

Political Science 343: The Politics of Film

Fall 2019

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Mondays 3:00 – 5:30

Saunders 624

From Spike Lee's *When the Levies Broke*



Course texts ordered thru the UH bookstore: Michael J. Shapiro *Politics and Time: Documenting the Event* and Pooja Rangan *Intermediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Alternatively, you can buy copies online⁰. As my choice of texts suggests, much of our focus will be on documentaries.

Course Orientation and Grading

It is ordinarily assumed that films are political when they explore the relationship between persons and recognized political institutions – for example Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), a film about a naïve everyman who fills a Senate vacancy and learns that he must cope with political corruption. The treatment of politics and film I am offering here operates with a very different assumption. Cinema as an art is political not because its content references familiar political institutions but because of the way it challenges familiar senses of reality, through the way it composes images, tones, words and sounds. Accordingly, to begin to approach cinema as political thought requires attention to film form, which delivers the way films think. In this respect, discerning the politics of cinema is similar to discerning the politics of other art forms.

For example, the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who developed the use of montage, pioneered by D. W. Griffith (a rapid succession of images whose juxtapositions bear the weight of sense making), claims to have refined his cinematic art by heeding the writing style of Charles Dickens. According to Eisenstein, Dickens's literary compositions, a montage style, is well attuned to illuminating urban life. Dickens, a "city artist," as Eisenstein puts it, "was the first to bring factories, machines, and railways into literature [and his] 'urbanism' ... may be found not only in his thematic material, but also in that head-spinning tempo of changing impressions...the city in the form of a dynamic (montage) picture." Accordingly, this politics and film course will emphasize the ways in which film form creates the conditions of possibility for political thinking. All the readings, other than those in Shapiro and Rangan will be sent out via email to the class or indicated from where in the UH library catalogue they can be downloaded.

Course requirements: In addition to midterm and final "exams" (do-at-home essays), those registered in the course must write a weekly reaction to the reading for the coming session and to the film that was seen in the previous session (Roughly 300 words, the reaction should be submitted to the class discussion file in Laulima's Political Science 343 site by the Sunday afternoon before class). A copy should also be brought to class to share if and when you are called on. The "reaction" can consist of interpretations of the reading and the film, a personal and/or film viewing experience that the reading or film evokes, or a set of questions that you have about the reading or film. I grade on the basis of "presence" to the course. You begin with an A grade and keep it as long as you maintain present (showing up for class, sending in reactions to the class discussion site, and making a reasonable effort on the midterm and final papers).

Reading/discussion/viewing schedule: TBA