

Department of Theatre, Film and Television

POLITICAL CINEMA AND TELEVISION

Spring Term 2015



Module convenor: Dr Greg Frame

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The Module: Aims and Objectives

This module will explore, in the broadest sense, politics in film and television: how film and television can be understood politically (i.e. how they say particular things about the societies they represent); how they have represented and, in some cases, commented upon specific political events and changes in the US, UK and further afield; how certain films and film movements have been produced in order to act as agents of political change and activism; how film and television have addressed questions of identity politics; how film and television have represented the democratic process itself. Each week we will explore a different topic and the module will draw upon material from the UK, the US and South America. We will be looking at different genres, modes and styles to examine how we can understand the interaction of film, television and politics.

The principal aims of the module are to:

- Examine in depth some of the diverse ways in which political issues have been represented and explored in film and television
- Introduce and examine some key films and television programmes with political themes
- Introduce and examine the creative contribution of some key film and television makers to political film and television
- Explore, in the context of specific works, some of the principal theories which have informed political film and television in the twentieth century

Timetable

Each week there will be a one hour lecture, a two hour seminar and a screening of a key film relevant to that week's topic. The main readings will be made available via the VLE and the university library.

Lectures: Tuesday 11:30 - 12:30 Venue TBC

Screenings: Tuesday 15:30 - 17:30 Venue TBC

Seminars: Thursday 13:30 - 15:30 Venue TBC

Thursday 16:30 - 18:30 Venue TBC

Summative Assessment

This is a 4,000 word essay, to be submitted by Thursday 16th April (week one of the summer term).

A list of questions will be circulated well in advance of the Easter break.

Week 2 – Introduction: Reading film and television politically

The first lecture will introduce the module and discuss the concept of political film and television and its significance to wider debates. What is political cinema and television? What are its main features? Is 'political cinema and television' straightforward to identify or does it encompass diverse styles, genres, and modes? This week will engage largely with how we might understand and interpret mainstream film politically – how we might interpret and understand texts that are largely considered 'only entertainment' in order to determine what they say about the society they represent. *Independence Day*, which for a time was the highest grossing film of all time at the worldwide box office, speaks to some of these concerns – it is, on the one hand, a mainstream genre film about an alien invasion, but it also expresses particular issues alive in the period in which it was produced to do with the United States' position in the world, and its racial and gender politics.

Screening: *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996)

Readings: Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods: Volume I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 22-30.*

John Hill, 'The Prospects for Political Cinema Today', *Cineaste* 37:1 (Winter 2011), pp. 6-17.*

Week 3 – Political Thriller

This week we will explore the political thriller, one of the most high profile film genres dealing with questions of politics and has a long pedigree in both American and British cinema. Key issues will include the kinds of scenarios that such films tend to explore, with an emphasis on espionage, conspiracy and the role of the secret state. We will consider American politics of the 1970s, in particular the response of film and television to the 'traumatic' decade (1963-74) which saw the assassinations of prominent political figures, the disastrous mismanagement of the Vietnam War and culminated in the resignation of President Richard Nixon after he was accused of corruption (known as the Watergate Scandal).

Screening: *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974)

Reading: Peter Lev, *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). (Chapter 3 – Disaster and Conspiracy)*

David Cook, 'The "Paranoid" Conspiracy Film', in *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 197-205.*

David Cook, '1974: Movies and Political Trauma', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1970s* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 116-34.

Additional viewing: *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962), *Seven Days in May* (John Frankenheimer, 1964), *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975) *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976).

