

JUNIATA COLLEGE

PS 305
Politics in Film

Fall, 2002
M, 7-10 PM (films)
TTh, 9-10:20 (discussions)
Good 402 (films); Good 321 (discussions)

Jack Barlow, Good 319
641-3651
barlow@juniata.edu

Course Description

This course is designed as an introduction to the study of political ideas as presented in motion pictures. We will look both at the direct representation of political ideas or points of view (especially through satire), and at the way Hollywood has shaped our ideas about politics and the political process. Because film is very much a 20th century medium, we will look with special care at two of the defining political events of that century, the crisis of Western democracy following World War I, and the Cold War.

Course Expectations

What are “political” ideas? How may they be presented? We are conditioned to think of political things as having to do with government – elections, campaigns, legislation, and so forth. Political ideas would, then, be ideas related to government and the electoral process. This course asks you to consider a more inclusive definition. Such an expanded definition might include such things as the family, or the place of the individual in society, or whether human beings are basically selfish. The primary requirement of this course is that you have an open mind.

This course will be a collaborative effort between the students and the instructor. It may change shape significantly as the semester progresses; we should all be prepared to be flexible. One of my frustrations is the dearth of good scholarly writing in this area, and thus I reserve the right to add any good readings that I might come across.

Students are required to attend the screenings on Monday evenings and to participate thoughtfully in the discussions. In addition to the class meetings, there may be lectures or events which students will be required to attend.

Why require attending the screenings? Because the movies are a social as well as an intellectual or emotional or whatever experience. Motion pictures were made to be exhibited in large rooms on large screens with audiences who are strangers but sharing a common experience. You will learn things about the films we see by watching them with a group that you could not learn by yourself.

Each student will be assigned to a group that will lead the discussion on one film, and thus should be prepared to work with other group members and with me outside of class to prepare for that discussion. Each group will produce a “viewer’s guide” to accompany their film (copies of films will be made available to discussion leaders in advance). The viewer’s guide is to be distributed in advance of the screenings, and no later than the previous Thursday. Each group will have at least one meeting with me to discuss the draft of the “viewer’s guide” and potential avenues for discussing the film.

In addition to leading the discussion, students will be expected to write four 2-3 page critiques of different films (but NOT the one on which you lead the discussion) during the course of the semester. Your critiques should focus on the political ideas of the films and the way those ideas are presented, rather than aesthetic or artistic considerations (although these should be included where they are relevant). These papers will be due not later than 5 PM on the day the film is discussed. Late critiques will not be accepted.

Students will also write a 10-15 page, in-depth analysis of a single film (which MAY be the film on which you led the discussion), and take a comprehensive final examination. All work submitted for the course must be your own (obviously excepting assigned group work); see the Pathfinder (<http://www.juniata.edu/catalog/policy/pathfinder/acadhonesty.html>) for expectations concerning academic honesty. If you have any questions regarding the proper use of information or opinions gathered elsewhere, please ask me.

In addition to the assigned text, for which students will be responsible whether or not it is discussed in class, there will be handouts and readings on reserve in the library.

It would be a good idea for you to photocopy the reserve readings, or else take good enough notes on them that you can bring in points from those readings during the class discussion, and/or answer questions about them. The instructor reserves the right to modify the reading list.

Grades will be distributed as follows: three critiques, 24% (total – 6% each); discussion leadership, 25%; class participation 11%; analytical paper, 20%; final exam, 20%.

What am I looking for when I grade your work? In the course of the semester, I would like to see, first, that you have learned how to watch a film (from which you may guess that I think it is not as easy as it sounds). Second, I would like to see that you have shown that you can examine critically the political ideas presented in the film. Third, I would like to see you learn to make use of some of the different critical tools you have picked up in the course of doing the assigned readings. Fourth, I would like to see that your understanding of what the term “political” encompasses has expanded in the course of the semester.

Required Text

Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film, and Politics*. Peter Lang.

Other Resources

The most useful single website is the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com>, which has links to almost everything you could want. Both Yahoo and Google have good directories to sites for individual films and film criticism as well. You should try to read the reviews in the *New York Times* regularly (most of the reviews appear on Fridays).

Schedule

Introduction. 1939: The Greatest Year?

- 8/26 Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)
Reading: Neal Gabler, "It's Like a Movie, but It's Not" (handout)
No class Thursday 8/29

Part 1. Democracy (1): Can an individual make a difference?

- 9/2 The Wizard of Oz (1939)
This week I will lead the discussions
Reading: Genovese, "Categories of Political Film" (reserve)
- 9/9 No Film: Macedo Lecture (required)
Reading: Ryan & Kellner, Introduction from *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988), on reserve
No class Tuesday, 9/10
- 9/16 Erin Brockovich (2000)
Reading: Giglio, ch. 1; David Riesman, "The Oral Tradition, the Written Word, and the Screen Image," and Marshall McLuhan, "Movies: The Reel World," on reserve

Part 2. Does human nature get in the way of democracy?

- 9/23 The Maltese Falcon (1940)
Reading: Giglio, ch. 2; reserve TBA
- 9/30 Chinatown (1974)
Reading: Giglio, ch. 4; Ryan & Kellner, pp. 76-86 (reserve)

Part 3. Is there a connection between democracy and the rule of law?

- 10/7 The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)
Reading: Giglio, ch. 7; reserve TBA
- 10/14 Fall Break – no film
Reading: Giglio, ch. 6; reserve TBA
- 10/21 Blazing Saddles (1974)
Reading: Selections from Aristotle's Rhetoric, on reserve

Part 4. Was the cold war a threat to democracy?

- 10/28 Seven Days in May (1964)
Reading: Giglio, ch. 8; David Bordwell, "Making Films Mean," on reserve
- 11/4 Dr. Strangelove (1964)
Reading: Giglio, ch. 10; Erwin Panofsky, "On Movies," on reserve

Part 5. Democracy (2): Who governs?

11/11 Lifeboat (1944)

Reading: TBA

Analytical Papers Due Thursday 11/14 (extensions granted ONLY if you are working on a film that has not yet been discussed – and granted reluctantly even then)

11/18 Election (1999)

Reading: TBA

Part 6. Film and Politics: Production values and the production of values

11/25 Sullivan's Travels (1942)

No class Thursday 11/28

12/2 Wag the Dog (1997)

Reading: Guy Debord, "Separation Perfected," from *The Society of the Spectacle* (reserve)

12/9 Duck Soup (1933)

Last class Tuesday 12/10

Final exam TBA