



Politics Through Film

In 2008, Americans spent \$9.6 billion on 1.34 billion tickets to attend movies. These numbers are slightly off from 2007, but still represent a significant commitment of both time and resources to this medium. Unlike home television viewing, the cinema experience is a public, collective activity. The audience experiences the film *as a group* and reacts *as a group*; and this group dynamic creates an inherently political dynamic. This course will explore the mutual interaction between politics and film in the United States. We will examine both the way in which films can influence our political ideas, beliefs, and perceptions; and how our political beliefs and ideas influence our perception and understanding of film. In other words, we will explore politics through film.

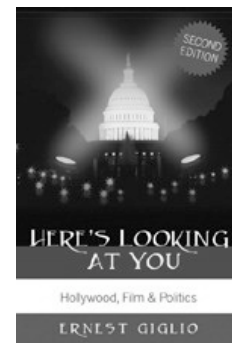


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Class Hours: M, 1-2:250 (K 648), W-1-1:50 (K648)*
*This meeting time will be reset the first week of class.
Final Exam: Monday, 11 May at 1:00 pm

Resources

We have one required textbook for the course: Ernest Giglio. 2007. *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film, & Politics*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers. In addition, I will make some other readings available on our website.

Finally, we'll be viewing ten films during the course of the semester. While we have public screenings of these films in class, I suspect you may also want to rent or purchase at least some of these for future study. The reason for the public showing is to try to capture at least some of the aforementioned collective experience of movie going.



Requirements/Assessment

Grading for the course will be based on a combination of exams, research project, and oral presentation.

Midterm (15%) and Final Exam (25%)

We will have a midterm (15%) and a final exam (25%). The former is a take home affair that will be due around Spring Break (the second week of March). The final will be an in-class exam given at the date and time specified by the University (Monday, 11 May at 1:00 pm). The final will be essay format and the questions will be distributed at least a week prior to the exam.

Research Project/Oral Presentation (25% each)

Each of you will write and submit a 8 to 10 page paper analyzing a film or films of your choosing from the films listed in the National Film Registry maintained by the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/film/titles.html>). You can work collaboratively if you want. I'll distribute a list of potential topics in early February, and you will submit a topic by the end of February. The papers are due the last day of class (6 May). The oral presentations of your research will be delivered the last two weeks of the course. A rubric for the papers and presentations will be available on the course website.

Class Participation (10%)

Class participation will be based on both the quality and the quantity of your participation in class discussions. Obviously, coming up with a brilliant *bon mot* in January and then sitting mute for the rest of the semester is as unrewarding as speaking constantly but off topic. Participation comes in various forms and the grading will reflect the fact that not everybody is comfortable speaking in a large class. To that end, we will have numerous small group exercises that should allow each of you to speak and express your views.

Generally I use the following as a rough guide for determining this part of the grade:

Participation in the form of regular *attentive* attendance to class is generally good for a "B" for this portion of the grade. I don't have a hard mathematical formula for determining "regular attendance" i.e., I don't take attendance and you don't have a set number of classes that you can miss before a penalty kicks in. You're all adults and you should want to come to class rather than being coerced into doing so. Please note the "attentive" part of the criteria. Stopping by regularly but then spending the class time talking, texting, and engaging in other disruptive behaviors will adversely affect the grade.

The same general rules apply in the discussions (both full class and small group). As a rule, it's better to speak more rather than less, but the discussion has to be on topic. Screaming in order to browbeat your peers into submission, for instance, will adversely affect the grade.

Occasional pop quizzes (see "Caveats" below) will be factored into this portion of the grade as well.

Objectives

Most Americans, indeed most of us, probably look to the movies for entertainment rather than political information. That said, films from their inception have both addressed political events and personages directly and explicitly and relied on political content for context, background, and plot en-

gines. In this course we will examine how films have attempted to capture and portray some of the key elements of political life -- government, public policy, and personalities -- and explore the message in these portrayals. One of our objectives, then, is to deepen our awareness of the political messages coming from Hollywood. A second objective, is to use our understanding of politics to analyze films in order to develop a deeper appreciation of what superficially may appear to be “fluff”

Structure

I've given the structure of the course a great deal of thought before settling on that described below. There seemed to be two key issues that needed to be addressed on content delivery: whether or not to watch the movies in class and whether to present historical or topical presentation of the material.

In terms of the former, my dilemma was based on the fact that on the one hand, I'm reluctant to turn over significant classroom time to screening films. However, as I noted above, movie going is a collective, social enterprise and the more I reflected on the best way to cover our topic the more I became convinced that we would likely miss some important political insights that derive from that shared movie-going experience. So, the basic structure for the course is that we will screen something close to a full movie in our 2 hour class session, and then leave the remaining class time for discussion and/or lecture devoted to analysis.