Week 4 - Political Satire

Some of the most pronounced political critique that has emerged from mainstream film and television is in the realm of satire. The satirical tradition is very well developed in the United Kingdom, particularly on television, where it has been a staple of broadcast since the 1960s, with programmes such as *That Was The Week That Was* (1962-63), *Spitting Image* (1984-96) and the perennial favourite, *Have I Got News For You* (1990-) providing immediate critiques of the state of politics in the UK. In the US, *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) has given way to the popularity of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, which shines a light the absurdities of American politics literally on a daily basis. This week we will look at a British satirist whose work has crossed the Atlantic. Armando Iannucci, writer and producer of *The Thick Of It* (and its film version, *In the Loop*) and *Veep* has satirised contemporary politics in the UK and US, with many noting that Iannucci's comedic creations are so close to the real thing that, in many ways, he has pre-empted many of the changes in politics with alarming accuracy, 'real' politics becoming so ridiculous it is almost 'beyond satire'.

Screening: *The Thick Of It* (2005-12) / *Veep* (2012-)

Reading: Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson, 'The state of satire, the satire of state', in Gray, Jones and Thompson (eds.), *Satire TV: politics and comedy in the post-network era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 3-36.

Steven Fielding, 'The way we spin now' in *A State of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage, and Page from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 257-63.

Additional viewing: *That Was The Week That Was* (BBC, 1962-63), *Yes Minister* (BBC 1980-88), *Spitting Image* (ITV, 1984-96), *Have I Got News For You* (BBC 1990-), *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-), *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996-), *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 2005-).

Week 5 - Political Documentary

The popularisation of feature length documentaries in recent years is a potent reminder of the power of cinema to disseminate and popularise political debate. This lecture will explore some examples and facets of this recent boom, but focus particularly on Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, a controversial work that explores the violent purge of political opponents in Indonesia in the mid-1960s by getting the perpetrators of these crimes to re-enact them for the camera. We will discuss how the documentary becomes both a representation of a political event and an engagement with the politics and ethics of the artform itself.

Screening: *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012)

Readings: Stella Bruzzi, 'The performative documentary', in *New Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 185-218.*

Nick Fraser, 'We Love Impunity: The case of *The Act of Killing*', *Film Quarterly* 67:2 (Winter 2013), pp. 21-24.*

(this entire issue of *Film Quarterly* is about *The Act of Killing* and is well worth looking at for different perspectives on the film)

Brian Winston (ed.), *The documentary film book* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

Additional viewing: *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935), *Primary/Crisis* (Robert Drew, 1960/1963), *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), *The Corporation* (Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar, 2003), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), *Taking Liberties* (Chris Atkins, 2007), *Inside Job* (Charles Ferguson, 2010), *The Spirit of '45* (Ken Loach, 2013).

Week 6 - Third Cinema

During the 1960s, and above all in South America where authoritarian regimes of various kinds were in power, there emerged several highly politicised cinemas, perhaps the best known of which were Brazil's Cinema Novo and the more internationally oriented Third Cinema movement. Cinema Novo was a broad movement of those seeking to make a political intervention in 1960s Brazil, while the Third Cinema movement was perhaps more overtly Marxist in its origins. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's 'Towards a Third Cinema' was an incendiary manifesto that sought to carve out a space for politicised, challenging filmmaking from the developing world. We shall explore some aspects of this political doctrine, some of the films produced in its image, and reflect upon its subsequent fate – not least as that is articulated in Solanas' later cinematic reflections upon the political history of his native Argentina in *Sur*.

Screening: *Sur* (Fernando E. Solanas, 1988)

Readings: Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 'Towards a Third Cinema' in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods Vol. 1* (University of California Press, 1976), pp. 44-64.*

Anthony R. Guneratne, 'Introduction: Rethinking Third Cinema', in Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (eds.) *Rethinking Third Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-28.*

Additional viewing: *Vidas Secas / Barren Lives* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963), *Black God White Devil / Deus e no Diabo no Terra do Sol* (Glauber Rocha, 1964), *La Battaglia di Algeri / The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), *La hora de los hornos / The Hour of the Furnaces* (Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968), *Memorias del subdesarrollo / Memories of Underdevelopment* (Tomas Gutierrez Alea, 1968), *Yawar Mallku / Blood of the Condor* (Jorge Sanjines, 1969), *La batalla de Chile / The Battle of Chile* (Patricio Guzman, 1975/76/79), *Tangos: el exilio de Gardel / Tangos: The Exile of Gardel* (Fernando Solanas, 1985), *El viaje / The Journey* (Fernando Solanas, 1992), *Fresa y chocolate / Strawberry and Chocolate* (Tomas Gutierrez Alea, 1994).

