

**THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL MANAGEMENT**
MEMORANDUM FOR ALL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PMGT 265.11: Politics and Film
Tuesdays 6:10 - 8:45pm // 1957 E Street, Room 213

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. As with all forms of media, many claims are made regarding the power and impact of film. Political actions are often directly attributed to audience response to specific films. In truth, the direct political impact of film is often overstated, while the real political dimensions are subtler than assumed. Furthermore, the political impact is beyond the intentions and expectations of those involved in the crafting of this specific medium. Clearly, this is about more than just the collective suspension of disbelief among a group of strangers eating popcorn in a darkened theater. Before making bold statements about the relationship between film and politics, there are a host of fundamental questions to be explored.

B. Before making bold statements about the relationship between film and politics, there are a host of fundamental questions to be explored. Do films matter? Are they art or are they strictly business? Are they just another form of technology? Are films 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 on film? How, then, should students of the political process evaluate films? Can those in the profession of politics analyze and apply the insights available from movies?

C. Together, we will explore these and other questions. To do so we will use a combination of texts, topical writings, independent research, Internet surfing, and—of course—films that deal with politics as broadly defined. These films will cover a range of genre and time periods. They will also represent varying degrees of obscurity and prominence. By design, many of the films selected for screening will be those you have not already seen.

D. As a unifying theme for this course offering in an election year, we will focus our efforts on the study of political power. Specifically, we will study cinema’s treatment of obtaining power, exercising power, and maintaining power in the American political system. We will address other issues in politics and in cinema, but these three points will serve as the foundations for our readings, screenings, and discussions.

2. Some Initial Thoughts About Film and Politics

A. Film is complex mix of medium and art. Like other media and forms of art, film is—consciously or otherwise—a reflection of politics. In fact, there is considerable evidence that film reflects far more than it affects politics. Unlike other works of art, filmmaking is a collective, collaborative process. Movies involve the talents, efforts, and ideas 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 revolutions 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.

B. Like other media, film is also influenced by factors beyond the physical process of filmmaking. All movies 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 (once known as the *Heaven's Gate* Effect, most recently referred to as the *Sahara* Syndrome) 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. Yesterday's B-Movie Bomb is today's Art House Classic. 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. Sound bite mini-review aside, responses to films are seldom fixed and one-dimensional; rarely are they universally thumbs up or thumbs down.

C. 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.

3. Format For Analysis

A. We will use the following concepts to analyze films:

- 1) Political definition—How a nation defines itself: what are the core beliefs and values; what are the formal institutions and processes; how does the nation interact in the international system; is there a distinct and consistent political culture identified with the nation and its citizens?
- 2) Political socialization—How new members of a society (whether by birth or by immigration) are introduced to the nation's political definition, how they come to accept and embrace that definition, and how they adapt and adjust during the course of a lifetime and in response to significant events
- 3) Political mobilization—How the citizens of the nation are organized and directed toward a specific collective action beyond what they would routinely be expected to undertake.
- 4) Political transformation—How the fundamental elements of political definition of a nation are comprehensively and substantially changed.

4. Course Goals

A. Identify strengths and weaknesses in existing literature about politics and film and develop alternative or additional hypotheses.

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

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

D. Integrate and apply individual student analytical skills.

E. Further develop and apply student communication skills.

5. 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.

6. Course Requirements

A. As indicated above, there is more to this course than eating popcorn in the dark and watching flicks. Listed below are the graded requirements, which total 1000 points. Details of the individual assignments will be provided separately and will be discussed in class.

1) Short scripted film scene (5-8 pages)	100
2) Film in Context paper for one of the in-class films (3-5 pages)	200
3) Reviews x 4 (3-5 pages) (50 points each)	200
4) Take Home Final Exam	300
5) Class participation.	200

B. **Note that 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. 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, D.C. Humor me.

7. Course Texts and Related Materials

A. On order at the GW Bookstore

Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film & Politics (Paperback) Ernest Giglio, Peter Lang Publishing; second edition (December 2005) ISBN 978-0820470993

Screenplays with Essays, William Goldman, Applause Books; New Ed edition (February 1, 2000) ISBN 978-1557833624

Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History (Paperback) Peter C. Rollins, editor; University Press of Kentucky; New Ed edition (March 18, 2005) ISBN 978-0813191263

B. Additional referenced reading: Includes 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.

8. Check Your E-mail Daily. If there are any last minutes changes—to include opportunities for speakers, field trips, film screenings, etc.—I will communicate them to you as quickly as possible.

9. Office Hours and Location. I do not have a regular office on the GW Campus. Furthermore, given the compressed nature of this summer course and the normal outside work requirements of those enrolled in this program, I do not confine my availability to set office hours. However, I am happy to make appointments to meet with individual students or groups of students to review course related issues and assignment. The best method to contact me is through email: jaymparker@rcn.com.

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