

American Politics through Film

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Course Syllabus, Spring 2010, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Office: #428 Thompson Tower – Wednesdays 10:00 - 11:30 am & 1:00 – 2:30 pm
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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 *Roger & Me*. 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.

Reading: Please complete the reading and movie viewing prior to the class meetings. You can download a reading guide from the SPARK course Web site. The reading guide is not intended to be a substitute for reading. Instead, it should make it easier to identify and connect the core issues covered in the readings to the films we view and discuss for this class. 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*

Reading Guides and Lecture Notes: Reading guides and selected lecture notes will be posted on SPARK.

Required Assignments: There are four types of graded assignments. Students will write take home mid-term and final exams, each counting for 25% of the final grade, as well as a 5-page research paper, which counts for another 30%. There are four scheduled reading, lecture and film 10-question, multiple choice quizzes (delivered through SPARK) that will collectively count for 20% of the final grade. In the exams and paper, 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. In general, we expect students to be fluent with the required readings and able to link them analytically to the films we are viewing.

Please note: If you have a technical problem with an online quiz, immediately document and report the issue to the HELP desk and to your TA. Forgetting to take the quiz is not a technical problem. **Each quiz will be available from 10 am the day it is posted to 4 pm EST the day it closes.**

Netflix Subscription: An individual or small group Netflix subscription is **required** for this class. The weekly feature movies should be viewed outside of class time and treated the same way that you would the required readings. In this class, films represent a kind of required text. In addition to the feature films, more than 90% of the films that are excerpted during lectures are also available to be viewed via the SPARK course Web site.

Discussion Sections: Attendance will be taken and unexcused absences will result in a grade reduction. Consistent and outstanding engagement will result in a 2% increase in your final grade. Active participation in discussion sections is an excellent strategy for success in large, survey classes.

Film Viewing and Reading Schedule

1/19-/21: From Griffiths and Riefenstahl to Humphrey Bogart

Reading: Coyne (Introduction & 1) Rogin (Chapter 7)

Excerpts: *The Birth of a Nation*, *Triumph of the Will* & *Casablanca*

1/26-1/28: Documenting Atomic History

Reading: Boyer (Chapters 1-8)

Excerpts: *America's Atomic Bomb Tests*, *World at War, v. 24: The Bomb*, *BBC History of WWII: Hiroshima*

Feature: *Atomic Café* (92 minutes; **1982**)

2/2-2/4: Feature Film and Atomic History

Reading: Boyer (Chapter 9-15)

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

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

2/9-2/11: Fighting the Good Fight

Reading: Rogin (Chapters 1 & 2)

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

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

Quiz #1 online from 2/10-2/12

2/18: Living with Communists and Other Demons (no class 2/16)

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

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

Feature: *The Ugly American* (120 minutes; **1963**)

2/23-2/25: The Facts & Myth Behind Rosie the Riveter

Reading: No new reading (Please review the film excerpts and first five weeks of reading for the Midterm)

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

Feature: *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (65 minutes; **1980**) {FULL MOVIE ON SPARK}

Quiz #2 online from 2/24-2/26

Hand out the take home midterm exam in class Thursday

3/2-3/4: Race & Racism

Reading: Rogin (5)

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

Feature: *Malcolm X* (202 minutes; **1992**)

Turn in the midterm exam at the start of class Tuesday

3/9-3/11: The Fourth Estate

Reading: Rogin (4)

Required Film Viewing: **Re-watch the film excerpts hosted on SPARK**

Excerpts: *Network* & *All the President's Men*

Feature: *Citizen Kane* (119 minutes; **1941**)

Quiz #3 online from 3/10-3/12

SPRING BREAK

3/23-3/25: 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*

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (129 minutes; **1939**)

3/30-4/1: The American Presidency

Reading: Coyne (4 & 5)

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

Feature: *Nixon* (213 minutes; **1995**)

Quiz #4 online from 3/31-4/2

4/4-4/6: American Public Opinion

Reading: Coyne (Conclusion)

Excerpts: *JFK* & *The American President*

Feature: *Magic Town* (103 minutes; **1947**)

4/11-4/13: American Electoral Politics

Required Film Viewing: **Study the film excerpts hosted on SPARK**

Excerpts: *Advise & Consent* & *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004)

Feature: *The Manchurian Candidate* (126 minutes; **1962**)

4/18-4/20: The Life and Times of Michael Moore

Reading: Selected essays online (via SPARK) about the work of Mr. Moore

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

Feature: *Sicko* (123 minutes; **2007**)

4/25-4/27: Sci-Fi Visions

Reading: Rogin (3)

Excerpts: *Star Wars* & *Return of the Jedi*

Feature: *Revenge of the Sith* (117, **2005**)

5/4: Review Session

Excerpt: *An Inconvenient Truth*

Hand out and discuss the take home final exam

