CINEMA 5: FILM AND SOCIETY         Section 1095

TOPIC: SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN FEATURE FILMS AND DOCUMENTARIES

THIS IS A SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Instructor: Dr. Sheila Laffey
Contact: email to echoprod@adelphia.net

Prerequisite: None • Skills Advisory: Eligibility for English 1 •

Course Description: This course presents motion pictures as reflections and influences of American society. Films are selected from a range of decades and analyzed as records of social attitudes shaping the present and past.

Our topic is designed to consider issues as well as solutions so get ready to be positive, idealistic AND pragmatic. Most people know about the many problems we face as a society but how many know there are many solutions waiting to be implemented! We will explore some of these issues and solutions and analyze how they are presented in films. Students will investigate solutions in their assignments as well as consider other films.

The text has a chapter about films from each decade from the forties to the nineties. So in the beginning of the semester we will cover a film from each decade, along with a more recent film that deals with a similar issue. For example, in terms of politics we might see Warren Beatty’s Bulworth of 1998, a political satire which mentions campaign finance reform and All the King’s Men, a classic which covers the story of Huey Long, a real life Southern politician and Unprecedented: Election 2000.

We may look at China Syndrome with Jane Fonda and Jack Lemmon which dramatizes gender bias in media as well as energy issues and also screen the docs SUV Taggers, The Veggie Van Voyage (in which the director travels 25,000 miles on used vegetable oil) as well as Oil on Ice about the controversial drilling at the Arctic Wildlife Refuge and The End of Suburbia.

With regard to corporations: Oliver Stone’s Wall Street with Charlie Sheen may be compared to the recent hot docs, The Yes Men, The Corporation, and Wal-Mart. In terms of media issues Network may be considered along with Outfoxed, the recent doc on Fox News. In terms of war we may see the classic Best Years of our
Lives and Hal Ashby’s powerful Coming Home. For personal issues we may see Supersize Me and for overconsumption Cost of Cool.

Assigned Text: American Film and Society Since 1945, Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, Praeger, Third Edition, 2002. Earlier versions do not include the Nineties. Students are expected to have read and completed the assignments for each class date.

Students will be expected to read a newspaper or news magazine at least once a week.


In addition many websites will be explored related to relevant issues in the course.

Course Requirements: Grades will be based on three quizzes (15% each for a total of 45%), one oral presentation or creative exercise or personal essay (13%), two papers (14% for first paper which is to be written in class and 18% for paper #2 to be handed in), outline for Paper #2 (4%), and class participation/ attendance (6%). The the films and issues chosen for your oral presentation/creative exercise and for Paper #2 should be different.

Guidelines for oral presentation/creative exercise and paper #2 are below.

Test #1 & #3 include multiple choice and choice of essays. Test #2 is multiple choice only. No make-ups for tests will be given, unless student provides doctor’s note. Please plan weddings, trips, etc. accordingly. Each test may have an extra credit question related to recommended supplementary reading, screenings, broadcasts or events. Test #3 is schedule on the date of the last class. NO late assignments will be accepted after the last class and please don’t ask if you can send assignments via email.

Papers: The first paper is to be written in class from a choice a questions provided. The second paper should explore an issue through research and discuss the treatment of that issue in a film(s) or films of your own choosing. Also a minimum of one page should cover solutions, both visionary and practical.

Preparation: The library has audio-visual facilities to review films, if you don’t have a VCR or DVD at home.

Attendance: Each absence over 4 classes will result in your final grade being lowered a half grade. Students who arrive after attendance is taken or leave class early will be marked late. Two lates equal one absence. Class participation and excellent attendance can make a difference if student is hovering between two grades. Students who miss the first two classes will be dropped from the class.

Withdrawal: Students who drop the course but do not officially withdraw by the deadline please note that your name still appears on the school’s roster and professors are required to give you a grade. You will, therefore, receive an “F” for not completing the course.

Meetings: Students are encouraged to meet with me before or after class if you would like to discuss your understanding of the work. To meet at another time please make an appointment.
Extra Credit Possibilities

a) Calculate your environmental footprint (6 pts to be added to Quiz #2 grade)
   Fill out questionnaire at [www.redefiningprogress.org](http://www.redefiningprogress.org) or [www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org) or other similar site, print out and hand in by due date.

b) Vocabulary (5 pts. to be added to each quiz if you hand in vocabulary by the quiz date). Type out brief definition of 20 words you are not familiar with in your textbook and use it in a sentence that you make up. Since your textbook has some sophisticated vocabulary this is a great way to enhance your understanding of the material.

