

Englit 1485
Summer 2007
Stevens, K.

Film and Politics: Visualizing Citizenship

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ENGLIT 1485
College of General Studies, University of Pittsburgh
Summer 2007
M W 1:00—4:50
209 David Lawrence Hall

Course Description

Today, films are our nation's biggest money-making export. This class will focus on Anglo-American filmic texts (e.g. those of cinema and television) to consider the complicated relationships between film and politics. As there is hardly any political discourse devoid of filmic images anymore, and there are no filmic texts devoid of political content, we need to narrow this topic down. We will concentrate on how American cinema negotiates the longstanding tension between the group and the individual—a perennial debate for establishing models of good citizenship. How have these ideas (and ideals) been represented in our national cinema? What is the relationship between a representational democracy and a medium reliant on representation? Are screen characters ever representative? Who elects them? Do we “vote” for texts by viewing them? As an institution that “governs” its spectators, is the cinema a democracy? A republic? A democratic art? If so, in what way?

The individual has occupied a lofty position in American mythos since the country's beginning. From Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories to our current fascination with celebrities, the individual has exercised remarkable staying power in a country ostensibly devoted to majority rule. We will look at films which engage the conflict between the individual and group, either explicitly through narratives following one character “type” or by looking at the “type” of spectator position the film demands. In order to think about the political efficacy of individual texts, we will maintain an emphasis on the spectator throughout our readings. It is our experience of texts upon which we will draw in order to think about the creation of cinematic designs for the relationship between the group and individual. How has Hollywood imagined the individual spectator? Other filmmaking practices? Other national cinemas?

Through fiction films, documentaries and television texts—as well as clips from a variety of other national cinemas—we will address such issues as censorship, legitimation, subordination, iconicity, art, propaganda, satire, the efficacy of movie stars as voices in the public sphere, commercial uses of film, authorship, the televising of elections, the charge of “trial by media,” and the representation of youth, soldiers, masculinity, torture, race, gender, sexuality and more.

Course Objectives

Given the prominent role filmic texts play in our everyday lives, the aim of this course is to contemplate how filmic texts visualize citizenship as well as how it positions its spectators as citizens. By looking at the mutually constitutive relationship between filmic texts and spectators, this class seeks to gain understanding about the ways cinema constructs models of citizenship. That is, we will question to what extent the position of “spectator” is one of submission and think about what model of authority this enacts. Furthermore, we will scrutinize what models of interpretation this schematic allows.

After this course, you will have considered how films—and not just overtly political ones—affect, influence or teach politics through expectations, pleasure, and perspective. By the end of the course, we will hopefully come to a deeper understanding of what we mean by “film,” “politics” and their relationship. Also, we will further our views as to what becomes of politics when put in the context of entertainment, and conversely, whether entertainment ever really avoid being political.

We will also look back at the history of film and television’s contribution to creating ideals about “the good citizen” to bear in mind what interpretations of citizenship have been made most available. Although we will reference formal elements associated with definitions of citizenship (the cultural specificity of human rights discourse, duties, economic rights, universalism, particularism, etc.), the main goal of the readings, screenings and discussions is to allow us to elucidate the complicated and changing relationships between ways of reading texts and modern democratic life.

Given our shared political moment, issues and questions raised by the representation of war will feature prominently. How do we reconcile the nation’s current low approval rating for the war in Iraq and the popularity of films like *The 300*, *Children of Men*, *V for Vendetta*, *Batman Begins*, etc. which, to a certain extent, glorify terrorism? What about the disapproval of the events at Abu Ghraib prison’s relationship to current spate of horror films which center on torture? Using Anglo-American texts and readings since the Second World War almost necessarily limits our discussion to the domain of men. It will be one challenge of this class to exceed such limits to include a discussion of all citizens. This aim also calls for us to be considerate and respectful of other classmate’s opinions and differences.

Class Policies

Attendance:

Since our class will be as discussion-centered as possible, I place great importance on class participation. If you are not in class, you can not participate. Come to class on time, be prepared with assignments (such as assigned readings) and to take part in conversations. If there is a time when you are unable to come to class, it is your responsibility to communicate your reasons before class. It is also your responsibility to contact other students and/or me to find out what discussions and/or assignments you may have missed in order to make up and prepare accordingly. Missing more than one class may be grounds for failure.

Disability and Special Needs:

Students who require assistance due to disability or special needs should contact the university’s Disability Resources and Services Center. They are located in the William Pitt

Union, room 216. The university's statement of policy can be found at www.drs.pitt.edu. Please do not hesitate to talk to me about accommodating you in any way.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism will not be tolerated in any form. If you use sources, you must cite them. If you are unsure how to cite material, ask me. For a useful reference about what constitutes plagiarism, as well as information on how to cite information correctly, visit <http://www.pitt.edu/~englit/plagiarism.htm>.

Screenings:

While we will be screening films in class, and I hope you enjoy the films, there is a distinction between “watching” a movie and “reading” it. You are expected to treat film screenings as scholarly activities by taking notes and coming prepared to pay attention. I may collect screening notes unannounced. Using films as primary texts for the coursework of this class is often an opportunity to combine learning and pleasure, but due to the difficulty and range of films we will experience means such a combination is not always guaranteed. While emotional responses are certainly welcome during screenings, cell phones and “rude food” are not.

