others in the class are not permitted. Insulting anyone one inside or outside the class on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, or national background is not permitted. Violations of these rules will be reflected in your grade and, if they continue, may result in disciplinary action by the University.

Contacting Me

I frequently check e-mail (smasket@du.edu), so that is usually the best way to get in touch with me. I can also be reached on my office phone (x12718). I will also have regular office hours on Fridays from 9AM to 12PM. If you need me to get back to you within the same day, definitely contact me before 9PM. I can't promise I'll look at e-mail after that.

I recommend that you check your e-mail at least once a day. I'll occasionally send out information relevant to our course that way.

Students with Special Needs

Please contact me as soon as possible if you have a documented learning disability or other condition that requires accommodations, such as extra time on papers.

Celluloid Government: American Politics Through the Eyes of Film Syllabus

Readings

Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film & Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

(Other readings, marked with a computer symbol (🖨), are available on the course Blackboard website. If you have trouble accessing any of those readings, please notify me immediately.)

Part I – Politicians

Just who are politicians? Are they decent people trapped in a corrupting environment? Are they soulless beings who would ship their mothers to Gitmo for a 60% approval rating? What do we expect them to be, and what do we think they are? Here we examine several complex views of the sorts of people who submit themselves to public service.

Week 1 (Sept. 10th, 12th) – “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939)

- Readings
 - Giglio, Chapter 2, “In Search of the Political Film”
 - Selection from Jacobs & Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander* (🖨)

Week 2 (Sept. 17th, 19th) – “The Candidate” (1972)

Readings

- Giglio, chapter 6 “Reel Politicians”
- Kant, “Humbuggery in Every Campaign” (🖨)

Part II – The Three Branches of Government

This section of the course examines the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government at their best and worst – struggling with prejudice and score-settling while trying to uphold their noble ideals.

Week 3 (Sept. 24th, 26th) – “The American President” (1995)

- Readings
 - Lowi, *The Personal President*, chapter 1 (🖨)

Week 4 (Oct. 1st, 3rd) – “Twelve Angry Men” (1957)

- Readings
 - Giglio, chapter 7 “Picturing Justice”
 - Dwyer, Timothy, “One Juror Between Terrorist and Death” (🖨)
 - Bowers, Sandys, and Steiner, “Foreclosed Impartiality in Capital Sentencing” (🖨)
 - Hastie, Penrod, and Pennington, “Inside the Jury” (🖨)

Week 5 (Oct. 8th, 10th) – “Advise and Consent” (1962)

- Readings
 - Giglio, chapter 5 “HUAC and the Blacklist”

Part III - The Media

What role should we expect of the media? Are they our watchdogs, keeping the worst excesses of government in check? Are they simply a rarified form of entertainment, giving us the minimal amount of news coverage while keeping us happy? How much power should the media have? Are they biased?

Week 6 (Oct. 15th, 17th) – “Good Night and Good Luck” (2005)

- Readings
 - Giglio, chapter 3 “Nonfiction Film”
 - Excerpt from Goldberg, *Bias* (📖)

Week 7 (Oct. 22nd, 24th) – “Network” (1976)

- Readings
 - Excerpt from Alterman, *What Liberal Media?* (📖)

Part IV - The Culture Wars

In recent decades, we have seen the growth of a notion that there is an elite overclass that rules the country in a way that is indifferent or even hostile to the values of average Americans. This section examines what are essentially fantasy films about individuals who ignore the rules and defy the elites to try to “save” the country.

Week 8 (Oct. 29th, 31st) – “Dirty Harry” (1971)

- Readings
 - Giglio, chapter 4 “Kiss Kiss Bang Bang”
 - George Wallace advertisement from 1968 (📖)
 - Miller, “Batman: The Dark Knight Returns” (📖)

Week 9 (Nov. 5th, 7th) – “They Live” (1988)

- Readings
 - Pat Buchanan’s address to the 1992 Republican National Convention (📖)
 - Pinkerton, *What’s Next?*, Chapters 1 and 2 (📖)

Part V - The State of Nature

What is the purpose of government? Asked another way, what happens when government fails? This final section of the course examines the human condition in the absence of governing institutions.

Week 10 (Nov. 12th, 14th) – “Children of Men” (2006)

- Readings
 - Excerpt from Brinkley, *The Great Deluge* (📖)
 - Locke, *2nd Treatise of Civil Government*, “Of the State of Nature” (📖)