

## Cinema in the Age of Trump

(CMA 3892) Fall 2020

Professor Jennifer Fay

[j.fay@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:j.fay@vanderbilt.edu)

Class meetings: T/R 12:45-2:00 Buttrick 201

Office Hours Via Zoom by Appointment.

### **Course Description:**

According to a 2019 Pew Research Center report, Republicans and Democrats are further apart in values and major policy issue than ever before in history. Feeding these stark divisions in the U.S. is a media culture intended to exacerbate disagreement. From the right and left-wing cable news outlets to super PAC-funded cinema, from comedic and satiric news to outright deceitful “fake news,” from Facebook algorithms (which give you the news you “like”) to increasingly homogenized “friend groups” and assaults on plurality and outright racism, post-truth media culture emphasizes feelings over facts and exploits the desire for in-group belonging over and against representing accurately a world we share.

This course focuses on cinema in the context of a post-cinema media culture (and it makes a case for why cinema still matters) and partisan feeling in the era of post-truth politics (and it makes a case for why truth still matters). Trump’s presidency requires us to think a-new and in a historical perspective, the distinctions between the politicization of film and the aestheticization of politics, between personal and corporate expression, and the distinction between partisan film and democratic commitments. This course seeks to understand our contemporary moment through four *interconnected* histories of the present:

- The rise of the partisan documentary, Super-PAC cinema and how movies gained access to free speech.
- The connection between popular film and populist politics.
- The media culture of #MeToo and a new history of film that this movement requires us to study.
- The cinematic cultures of Black Lives and “White Rage.”

Bringing together legal history, political science, and media history, and featuring such directors as Michael Bay, Ava DuVernay, Michael Moore, Kelly Green, and Jordan Peele, we will ask: What are the film genres, directors, and character types that reflect and shape our current political moment? What is the historical connection between artistic practice and civic engagement that makes our current crisis both familiar and utterly new?

### **Course Policies in the time of covid-19:**

We will be meeting in person for as long as possible. In the event that you become sick or need to quarantine, you can keep up with material by viewing the notes from class taken by fellow students along with my Powerpoints, all of which will be uploaded on Brightspace within 24 hours of each class meeting.

**Note-taking:** Due to the particular challenges of teaching and learning during a pandemic, we need a system of note-taking so that students who become ill do not fall behind. For each class session, there will be two designated student note-takers who type the notes from class and post them onto Brightspace within 24 hours. This way, there will be two note-takers for each class (and thus a back-up in the event that one note-taker falls ill). Students will sign up to take notes for at least four in-person classes over the course of the semester. Posting good notes from class at least four times in the semester is a completion requirement that counts for five percent of your final grade.

**Brightspace Posts:** A significant portion of your final grade is based on your on-going Brightspace posts. These are informal writings that summarize the assigned readings and films for the week and then pose a few questions for us to take up in discussion. **You are required to post at least eight times over the course of the semester and also to respond to the post of another student at least eight times.** This will bring you to a total minimum of 16 Brightspace posts. You are encouraged to post more often! So that they may inform our class discussions, you must post by mid-night on the eve our class meeting so that we may all read the posts before our morning class. Late posts will not count towards satisfying this requirement. I will invite students who post to talk about their thoughts in class.

**Participation:** This course presupposes an *active and participating* student body. Our aim is to create a respectful intellectual community. In order to achieve this, you are expected to come to class on time, masked and at the appropriate distanced. You should also be prepared to jump into class discussion with comments, questions, and connections you have made in regard to the assigned texts. I expect everyone to participate in our conversations and be considerate to me and to the other students in the class.

**Students with Special Instructional Needs:** I am committed to accommodating students who have special instructional needs. If you need course accommodations due to a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me and with the Disability Serves Department (EAD: 2-4705) as soon as possible.

**Religious Holidays:** Students who expect to miss classes, examinations, or any other assignment as a consequence of their religious observance should provide me with notice (via email) of the dates of religious holidays in the first two weeks of the semester

**Attendance:** Unless you are ill or in quarantine, you are expected to come to class and I will take roll based on a seating chart. This is both for my records, but also Vanderbilt policy for the purposes of tracing possible covid infections.

**Grade Distribution:**

Paper #1: 15 %

Paper #2: 20%

Final, comprehensive exam: 15%

Brightspace discussion posts and responses to other students: 25%

Robust class participation: 20%

Posted Notes from class: 5%

**Key due dates:**

Paper 1: Sunday, Sept. 27, 11:59 p.m.

Paper 2: Monday, Nov. 30 11:59 p.m.

Final exam: Thursday, Dec. 10<sup>th</sup> 7:00- 9:00 p.m.

**Reading and Screening Schedule**

This syllabus is intended to give you a schedule of topics, readings and films to be covered during the semester. I will follow it as closely as possible. I may modify, supplement, and make changes as needs arise and as our discussion and group dynamic takes shape.

