

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL MANAGEMENT

4 September 2005

MEMORANDUM FOR ALL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PSC286—Special Topics: Congress  
Goes To The Movies

SUBJECT: Course Goals, Philosophy, and Requirements

*“Washington is Hollywood for ugly people.”  
--Old cliché heard in both cities*

1. Introduction

A. From the invention of the first simple “moving pictures” more than 130 years ago to the latest multi-million dollar high tech blockbuster, films have served a political purpose. On occasion, the purpose was explicit. Propaganda--both in acknowledged “fiction” and in documentary form--often made film its chosen vehicle. More often, the political dimension of film is subtler, and the political impact is beyond the intent and expectation of those involved in the crafting of this specific medium.

B. Film is both medium and art. Like other forms of art, film is as much a reflection of politics (consciously or otherwise) as it is a tool for affecting politics. Unlike other works of art, however, filmmaking is a collective, collaborative process. Commercial films involve the talents and efforts of hundreds--sometimes thousands--of people. While the caterer arguably has less influence than the director, the accountant may have as much impact on the final product as the screenwriter. Films are also the products of dynamic technical evolution as much as they are products of timeless artistry. The complex special effects of George Lucas have little resemblance to the early efforts of Antoine Lumiere.

C. Like other media, film is also influenced by factors beyond the physical process of filmmaking. Films must be put in the context of specific contemporary events, broad social structures, and even broader cultural dimensions. It is not unusual for filmmakers--whether through stubborn hubris (known as the “Heaven’s Gate” effect) or just plain bad timing--to miss the mark. Sometimes, filmmakers are clueless about the mark they have hit. Like other works of art, some films improve with the perspective of time. These factors affect not just the filmmakers but the audiences as well. As anyone who tracks film reviews will attest, there is no unanimous response to any given film. Soundbite mini-review aside, responses to films are seldom fixed and one-dimensional. Responses to films are rarely universally thumbs up or thumbs down.

D. Do films matter? Are they art? Are they business? Are they technology? Are they bold statements of political vision or hollow appeals to the lowest common denominator? Are filmmakers even capable of determining their impact? Can “historic accuracy” and “artistic truth” co-exist? How, then, should students of the political process evaluate films? Who determines the impact and what tools are used for measurement? Are we missing the point and should we develop new questions?

E. Together, we will explore these and other questions. To do so we will use a combination of texts, topical writings, independent research, Internet surfing, guest lectures, and--of course--films. These films will cover a wide range of genre and time periods. They will also represent varying degrees of obscurity and prominence. I will survey you early in the course to ensure that these films, to as great a degree as possible, will not all be ones you have already seen.

F. It is important to highlight two key points about this course. First and foremost, you will be required to do more than just eat popcorn and watch movies. You must read, contribute in class, and complete a number of assignments in a timely manner. Second, some of the films you will watch are old, black-and-white, corny, and predictable. Films are meant to entertain, but you will not always be personally entertained by the films in this class. You must think about films beyond your immediate personal likes and dislikes.

## 2. Goals

A. Using films about Congress and case studies, understand film's roles in:

- 1) Political definition
- 2) Political socialization
- 3) Political mobilization
- 4) Political transformation.

B. Identify strengths and weaknesses in existing literature and develop alternative approaches to the study of the relationships between politics and film.

C. Identify and understand the links between culture, technology, economics, philosophy, art, and political behavior exemplified by film.

D. Identify and understand the links and distinctions between film and other forms of art and popular culture, particularly as they apply to politics.

E. Integrate and apply student analytical skills.

F. Further develop and apply student communication skills.

## 3. Course Philosophy

A. Learning is not a straight line, deterministic process. For that matter, neither is life. Those who study and work in the world of public policy thrive on the multi-layered, multi-dimensional, chaotic order that is reality. We do so not because we have set answers and unwavering facts that apply in every case. We do so because we understand that the key to getting to wherever we are going lies in the purported dying words of Gertrude Stein.

B. As the icy hands of the grim reaper slowly pulled the curtains on her eventful life, Gertrude is said to have asked, "What is the answer?" Hearing no reply from her confused soon-to-be mourners, she then said, "In that case, what is the question?" Too often, we start by looking for answers before we have fully developed the real questions we should be asking. In this course, we will focus on questions. We will study them and, if need be, develop new ones. You will then develop the answers and test and defend them.

#### 4. Course Requirements

A. As noted above, there is more to this course than eating popcorn in the dark and watching flicks. Here are the graded requirements.

1) A short script that adapts another work of art to film without losing the thread of the important political themes addressed in the original.

2) A “film in context” paper for one of the in-class films.

3) A weekly journal of questions, observations of the course, analysis of the readings, and reviews of movies and other art/ media viewed independent of those seen in class.

4) A final, take-home exam.

5) Class participation.

B. There are 1000 marks in this course awarded as follows:

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| Script              | 100 |
| Context Paper       | 200 |
| Journal             | 200 |
| Final Exam          | 400 |
| Class Participation | 100 |

C. Details will be given in class. Time is provided to ensure successful completion of these assignments. It is your responsibility to use that time well.

#### 5. Course Texts

A. On order at the GW Bookstore

Gianos, Phillip Politics and Politicians in American Film

Giglio, Ernest Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film, and Politics

Radosh, Ronald and Allis Red Star Over Hollywood: The Film Colony's Long Romance with the Left

B. Additional referenced reading

Carnes, Mark Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies

Misc handouts, web links, etc TBD

Texts from all previous GW graduate courses. Education is a journey. You must bring more than just your personal baggage.

#### 6. Instructor Policies

A. Class participation counts. Come prepared and participate in class discussions. That does not mean you must come to class with all the answers. However, you must come to class with questions that reflect that you studied the material.

B. Check your e-mail daily.

C. Class discussions will be civil and reflect a spirit of open minded inquiry and respect for the opinions of others. Yes, I realize this is Washington, DC. Humor me.

7. Instructor Contact Information

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