

POLITICS OF FILM

HON 4351 001

SPRING 2011

PROFESSOR: GABRIEL ROCKHILL

Time: T/Th 2:30-3:45

Location: Garey 115

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OVERVIEW

This course explores the diverse relationships between politics and film across a historical spectrum stretching from the early avant-garde to the present. We will begin by examining the philosophic debates on art and politics (Adorno, Lukacs, Rancière, Sartre), foregrounding two dominant models for thinking the conjuncture between aesthetics and politics: “content-based commitment” founded on the explicit political message of a work of art and “formal commitment” rooted in the idea that formal innovations in aesthetics are analogous to various forms of emancipation. We will then analyze the emergence of political concerns in avant-garde filmmaking by focusing on examples from Surrealism and Dadaism. We will compare and contrast these avant-garde developments to subtle political subtexts in more mainstream American filmmaking (particularly in *The Wizard of Oz*). The next segment of the course will concentrate on the various attempts to politicize film in the wake of the Second World War, including in the French New Wave and New German Cinema. By situating these movements in relationship to the counter-cultural developments of the 1960s and 1970s, we will explore themes such as postcolonialism, homosexuality, racism, feminism, and the critique of consumer society. The final sections of the course will focus on contemporary film and the various attempts to bring politics to the forefront of the silver screen. After exploring the subtexts of Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, we will discuss the explosion of political documentaries over the last decade or so and the various uses of video, Internet and digital media to present alternative views of the world. The issues explored include the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture and extraordinary rendition, the militarization of society and political propaganda. In addition to being presented with some of the major political issues in film and media studies, students are expected to come away from the seminar with a refined understanding of the philosophic debates on politics and art as well as a concrete grasp of the various attempts to conjoin the two through the politicization of cinema.

REQUIRED MATERIAL

1. Books available in the bookstore (you are free to use other editions or photocopy the relevant sections, depending on the length):
 - a. Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs. *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso Books, 2002.
 - b. Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
 - c. Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* (Norton Critical Editions). W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.
2. Essays and articles will be made available to you electronically via WebCT and placed on reserve in the library. **It is required that you print or photocopy them so that you can bring them to every class.** It is highly recommended that you collect them all together in a binder so that you have all of the course readings in one place.
3. The films we will watch will be available at the library and/or on Internet.

4. It is highly recommended that the students keep abreast of current events through the course of the semester by consulting and comparing various media sources (conservative and progressive, American and foreign, etc.). In addition to well-known sources of news (the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, major network news, the BBC, etc.), it is recommended that you look at alternative sources like www.democracynow.org, www.fair.org, www.english.aljazeera.net, www.informationclearinghouse.info, www.counterpunch.org and <http://213.251.145.96/> (WikiLeaks).

REQUIREMENTS

1. **Attendance and Participation – 15%.** The class will be conducted as a seminar so it will be very important for you to come to class on time having engaged with the required material. This means taking notes on the readings and films, preparing informed questions and comments, and reviewing the material after class discussion. A cursory, passive overview of the material will prove insufficient. In addition, you should make sure that you organize your time wisely since some sessions will require more out-of-class work than others. Finally, it is your responsibility to arrive on time and make sure that your name has been checked on the attendance list (no changes will be made retroactively).
2. **Exposé – 25%.** You will be asked to do a 10-minute presentation based on one of the readings or films. The goal of the exposé is to relate the text or film in question to the major issues of the seminar. You should make sure that you present its major themes in a concise and coherent manner, that you relate them to other issues in the course, and that you raise important questions for debate. You are free to choose any of the readings or films as long as no one else has already chosen the same one. You can, if you like, focus your exposé on a work that is related to your final research project.
3. **Mid-Term Paper – 25%.** You will be expected to write a 3-page double-spaced mid-term paper that critically responds to and engages with one of the readings or films in the first half of the semester. You will need to carefully review the material you choose and consult other relevant sources. The aim of this exercise is to have you succinctly present a core theme or issue and carefully work through its implications via rigorous philosophical argumentation and precise analysis. You can choose any of the required material from the first half of the semester except for any material you focus on for your exposé. Your paper is due on February 22nd.
4. **Final Exam (Research Project) – 35%.** You will be required to write one 10-page double-spaced research project. You will be free to choose the topic based on the material covered, and I recommend that you develop and explore one of the central themes of the seminar.

