

First Year Seminar
Celluloid Government: Politics Through the Eyes of Film
JMAC Classroom, MW 10-11:50AM
Autumn 2009
Professor Seth Masket

Contact Info:

e-mail: smasket@du.edu

Phone: x12718

Office hours: Tuesdays and Fridays 10AM-12PM, 466 Sturm Hall

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 seven 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 does 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 behavior does the film praise? What behavior does it criticize?
- Is the film primarily a celebration of American political culture or a critique of it?
- What does the film tell us about political behavior that we might not learn by just following politics?

The main book for this class is Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. There will be additional readings to set historical contexts and provide real-life examples of the phenomena the film is depicting. 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.

We will view seven films during this course, usually with one or two discussion classes between them. You are encouraged to bring your laptop computer to class on film viewing days so that you can keep a brief running journal during the film. ***You are expected to attend all viewings and discussions.***

Graded Material

You will be graded on four 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 five percent for each day late. (For example, the highest score you can get on a paper that is three days late is 85.) The remaining 20 percent of your grade will be determined by your performance on reading quizzes, which will be given from time to time throughout the course.

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.

H1N1

The University is taking precautions to deal with the spread of H1N1, also known as swine flu. There is a nonzero chance we'll get some sort of an outbreak at DU during the quarter. Should this happen, the plan is to continue the course, even if we need to resort to an on-line format to do so. Should you find yourself suffering severe flu symptoms, please notify me by phone or e-mail, and do not come to class. I will make arrangements for you to obtain course materials and submit written work to me electronically. You will still be responsible for all coursework, but deadlines may be extended. Should illness force you to miss more than three consecutive class meetings, I encourage you to seek advice on withdrawing, taking an incomplete, receiving a medical stop-out, etc., from the Center for Academic Advising.

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 Tuesdays and Fridays from 10AM 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.

Syllabus

Required text: Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, 7th ed. (Pearson-Longman, 2010).
Other readings made available on the class' Blackboard website.

Part I – Politicians and Institutions

Just who are politicians? Are they decent people trapped in a corrupting environment? Are they soulless beings who would ship their mothers to Guantánamo Bay for a 60% approval rating? And what can film tell us about the powers and limitations of the major branches of government – the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary?

Week 1 –

Sept. 14th : View “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939)

Sept. 16th: Finish “Mr. Smith.” Discussion of film and the role of politicians

- Readings
 - Corrigan, chapters 1 and 2
 - Selection from Jacobs & Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander*
 - Koger, “Well, How Did We Get Here? The Rise of the 60-Vote Senate”

Week 2 –

Sept. 21st: View “The Queen” (2006)

Sept. 23rd: Discussion of “The Queen” and limits on executives

- Readings
 - Corrigan, chapter 3
 - Lowi, *The Personal President*, chapter 1

Written assignment: Critical analysis of “Mr. Smith” and “The Queen.” Due Wed., Sept. 30th.

Week 3 –

Sept. 28th: No class – Yom Kippur holiday

Sept. 30th: View “12 Angry Men” (1957)

- Readings
 - Corrigan, chapters 4 and 5

Week 4 –

Oct. 5th: Discussion of “12 Angry Men”

Oct. 7th: Discussion of writing about film

- Readings
 - Dwyer, Timothy, “One Juror Between Terrorist and Death”
 - Hastie, Penrod, and Pennington, “Implications for Law and Social Science”
 - Zeisel, “The Waning of the American Jury”

Written assignment: Branches of government. Due Wed, Oct. 14th.

Part II: The Media

Week 5 –

Oct. 12th: Discussion of film reviews and research, preview of media.

Oct. 14th: View “The Contender” (2000)

- Readings
 - Bagdikian, “Democracy and the Media”

Week 6 –

Oct. 19th: Discussion of “The Contender”

Oct. 21st: Discussion of film reviews and research, preview of media.

- Readings
 - Media consolidation chart
 - Excerpt from Goldberg, *Bias*

Week 7 –

Oct. 26th: View “Network” (1976)

Oct. 28th: Discussion of “Network” and media politics

- Readings
 - Excerpt from Alterman, *What Liberal Media?*

Written assignment: The influence of the media on politics. Due Wed., Nov. 4th.

Part III – The State of Nature

What is the purpose of government? Asked another way, what happens when government fails? What conflicts do we see among people when this happens? This final section of the course examines the human condition in the absence of governing institutions.

Week 8 –

Nov. 2nd: View “They Live” (1988)

Nov. 4th: Discussion of “They Live” and culture/class divisions.

- Readings
 - Pat Buchanan’s address to the 1992 Republican National Convention
 - Selection from Stonecash and Brewer, *Split*

Week 9 –

Nov. 9th: View “Children of Men” (2006)

Nov. 11th: Discussion of “Children of Men.”

- Readings
 - Cooper and Block, “Do it Yourself”
 - Locke, 2nd *Treatise of Civil Government*, “Of the State of Nature”

Written assignment: “Children of Men,” “They Live,” and Hurricane Katrina. Due Wed., Nov. 18th.

Week 10 –

Nov. 16th: Putting it all together

Nov. 18th: Class presentations

- Readings to be determined.