

Film and Politics

Senior Seminar
Tuesday
Saint Michael's College
Department of Political Science

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SED 349

Office hours: Th 10:30-12:30 and by appointment
Students are welcome to stop by anytime

In this course, we will examine how the nation and national belonging are represented in film. With its origins in the 19th Century, film becomes a dominant form of communication at the same time mass communities are being formed within national borders and as nationalism is exported from Europe and North America to the post colonial and developing world. Thus, film

enables and is enabled by the developing of nations and national audiences. With the advent of globalization and transnational migration, film has become a vehicle for understanding how one can belong to a variety of nations - the nation where we might live, the nation of our origins, or visions of identity that move through and beyond the nation, including gender, sexuality, race, and religion. What defines a given nation? How does film portray the nation and national purpose? What is the nature of belonging and how are conflicts over who is part of the nation resolved in film?

We will focus our attention on movies as a form of story-telling, and look to how the key characters are defined, how the arc of their stories plays out, and how such story lines and narrative conflict define the moral and ethical nature of national belonging. Movies contain heroes and villains, and the interplay between these "representative" heroes and villains draw on and interpret well-known characters in national histories and mythologies. These characters come with expectations about their behavior, a set of values or beliefs that help explain to us why they make the choices they do as the narrative moves forward and they respond to each other and new situations.

Film is also a visual medium, which means we can look at movies to see how images tell stories through metaphor and allusion. Film can reinforce traditional ways of seeing the national community, challenge such traditions, or do a combination of both.

Film can be analyzed from the standpoint of the film makers - what is the intent of their story and how does the film represent their personal experiences or their political goals. At the same time, movies are interpreted by the audience, who may or may not share the vision of the film makers or may "read" a film in ways not envisioned. We "accept" characters because they behave in ways that we consider to be "realistic" or "authentic" based on our understanding of who they are. We get such notions about representative characters from our experiences, our culture, our families, other films, "true" stories in the news, etc. So understanding a film, and its politics, means understanding why characters and their stories are representative for the audience - why they resonate with experience and seem authentic.

Readings: ALL READINGS FOR AN ASSIGNED DATE ARE TO BE COMPLETED PRIOR TO VIEWING THE FILM ON THAT DATE.

At times, readings will directly consider the film we are viewing. These will examine the work through consideration of historical and cultural contexts, the role and intent of the film maker, the engagement with contemporary debates, the characters and narrative structure, and/or the visual technique. At other times, the readings will focus on historical, cultural, and

political contexts through which we, as a class, can work to better understand the film we are viewing. In the first case, we will apply the analysis to the film and consider how well it works. In the second, we will develop our own analysis, individually and as a class. Our goal is to learn how to consider narrative and character, history and culture, to better understand how politics is portrayed and interpreted through film.

Texts:

Books to be purchased

Rogin, Independence Day

William A. Callahan, Contingent States

Taylor, October

Guerrero, Do the Right Thing

Sturken, Thelma & Louise

Cathy Cohen, The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics

Herman Lebovics, Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age



Articles and Book Chapters

Unless otherwise indicated, articles and individual chapters from books you have not purchased will be made available electronically. Those not available are indicated as "reserve" and are available in the library reserve. Those marked with an asterisk (*) are to be determined. SOME READINGS IN THE FIRST WEEK ARE ONLY AVAILABLE ON RESERVE.

Evaluations (100 Points Total):

Students will be responsible for all readings and viewing all films. Seminar time will be devoted to film viewing and discussion, with longer meetings to facilitate a comparative analysis of a given topic in film. Evaluations will be based on the following tools:

Essays (54 points; 18 points each): Three (3) essays, four (4) pages in length will be due as scheduled in the syllabus. Essays should compare the films viewed in each section based on the readings. Has the analysis proven successful? How would you disagree with the analysis? Where does it come up short? Where does it succeed? What analysis would you offer? What are the expectations we place on the characters? How do they respond to each other and the unfolding of events? What does their response - their behavior as guided by their values - say about them and thus about their characters as representative? For example, what does the character of a woman say about the role of women in society, the moral nature of gender or sexuality? How do you understand a given film and compare a series of films that engage such questions of nation and national belonging?

Notes (18 points): It is recommended that you take notes while viewing each film to recall content for the essays, and you are required to submit 3 pages of notes for each week's readings. Reading notes will be submitted each week, and will be graded on a 2 point scale: unsatisfactory (0), satisfactory (1), and excellent (2). This is a measure of your ability to synthesize and analyze assignments. You can miss one week or drop your lowest score.

A Note on Note Taking:

While reading, start with the primary argument, which the author will outline at the beginning of the work. Look for the subsidiary arguments, or those that move the primary argument forward. What evidence does the author use to prove her or his argument? What political issues, what aspect of the nation and national belonging, does the author address?

While viewing a film, pay particular attention to the characters and conflicts in the narrative. What attributes, moral codes, values, identities, behaviors define each primary character? How do these characters respond to the events that unfold? To each other? Does an image or event seem similar, like you have seen or heard about it before? Pay particular attention to how the issues addressed in the readings play out in the film and how the narrative resolves the political conflicts we are reading about in contexts with which we are not familiar.