PROGRAM (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE POLITICS OF SIGHT AND SOUND

- 1/11 Videos available through WikiLeaks: <http://www.collateralmurder.com/>
 Glenn Greenwald, “Attempts to Prosecute WikiLeaks Endanger Press Freedoms”:
http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/12/14/wikileaks/index.html
 John Pilger. *The War You Don't See*.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egcTynu6sBk>
Optional Film
WikiRebels Documentary: <http://www.zcommunications.org/wikirebels-documentary-by-wikileaks-wl>

SECTION 2: REALISM, POLITICAL COMMITMENT AND FORMAL TRANSFORMATION

- 1/13 *Aesthetics and Politics, Presentation I* and Georg Lukacs, “Realism in the Balance.”

1/18 *Aesthetics and Politics, Presentation II* and Bertolt Brecht, “Against Georg Lukacs.”

1/20 Jean-Paul Sartre. *What Is Literature?* (selection).
Michael Moore. *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).

1/25 *Aesthetics and Politics, Presentation IV* and Theodor Adorno, “Commitment”

1/27 Gus Van Sant. *Elephant* (2003).
Gabriel Rockhill. “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art” (selection) in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*.

SECTION 3: POLITICS OF AESTHETICS OR SOCIAL POLITICITY OF ART?

2/1 Jacques Rancière, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

2/3 Gabriel Rockhill. “Rancière’s Positive Contradictions: From the Politics of Aesthetics to the Social Politycity of Art” (forthcoming in *Symposium* special issue on Jacques Rancière).

2/8 Frances Stonor Saunders. “Modern Art Was CIA ‘Weapon.’” *The Independent* (October 22, 1995).
Hugh Wilford. *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America*. “The Cultural Cold War: Writers, Artists, Musicians, Filmmakers” (Chapter 5).

SECTION 4: AVANT-GARDE ENCOUNTERS OF ART AND POLITICS

2/10 Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. “The Avant-Garde and Politics” (section from Chapter 5).
Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Introduction and Chapter 1.
Man Ray, *Le retour à la raison* (1923) / *Film to be viewed in class*.

2/15 Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Chapters 2-3.

2/17 Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Chapter 5.
Luis Buñuel. *L’âge d’or* (1930).

SECTION 5: POLITICS IN THE HEART OF HOLLYWOOD

2/22 Victor Fleming. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).
Henry M. Littlefield, “The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism.”

Mid-term paper due

2/24 Ridley Scott. *Black Hawk Down* (2001).
David L. Robb. *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*. Introduction and Chapter 10.

SECTION 6: BETWEEN NUCLEAR WAR AND COLD WAR

3/8 Alain Resnais. *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959).

3/10 François Truffaut. *Fahrenheit 451* (1966).

SECTION 7: MAINSTREAM MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS CRITICS

3/15 R.W. Fassbinder. *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (1972).

Cornel West. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference."

- 3/17 Sofia Coppola. *Lost in Translation* (2003).
Homay King. *Lost in Translation* (Review).
- 3/22 *A Rabbit in the Moon*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzkLGhWHgZc>
Japanese American Internment: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OiPldKsM5w
- 3/24 Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu. *Babel* (2006).

SECTION 8: FROM COLONIALISM TO TRIBALISM

- 3/29 Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*.
- 3/31 No class.
- 4/5 Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*.
Edward Said, "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*" in *Culture and Imperialism*.
- 4/7 Francis Ford Coppola. *Apocalypse Now* (1979).
Essay on *Heart of Darkness* in the Norton Critical Reader
- 4/12 *Invisible Children*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qds5MQCqWnk>
Alfredo Jaar, *The Rwanda Project, 1994-2000*: <http://www.alfredojaar.net/>

SECTION 9: BREAKING THE MEDIA MATRIX WITH THE INTERNET

- 4/14 Adam Curtis. *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear* (2004).
Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick. *Manufacturing Consent - Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1993).
Michael Chanan. *The Politics of Documentary* (selection).
- 4/19 *Outlawed* (available at www.witness.org).
John Pilger. *Breaking The Silence - Truth and Lies in the War on Terror* (available at www.video.google.co.uk).

SECTION 10: SECURITARIANISM AND THE POWER OF VIDEO

- 4/28 Matthias Müller, *Home Stories*.

FINAL EXAM

- 5/2 Deadline for final project.