You should read/ watched assigned texts before the class period day on which they are assigned. So, for Week 1., you should come to class on Thursday having watched *Boys State*.

Week 1(Aug. 25,27): Why Cinema in the Age of Trump?

T. Course overview.

R. Watch: *Boys State* (McBaine and Moss, 2020) Brightspace

**UNIT ONE: HOW MOVIES BECAME POLITICAL AND PARTISAN SPEECH**

Week 2 (Sept. 1, 3): The Rise of the Partisan Documentary

T. Read: Benson and Snee, “New Political Documentary: Rhetoric, Propaganda, and the Civic Prospect”

R. Screen: *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004. 122 min) Brightspace.

Read: Rosteck and Frenz, “The Conversion of Lila Lipscomb in *Fahrenheit 9/11*”  
Overby “Are Fahrenheit 9/11 Ads Campaign Spots?”

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3023147>

Week 3 (Sept. 8, 10): Partisan Affect and Political Speech

T. Read: Iyengar and Westwood, “Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines”  
Recommended: Pew Research Center “Partisan Antipathy”

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>

R. Watch: *Hillary: The Movie* (Peterson, 2008, 90 min.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IOpbj8ajZs>

Read: Toobin, “Money Unlimited.”

Rucker, “Citizens United Used ‘Hillary: The Movie’ to Take on McCain Feingold”

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/21/AR2010012103582.html>

Week 4 (Sept. 15, 17): The First Amendment and Media Convergence.

T. Read: Barbas, "How the Movies Became Speech," 665- 709.

R. Watch: *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941, 119 min.)

Read: Barbas, "How the Movies Became Speech," 709-745.

Week 5 (Sept. 22, 24): **Interlude:** Vernacular Blue State and Red State

T. Watch: *In Jackson Heights* (Wiseman, 2015, 190 min). Kanopy

R. Watch: *Monrovia, Indiana* (Wiseman, 2018, 144 min.) Kanopy

**Paper #1 due Sunday, Sept. 27 11:59 p.m. on Brightspace**

**UNIT TWO: POPULAR FILMS AND POPULIST POLITICS**Week 6 (Sept 29, Oct. 1) What is Populism?

T. Read: Müller, *What is Populism?* Introduction and Ch. 1

R. Watch: *Face in the Crowd* (Kazan, 1957, 126 min.)

Read: Müller, *What is Populism?* Ch. 2

Week 7 (Oct. 6, 8): Popular Media and Populist Sentiment

T. Read: Müller, *What is Populism?*, Ch. 3 and Conclusion ("Seven Theses").

R. Screen: *13 Hours* (Bay, 2016, 144 min.)

Read: Koepnick, *Michael Bay*

Steve Rose, "Fighting Dirty" *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/27/fighting-dirty-can-michael-bays-benghazi-movie-take-down-hillary-clinton-13-hours>

LUTZ KOEPNICK to visit class on Thursday!

Week 8 (Oct. 10, 12): **Interlude:** Lying, Politics, and Believing

T. Read: Arendt, "Truth and Politics"

R. Screen: Bob Roberts (Robbins)

**UNIT THREE: #MeToo: Media Histories and Systems of Abuse**Week 9: (Oct. 20, 22): Hollywood's Gender Problems

T. Read: Farrow, "Abuses of Power."

Hess, "How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women."

R. Watch: *The Assistant* (Green, 2019) 87 min).

Read: Chang, review of "The Assistant"

Week 10: (Oct. 27, 29): Collectives and Intersectionality

- T. Read: Jafee, “The Collective Power of #MeToo”
- R. Watch: Episode of 1 and 2 of *Surviving R Kelly* (Netflix)  
Read: Leung and Williams “#MeToo and Intersectionality”

Week 11 (Nov. 3, 5): Gentrification Refugee

T No Class \_\_\_ GO VOTE

- R. Coates, “Donald Trump is the First White President.”

**UNIT FOUR: BLACK LIVES, WHITE RAGE**

Week 12 (Nov. 10, 12): Beginning and Endings

T. Read: Coates, “My President Was Black,” “Donald Trump is the First White President.”

- R: Watch: *Get Out* (Peele, 2017, 104 min.) Brightspace  
Read: Interview with Peele:

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-get-out-jordan-peeel-racism-horror-america-20170224-story.html>

Week 13 (Nov. 17, 19): Racism and Rage

T. Read: Anderson, Intro + Ch. 5 “How to Un-elect a Black President.” From *White Rage*

- R. Screen: *13<sup>th</sup>* (DuVernay, 2016, 100 min.) Netflix  
Recommended: Hasbrouck, “The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment Could End Racist Policing.”  
<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/06/police-abolition-13th-amendment-slavery-racism.html>

Week 14: THANKSGIVING BREAK

Paper #2 due Monday, Nov. 30

Week 15: (Dec. 1,3) Review

Final Exam: 7:00- 9:00 P.M., Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>.