This course may include printed or filmic material that some students may find objectionable due to the representation of violence, sexuality and/or other potentially controversial material. If you are concerned about such matters, please see me.

Most films we will screen this semester will be on reserve at Hillman Library. To screen a film on your own, go to the media center on the first floor with the appropriate call number. Be sure to allow plenty of time to screen films, as copies are limited and many students may need to use them. If you have any trouble getting what you need, or if any materials are unavailable, contact me.

Quizzes: There will be unannounced reading and screening quizzes designed to keep us all diligent and to prevent wasted class time.

Presentations:

With a partner, you will be required to make a 15 minute presentation on a visual text of your choice. Although you will sign up to present on a specific day and your presentation will need to address the issues of that day, I encourage you to work together and use this assignment as an opportunity to bring in issues you are interested in that the syllabus does not yet address. For example, you may want to think about the status of third-world cinemas and television programs, adaptations, production or exhibition histories, generic issues, the internet, educational systems which use screens, avant-garde art, etc. Or you may want to provide an example of a relevant text and deepen our historical and/or cultural context of it. You will need to propose your topic of presentation to me at least one week before you present.

You may want to consider character, setting, to whom do you think the text is “for?” That is, who does it want the spectator to be? Narrative structure, government, background, class presentation, other issues that are politicized...

Your presentation will be evaluated based on how you demonstrate your understanding of concepts from readings and class lectures, and your ability to apply them in order to elucidate another text. You should make sure to give specific evidence to support your points (e.g. clips). If you use outside sources, please cite them. This is a good time to refer to the supplemental bibliography if you want to explore a particular issue!

Final Paper:

For your final assignment in this class, you will need to complete a 10-12 page original essay. Papers should be typed, double-spaced, paginated, titled, and properly cited (include a works cited page for any outside sources).

Though you may choose to write on a text of your own choosing (preferably one we have *not* screened in class), an essay we have read, or a combination of the two, your paper must have a clear, well-defined, engaging thesis based on your own *analysis*. You may choose to further develop topics with which we have dealt in class, or, as in your presentation, you may use this assignment as an opportunity to explore a topic or problem of interest to the relationship between film and politics we did not address. While I expect you to support all your claims through textual evidence (i.e. close readings), I urge you not to waste valuable space or weigh down your own thoughts with redundant or unnecessary plot summary. All students must submit a written proposal of your final paper topic to me at least one week prior before the essay is due, and meet with me to discuss it.

Essay Due: Monday, August 6th. It must be in my mailbox no later than 5:00 pm.

Schedule of Classes

Week One: The Cinematic Individual

Monday, June 25: Introduction: **The Critic**
Screen: *Zizek!* (Astra Taylor, 2005)

Wednesday, June 27: **The Messiah:** *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939)
Read: “Film, Ideology and American Politics” by Ian Scott and “America First” by Michael Wood
Watch in class: clips from *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942)

Week Two: The Idealist

Monday, July 2: **The Candidate:** *Primary Colors* (Mike Nichols, 1998)
Read: “The Assault on the Individual” by Al Gore
[Presentation 1]

Wednesday, July 4: No Class

Week Three: The Soldier

Monday, July 9: **The Hero:** *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946)
Read: Andrew Higson’s “The Concept of National Cinema” and Robert Warshaw’s “The Anatomy of Falsehood”
[Presentation 2]

Wednesday, July 11: **The Victim:** *Winter Soldier* (1972) and *Letter to Jane* (Godard

and Gorin, 1972)
Read: Susan Sontag's "Regarding the Torture of Others"
[Presentation 3]

Week Four: The Savant

Monday, July 16: **The Pundit**: *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976)
Read: "The Danger of Teledemocracy" by Robert Denton
[Presentation 4]

Wednesday, July 18: **The Whistle-blower**: *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005)
Read: "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction" by Robert Stam and Louise Spence
Watch in class: clips from *Iraq in Fragments* (James Longley, 2006) and *Confederate States of America* (Kevin Willmott, 2004)
[Presentation 5]

Week Five: The Rebel

July 23: **The Youth**: *Berkeley in the 60s* (Mark Kitchell, 1990)
Read: "Politics and Popular Culture" by Gary C. Woodward and Robert E. Denton
Watch: clip from *The Way We Were* (Sidney Pollack, 1973)
[Presentation 6]

July 25: **The Terrorist/Vigilante**: *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005)
Read: "Political Film in the Twenty-First Century" by M. Keith Booker
And Jean Baudrillard's "The Global and the Universal"
Watch: clips from *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), *Little Murders* (Alan Arkin, 1971), *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1969), *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969)
[Presentation 7]

Week Six: The Product

Monday, July 30: **The President**: *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997)
Read: Geoff King's "Satire and Parody"

Wednesday, August 1: **The Messiah**: *Angels in America* (Mike Nichols, 2003)
Assignment: See Parts 1- 4 on your own

Monday, August 6th: Final Essays due in my mailbox by 12:00