Week 7 – Identity Politics: Race & Ethnicity

American film and television have chequered histories in the representation of race. While the straightforward racism of films such as DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is thankfully a thing of the past, mainstream film and television remains in many ways wedded to old forms and structures in its representation of race. Independent cinema and cable television have played crucial roles in disrupting and challenging these constructs. *The Wire* in many ways represents a further extension of this process, examining the intersection of race and class in the urban United States, providing an unflinching chronicle of the decay of social structures in the post-Civil Rights era. This week we will consider *The Wire* as a provocative critique of race relations in the United States.

Screening: *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008)

Readings: Linda Williams, *On the Wire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), Chapter 6.*

John Kraniauskas, 'Race, ethnicity, and class: tracing *The Wire*', in Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (eds.) *The Wire: Race, class and genre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).*

Additional viewing: *Roots* (Stan Marguiles, 1977), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *New Jack City* (Mario van Peebles, 1991),

Malcolm X (Spike Lee, 1992), *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 1993), *When the Levees Broke* (Spike Lee, 2006), *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), *Treme* (2010-13).

Week 8 – Not Hollywood: Independent Cinema as Political Critique

Building on the work of the previous two weeks, we turn specifically to American independent cinema as a site of political critique. Mainstream cinema is not renowned for its willingness to challenge the political status quo, but the independent sector, which flourished in the late 1980s, has provided alternative forms of expression in terms of style and content. It was in its willingness to examine controversial subjects that independent cinema found its voice but, as it became more successful it was subsumed by the mainstream and became part of corporate Hollywood's 'niche' marketing strategies. In recent years, however, some filmmakers have reacted to the decline of the United States' economy and the divisiveness of its politics by shining a light on the strata of society that are ignored by the mainstream, revealing the plight of the poor in stark portraits of poverty, drugs, homelessness and violence. We will look particularly at Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* as a vision of a nation in decline.

Screening: *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010)

Reading: Sherry B. Ortner, *Not Hollywood: independent cinema at the twilight of the American dream* (London: Duke University Press, 2013).
(Chapter 1 – Introduction)*

J. Hoberman, 'Cineobamarama', *Film Comment* 48:4 (2012), pp. 44-49.*

Further viewing: *Old Joy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Frozen River* (Courtney Hunt, 2008), *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), *Blue Valentine* (Derek Cianfrance, 2010), *Killer Joe* (William Friedkin, 2011), *The Paperboy* (Lee Daniels, 2012), *The Place Beyond the Pines* (Derek Cianfrance, 2012).

Week 9 – The Representation of Politics and Power

The representation of the political process is often regarded as somehow too dull and specialist for mainstream drama. However in recent years we have seen a number of examples of high profile television series that have successfully mined this subject matter – recently, the American remake of the British drama series *House of Cards* (2013-) and Danish series *Borgen* (2010-13) have attracted critical acclaim and popularity by examining the corruption and intrigue of the political process, while *Scandal* (2012-) has proved hugely popular with audiences for its hyperbolic exploration of the conduct of politics in the US. Arguably none of these programmes would have been possible without *The West Wing* (1999-2006), which proved that politics could be popular subject matter on mainstream TV. In this final week we will look at *The West Wing* as an optimistic, perhaps naïve, representation of the political

process in the United States, as a hopeful vision in an era of political turbulence, and consider whether such a programme would be possible, or believable, in the contemporary period.

Screening: *The West Wing* (Aaron Sorkin, 1999-2006)

Reading: Gregory Frame, *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), Chapter Four.*

Janet McCabe, *The West Wing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).*

Additional viewing: *Commander in Chief* (ABC, 2005-6), *Borgen* (DR1, 2010-13), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2012-), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-).
