

American Politics through Film

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Course Syllabus, fall 2009, University of Massachusetts Amherst
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Overview: Film plays an uncertain yet prominent role shaping the contours of the American political landscape and our collective understanding of political history. In this class, we read about American politics and history as we watch a mix of documentaries and feature films. The class is organized around related themes, including: atomic weapons, Cold War anti-communism, racism, sexism, and the ethos of American Exceptionalism. Students will gain an appreciation of the complex relationship between art and politics. History and mythology take shape, in part, in darkened rooms where large groups of strangers collectively laugh, cry and groan through cinematic efforts like *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Ugly American*, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Equally important are traditional documentaries shown in schools and universities or on PBS that explicitly seek to provide direct access to audio and visual history. Films like *The World at War*, *Atomic Café*, *Rosie the Riveter*, and *Blood in the Face* exemplify some of the many varied approaches employed by documentary film makers. In “American Politics through Film” we survey critical twentieth century issues that led to the creation of these and other important films as well as the impact of the films on the body politic. Feature films will be shown at a Monday night, 9 pm public viewing starting on September 14 and both films and excerpts will be delivered via SPARK.

Reading: Complete the reading prior to the class meeting. The required books are:

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought & Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*

Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*

Michael P. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes of Political Demonology*

Required Assignments: There are four types of graded assignments. Students will write take home mid-term and final exams, each counting for 20% of the final grade, as well as a 5-page research paper, which counts for another 20%. There are four scheduled reading, lecture and film quizzes (delivered through SPARK) that will collectively count for 40% of the final grade. **Each quiz will be available from 10 am the day it is posted to 4 pm EST the day it closes.** In general, I expect students to be fluent with the required readings and able to link them analytically to the films we are viewing. You will need to be able to draw on theory and evidence from all the class materials (readings, films, lectures, and in-class or online discussions) to make coherent, original arguments about the relationship between film and politics. **Please note: If you have a technical problem with an online quiz, immediately report the issue to the HELP desk and to your TA.**

Movie Lab: We will show the feature film at 9:15 every Monday night in Herter 227.

Discussion Sections: Attendance will be taken and unexcused absences will result in a grade reduction.

Film Viewing and Reading Schedule

9/9/09: From Griffiths and Riefenstahl to Stone

Excerpts: *The Birth of a Nation*, *Triumph of the Will*, and *JFK*

9/14/09 & 9/16/09: Documenting Atomic History

Reading: Boyer (1-5, 9, 11)

Excerpts: *America's Atomic Bomb Tests*, *World at War*, v. 24: *The Bomb*, *BBC History of WWII: Hiroshima*
Feature (9/14): *Atomic Café* (92 minutes; **1982**)

9/21/09: Feature Film and Atomic History [Note: There is no class meeting 9/23]

Reading: Boyer (6-8, 10-12, 14-16) [Quiz #1 online from 9/23-9/25]

Excerpts: *Cloak and Dagger*, *Them*, *Failsafe*, *Thirteen Days*

Feature(9/21): *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (93 minutes; **1964**)

9/28/09 & 9/30/09: Fighting the Good Fight

Reading: Rogin (1 & 2) Coyne (Introduction & 1)

Excerpts: *World War II: The Propaganda Battle*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *The Fog of War*, *Path to War*

Feature (9/28): *Why We Fight* (99 minutes; **2005**)

10/5/09 & 10/7/09: Living with Communists and Other Demons

Reading: Rogin (8 & 9), Coyne (6 & 7)

Excerpts: *Panama Deception*, *Berkeley in the Sixties*, *Rambo*

Feature (10/5): *The Ugly American* (120 minutes; 1963) [Quiz #2 online from 10/7-10/9]

10/12/09 & 10/14/09: The Facts & Myth Behind Rosie the Riveter

Reading: Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*

Excerpts: *American Thrift*, *American Women: Partners in Research*, *Salt of the Earth*

Feature (10/12): *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (65 minutes; 1980)

Hand out the take home midterm exam 10/14/09

10/19/09 & 10/21/09: Race & Racism

Reading: Rogin (5)

Excerpts: *The Intruder*, *Blood in the Face*, *The Klansmen*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Feature (10/19): *Malcolm X* (202 minutes; 1992)

Turn in the midterm exam at the start of class 10/19/09

10/26/09 & 10/28/09: The Fourth Estate

Reading: Re-read Rogin Chapters 5, 8 & 9

Excerpts: *Network*, *All the President's Men*, *Magic Town*

Feature (10/26): *Citizen Kane* (119 minutes; 1941)

11/2/09 & 11/4/09: Is America Exceptional?

Reading: Coyne (2 & 3)

Excerpts: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *You Can't Take it With You*, *Harvest of Shame*, *The South Park Movie*

Feature (11/9): *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (129 minutes; 1939) [Quiz #3 online from 11/4-11/6]

11/9/09 & 11/11/09: The American Presidency

Reading: Coyne (4 & Conclusion)

Excerpts: *Gabriel over the White House*, *State of the Union*, *The American President*, *Air Force One*

Feature (11/2): *Nixon* (213 minutes; 1995)

11/16/09 & 11/18/09: American Electoral Politics

Required Reading: Scott, "Film, Ideology and American Politics"

Excerpts: *Advise & Consent*, *Primary Colors*, *The Candidate*, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)

Feature (11/16): *The Manchurian Candidate* (130 minutes; 2004)

11/23/09 – Full class discussion about film & American elections [Paper due at the start of class 11/23]

*** THANKGIVING BREAK ***

11/30/09 & 12/01/09: The Life and Times of Michael Moore

Reading: Selected essays about Mr. Moore

Excerpts: *Roger & Me*, *The Big One*, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*

Feature (12/7): *Sicko* (123 minutes; 2007) [Quiz #4 online from 12/1-12/3]

12/7/09 & 12/9/09: Sci-Fi Visions

Reading: Wood, "Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era," and Rogin (3)

Excerpts: *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Revenge of the Sith*

Feature (12/14): *Blade Runner* (117, 1982)

Hand out the take home final exam 12/09/09