c) Ebert and Roeper at the Movies,” which airs Sundays, 6:30 PM on ABC. Each test will have a question related to film(s) covered on the show during the period from one test to the next. (5 pts)

Recommended additional readings for Paper #2 or your own understanding:

**On documentaries:**
- The Search for Reality: The Art of Documentary Filmmaking, edited by Michael Tobias (with chapter by Sheila Laffey)
- A New History of Documentary Film, Jack Ellis and Betsy A. McLane
- Nonfiction Film, A Critical History, Richard Barsam
- Documentary Explorations, 15 Interviews with Filmmakers, G. Roy Levin

**On gender issues:**
- On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties, Brandon French

**On media:**
- Media Control, The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda, Noam Chomsky
- Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, Jerry Mander
- In the Absence of the Sacred – The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations, Jerry Mander
- The Age of Missing Information, Bill McKibben
- Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry, John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton

**On films by decades:**
- American Films of the 70’s, Conflicting Visions, Peter Lev
- City of Nets, A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940’s, Otto Friedrich
- Movies of the Fifties, edited by Ann Lloyd
- Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties, Peter Biskind

**BELOW IS A SAMPLE OF FILMS AND TOPICS ONLY**

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<td></td>
<td>Bulworth, Beatty, 1998</td>
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<td>(a solution: campaign finance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class #2</td>
<td>THE FORTIES</td>
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Sign up for date of your oral or creative presentation 1-39
All the Kings Men, 1948
Clips from Unprecendented: Election 2000, Sekler, 2001

Class #3  THE FIFTIES & MEDIA  39-52
Clips from Outfoxed, Greenwald, 2003
A Face in the Crowd, Kazan, 1957

Class #4  VALUES AND MEDIA  52-67
Being There, or Truman Show or What the Bleep Do We Know

Class #5  THE SIXTIES & RACISM  67-97
In the Heat of the Night
Quiz #1 – NO MAKE-UP,
If you do not take this test, you fail the course
Extra credit question on Ebert and Roeper at the Movies,
Sundays, 6:30 PM, ABC

Class #6  SEVENTIES & COUNTERCULTURE  97-127
Easy Rider, Hopper, 1969

Paper #1  ASSIGNED TOPIC TO BE WRITTEN IN CLASS
If you miss this class you will need to rent the film.

EXTRA CREDIT ASSIGNMENT DUE:
ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRING
(6 extra pts added to Paper #1 grade)

(print out calculation of your footprint at www.redefiningprogress.org
& write one paragraph: what did you learn about your use of resources
and second paragraph: what can you change to shorten it

Class #7  THE EIGHTIES & CORPORATIONS  127-163
Wall Street, Stone, 1987

DUE: Outline for Paper #2 (4 pts.)
(see guidelines below and sample outline)

Class #8  CORPORATIONS CONTINUED  websites
The Yes Men or The Corporation or Wal-Mart

READINGS: www.corpwatch and others

Class #9  THE NINETIES  163-209
Surprise film - comedy
Quiz #2 – NO MAKE-UP,
If you do not take this test, you fail the course
Extra credit question on Ebert and Roeper at the Movies,
Sundays, 6:30 PM, ABC

CLASS #10  LIFESTYLES
Supersize Me, Spurlock, 2004
Clips from Diet for a New America, Robbins, 1998

READINGS: websites

CLASS #11  ENERGY
China Syndrome, Bridges, 1979
Oil on Ice, 2004
SUV Taggers, Vogelsang, 2001

READINGS: alternative energy websites

CLASS #12  ENVIRONMENT
Treewoman, (about Julia Butterfly Hill), Rideux, 2000
The Last Stand – Heroes at Ballona Wetlands, Laffey, 2004
Clips from The Emerald Forest, Boorman, 1985
(Solutions: www.amazonwatch.org)

READINGS: websites on environment

DUE: PAPER #2, see guidelines, minimum 4 pages, typed
Don’t forget minimum of one page on solutions
(Grade lowered half grade for each class paper is overdue)

CLASS #13  PEACE AND NON-VIOLENCE
Gandhi, Attenborough, 1982
Clips from Arlington West, 2004
Clips from Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraqi War,
Greenwald, 2003

(see website that describes proposed Dept. of Peace)

Class #14 Quiz #3 NO MAKE-UP
No late assignments will be accepted after today
Extra credit question on Ebert and Roeper at the Movies,
Sundays, 6:30 PM, ABC

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GUIDELINES FOR ORAL PRESENTATION OR CREATIVE EXERCISE OR PERSONAL ESSAY

Choose ONE of the following to explore the relationship between film and society:

1) ORAL PRESENTATION: Review a 3 minute sequence from a film of your own choosing. Your analysis should be about 3 – 4 minutes long about the issues that the sequence raises and how it is or is not relevant today. Introduce the film by giving the title, date and director and why you chose this film and this sequence. Which genre does it represent (film noir, musical, melodrama, Hollywood epic, war film, comedy, documentary, “message” film, etc.) Comment on at least one or two cinematic elements (lighting, composition, audio, moving camera, etc.) and what they contribute to the sequence. Is the sequence and/or film effective in dealing with the issue it covers? Why or why not?