As for the presentation, I've adopted what may be termed a historical/topical approach. Because political

issues can be enduring, and the movie business cyclical, I think we can follow the historical evolution of American cinema, but use more contemporary movies to illustrate at least some of the issues raised at the points in that evolution. So while some classics are included here, I've also tried to incorporate more current movies with which you may already have some familiarity.

Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that *this is a political science course* and we will be using the films to enhance our understanding of politics and the political science literature. This means that we will be focusing on topics like: ideology, institutions, participants and avenues to participation, and public policy (most obviously, warfare). Or, to put it in another way, this is *not* a course in film theory. So while we may consider to some extent what a film “means” and perhaps speculate on the intentions of the filmmakers, our focus will be on politics and political science..

Meeting Schedule/Readings

As indicated above, we have on required text for the course, supplemented with online reading. You may also find the following texts helpful for the course:

Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. New York: Blackwell Publishing.

Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Toby Miller & Robert Stam, eds. 2004. *A Companion to Film Theory*. New York: Blackwell.

Tom O'Brien. 1990. *The Screening of America: Movies and Values from Rocky to Rainman*. New York: Continuum.

Readings that are available on the course website are italicized. They are pdf files and require the free adobe reader in order to open and read them. The website has a link to download that reader if you do not already have it installed.

Introduction	21 Jan	Overview (Giglio, chps 1-2; <i>Diamond</i> ; <i>NYT 18 Jan</i>)
Political Films?	26 Jan	Basics of Film/Film Theory (<i>Christenson, Adorno/Horkheime</i> ; <i>NYTimes 18 December 08</i>)
		Screening: <i>It's A Wonderful Life</i> (1946); <i>Caddyshack</i> (1980)
Documentary	2 Feb	Politics & Nonfiction Film (Giglio, chps. 3-5; <i>Watson</i>)
		Screening: <i>Sicko</i> (2007)
Government	9 Feb	Politicians (Giglio chp. 6)
		Screening: <i>The Candidate</i> (1972); <i>Bob Roberts</i> (1992)
	2 Mar	Institutions
		Screening: <i>The Simpsons Movie</i> (2007), <i>Ghostbusters</i> (1984)
	9 Mar	SPRING BREAK
War	16 Mar	Fighting the Good Fight (Giglio, chp 8)
		Screening: <i>Star Wars IV</i> (1977)
	23 Mar	Terrorism (<i>Marx, Lenin</i>)
		Screening: <i>The Matrix</i> (1999)
Gender	30 Mar	Gender Equity (Giglio, chp 7)
		Screening: <i>North Country</i> (2005)
Race	6 Apr	Race Relations
		Screening: <i>Crash</i> (2004); <i>Do The Right Thing</i> (1989)
Immigration & Class	13 Apr	<i>James</i>
		Screening: <i>Babel</i> (2006)
Anarchy	20 Apr	(Giglio, chps. 10-11; <i>Hobbes; Locke</i>)
		Screening: <i>Children of Men</i> (2006)
	27 Apr	Presentations
	4 May	Presentations
	11 May	Final Exam (1 pm)

Caveats



1. This syllabus is meant as a guide for the course. While I will do my best to maintain the pace outlined above, I am not guaranteeing that that will in fact occur. *Any substantive changes related to due dates, course content, or course requirements will be distributed in class and posted on the course website.*

2. Please do your best to **get to class on time**. I am well aware of the joys of traveling in this little corner of the Garden State. That being said, you all know traffic is a nightmare and parking can be a pain, so plan accordingly. Tardiness adversely affects the “Participation” part of the

grade.

3. **Keep the food consumption to a minimum.** Coffee, tea, or something to drink is fine; a five-course meal from the truck is not. If you’re going to chow down, bring enough to share with everybody or keep it out of the classroom (and I strongly prefer the latter – eat on your own time).

4. *Turn off the cell phones, Ipods, or whatever latest bit of technological wizardry you possess.* If I hear or see any of these in use during class, class stops and it’s quiz time. The grades for the quizzes will be factored in to the “participation” part of the course.

5. **Respect your colleagues.** Politics is great fun to talk about and I want to encourage you all to express your thoughts freely, but be mindful of the impact your words can have on others in the room.

6. **Missed and Late Exam Policy:** All exams are due on the date assigned. Exams received after that time will be docked 1/3 of a grade for each class day late. In the event of missed in-class exam (that is, the final exam), you will receive a grade of “F” for the missed work unless you give me prior notification of the conflict and reason for missing the exam. The same applies for research papers. In the case of the oral presentation, an absence equals an “F.”

7. **Plagiarism:** All submitted work must be the product of your own thought. If you are found to have plagiarized all or part of an assignment, you will receive a grade of “F” for that assignment. Furthermore, notification of, and supporting documentation for, the violation will be forwarded to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Dean of Students. Consult your student handbook for the gory details.