Group Facilitation (9 points): Each Review and Discussion Session (as indicated on the syllabus) will be facilitated by a student team. The seminar will be divided into three teams. Each team will be responsible for preparing discussion topics and questions that bring the readings and films together and offer a comparison. Teams will be evaluated based on their ability to:

- synthesize and explain the readings for the section
- apply readings and context to films
- bring in points from previous sections when applicable
- develop interesting directions for discussion
- engage the other students in the discussion.

Service Learning (9 points): You are required to perform 9 hours of community service during the semester in some way associated with the themes we are studying. You must perform such service in groups of no less than 3 of your colleagues. You must, as a group, obtain prior permission from the professor for your service project. Each student will submit a two-page paper on her or his service learning on the last day of class, and a portion of the final class will be devoted to a discussion of service. On campus examples are: Diversity Coalition, Student Global AIDS Campaign, ALLY, Women's Center, Amnesty International, and New Sudan Education Project with Professor Lair. Also check with MOVE. Off Campus examples are the Committee on Temporary Shelter (www.cotsonline.org), Vermont Cares (www.vtcares.org), Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program (802) 655-1963, and the Vermont Peace and Justice Center (<http://www.pjcvvt.org/center.htm>)

Participation (10 points): Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will lower your grade no matter how well you perform on the assignments. Absences may be excused through college procedures or through requests to the instructor. Each unexcused absence will lower your grade by three (3) points.

Part One: "Representative Characters" and National Identity

W1 Introduction

W2 Film: Casablanca (U.S. - 102 mins)
 Reading:
 Michael Rogin, *Independence Day*
 Alasdair MacIntyre, Chapter 15, "The Virtues, the Unity of Human Life, and the Concept of Tradition," *After Virtue*,
 ON RESERVE

Part Two: The Nation as Historical and Moral

W3 Recent History and State Legitimacy

Film: October (U.S.S.R. - 103 mins)

Reading:

Taylor, *October*

W4 "Ancient" Myths, Modern Diaspora, and National Unity



Film: Hero (P.R.C. - 99 mins)

Readings:

William A. Callahan, *Contingent States*

W5 Post-Colonial Nationalism, Globalization, and Gender

Film: Fire (India - 104 mins)

Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities" (27 pgs)

Ratna Kapur, "Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of Fire" (11 pgs)

Jigna Desai, "Homo on the Range" (25 pgs)

Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India" (11 pgs)

*Tejaswini Niranjana "Nationalism Refigured: South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism"

W6 Review and Discussion

Essay Due

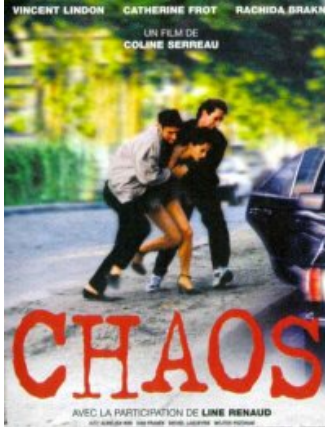
Group 1 Facilitation

W7 Columbus Day Break

Essay Due
Group 2 Facilitation

Part Four: Globalization Challenges the Nation

W12 Immigrants and the "Clash of Civilizations"



Film: Chaos (France - 109 mins)

Readings:

Edward Saïd, "Orientalism" (Library Reserve)

Herman Lebovics, Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age

W13 National Traditions and Global Modernity

Film: The Wedding Banquet (R.O.C./Taiwan - 106 mins)

Readings:

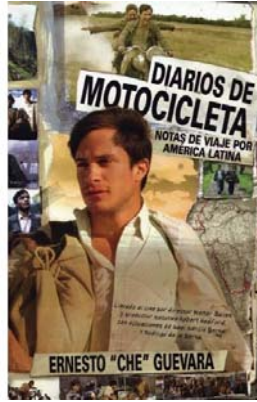
*Saskia Sassen, "The State and the New Geography of Power" (30 pgs)

André Laliberté, "Taiwan: Between Two Nationalisms" (23 pgs)

Sheng-Mei Ma, "Ang Lee's Domestic Tragicomedy" (11 pgs)

*Mark Chiang, "Coming Out into the Global System" (18 pgs)

W14 History, Capitalism, and National Space



Film: Motorcycle Diaries
(U.S./Germany/U.K./Argentina/Chile/Peru/France - 128 mins)

Readings:

- Sebastiaan Faber, "The Beautiful, the Good, and the Natural" (22 pgs)
- Héctor Jaimes, "Before and After" (11 pgs)
- John Blanco, "Bastards of the Unfinished Revolution," (24 pgs)
- Daniel Hellinger, "Tercermundismo and Chavismo" (11 pgs)
- Steve Ellner, "Leftist Goals and the Debate over Anti-Liberal Strategy in Latin America" (24 pages)

- W15 Review and Discussion
- Essay Due
- Group 3 Facilitation