2) If you are interested in acting you can present a character related to a film, or a parody of a film scene. You may do this with another student from the class or a friend willing to do this with you in class.

3) Visual collage designed as a creative exercise to explore, comment on, suggest associations, provoke insights, etc. Choose an issue and one or more films that deal with that issue. Show a poster collage and/or computer visuals related to the issue using images from the film or your version of storyboards from the film. You may want to include audio to enhance your presentation but it is not necessary. Some of the material could refer to the issue from a source other than the film(s), such as headlines or references to current or historical events, or books, articles, etc. Grading will be based on quality of presentation, range of images (and audio, if present) and creative insight.

4) One page personal essay on how you relate to a film about a problem or an issue. Why are you interested in the topic of the film and how does the film help you (or not help you) understand the issue or problem. This is not meant to be an analysis or review of the film but your own response.

Tips for oral presentation: You could write an outline of the points you wish to make. Maintain eye contact with your “audience.” Have fun and be creative.

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GUIDELINES FOR OUTLINE AND PAPER #2
(typed, minimum 4 pages, double spaced)

CHOOSE A FILM ON AN ISSUE OR COMPARE FILMS THAT DEAL WITH SIMILAR ISSUES OR RELATE FILM TO CURRENT EVENTS. YOU WILL GET 5 MORE POINTS IF YOUR CHOICE OF FILM AND ISSUE ARE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE IN YOUR ORAL PRESENTATION/CREATIVE PROJECT. YOU CAN ALSO COMPARE THE FILM YOU CHOOSE WITH ONE SHOWN IN CLASS. YOU CAN CHOOSE ANY GENRE OF FILM. COVER THE FOLLOWING:

1. What issue does the film(s) cover?
2. Give a brief overview of the issue and past and/or current relevant examples in real life. You can provide some statistics but be sure to bring out the human dimensions.

3. Give three BRIEF specific examples from the film about how the issue is treated. **Don’t get bogged down in plot. Points will be deducted if you include more than one page of plot.** Only discuss plot as it relates to the other questions.

4. The major thesis to prove or disprove is the age old question of whether art mirrors society’s values or do society’s values shape art. Discuss the film in these terms. Give at least two reasons for your point of view on this question.

5. Another topic you might address if appropriate: Does the filmmaker (if a documentary) or the characters (if a feature film) advocate for a particular point of view? If so, how is this communicated? (dialogue, narration, selection of images, acting, editing, etc.)

6. Discuss **practical** and **visionary** solutions to the issue you have chosen. (one page minimum) What is needed for these solutions to make a difference?

If you use any sources for preparation of your paper they should be cited in a bibliography. If you refer to any major ideas or use material from other source you should use footnotes or parentheses to cite the sources. Students engaging in academic dishonesty or “cheating” and plagiarism will receive an “F” in the course and will be reported, in accordance with the Code of Academic Conduct.

For issue resources check out www. www.alternet.org; www. kpfk.org, www. fair.org; www. democracynow.org, www. indymedia.org. Students are encouraged to share other sources for info on issues in class. The Environmental Studies Center at 1744 Pearl St. has been developing a library of resource materials.

See list provided in classroom for possible ideas for films and issues. You will get extra points if you compare and contrast films that deal with similar issues. For example, you might compare the treatment of gender issues from a scene from Tootsie, Mrs. Doubtfire, or The Birdcage with Some Like it Hot. A sequence from LA Confidential or Touch of Evil might be compared to In the Heat of the Night in terms of their treatment of police. You might compare Boys N’ the Hood with another film on youth or with Rebel without a Cause. You could compare the treatment of war in Dr. Strangelove with that of Three Kings or No Man’s Land or look at the problems of returning veterans as seen in Best Years of our Lives with Coming Home or Born on the Fourth of July, or The Deer Hunter. Middle class suburban family relationships in Kramer vs. Kramer could be compared to those in Ordinary People or American Beauty. Or the lure of media exposure in Requiem for a Dream for Sara compared to Lonesome Rhodes in A Face in the Crowd.