

## **POS 4258: Politics in Fiction and Film**



**Class Periods:** Tuesdays periods 5-6 (11:45-1:40), Thursdays period 6 (12:50-1:40)

**Location:** Leigh Hall 0142

**Academic Term:** Fall 2025

**Instructor:** Thomas J. Harrington, PhD

**Email:** gatortj@ufl.edu

**Office Hours:** Upon request

**Digital Books Provided by Instructor for Selected Readings:**

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1998)

**Books (Goal – pick at least 3):**

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* (1721)

George Orwell, *1984* (1949)

Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1986)

Carl Hiaasen, *Sick Puppy* (2000)

Glen David Gold, *Carter Beats the Devil* (2001)

Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (2004)

Roland Merullo, *American Savior: A Novel of Divine Politics* (2008)

David Pepper, *The People's House* (2016)

Charles J. Winn, *True Tales of the Dai-Uy* (2019)

Steve Berry, *The Jefferson Key* (2011), *The Columbus Affair* (2012), or *The Atlas Maneuver* (2024)

### Research articles:

Copies of these (which also can be accessed directly through Smathers Library) and all other assigned articles are posted in the Files folder on Canvas (<https://elearning.ufl.edu>).

### Films for Consideration:

- **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)** – Congress, moral fortitude
- **Wilson (1944)** – presidential persistence, idealism, and leadership
- **Disney's The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band (1968)** – U.S. expansionism, historical revisionism, political party identity (Democrat/Republican during 19th century) – 1888 election between Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison
- **RoboCop (1987)** – Corporate rule, privatization of state functions, urban decay
- **1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992)** - politics of discovery and exploration
- **Schindlers List (1993)** - Nazi occupation and resistance
- **Dave (1993)** – presidential substitution
- **Braveheart (1995)** – Nationalism, historical mythmaking, rebellion against tyranny
- **Nixon (1995)** – Power, paranoia, downfall
- **The American President (1995)** – Image-making, romance, and the presidency
- **The Crossing (2000)** – George Washington/Revolution; colonial heroism
- **V for Vendetta (2006)** – Totalitarianism, resistance, individual freedom vs. state power
- **Recount (2008)** – Electoral process, voting integrity
- **Valkyrie (2008)** – WW2, suspense, Hitler assassination attempt
- **The Dark Knight (2008)** - vigilantism, local corrupt politics, concept of power, moral authority, societal limitations
- **Inglorious Bastards (2009)** - WW2 revenge against Nazis
- **Book of Eli (2010)** – post-apocalyptic governance, role of narrative in political control
- **The Darkest Hour (2011)** – WW2, Winston Churchill leadership
- **Argo (2012)** - American embassy hostage crisis, Iranian Revolution
- **Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter (2012)** - concept of slavery, alternative history
- **The Campaign (2012)** – Campaigns, public personas, media, political donors
- **American: What Would Be Like Without Her (2014)** – American exceptionalism
- **LBJ (2016)** – Civil Rights Act, political pragmatism vs. principle
- **Dunkirk (2017)** – pivotal WW2 event
- **The Front Runner (2018)** – Media ethics, personal scandal, campaign downfall
- **Vice (2018)** – rise to power, vice presidency, war
- **Harriet (2019)** – biopic of Harriet Tubman, underground railroad
- **Midway (2019)** – critical juncture for WWII, patriotic framing of military history
- **Reagan (2024)** – Patriotism, Cold War, good vs. evil
- **The Beekeeper (2024)** – Vigilantism and systemic failure (allegorical political framing)
- **The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare (2024)** - undercutting Nazi plans during WW2

## Course Overview:

This course uses the sometimes (mostly) true but other times make-believe stories told in popular novels and Hollywood motion pictures to provide insights into the nature of real-life politics in the United States and beyond. The focus is mainly on process (political competition and decision making) rather than substance (policy), and each of the stories we encounter raises issues that are as relevant today as they were when the tale was originally told. We will consider, for example, whether the temptations of politics and power are beyond the capacity even of fundamentally decent people to resist; whether the actions of organized interest groups promote or undermine the principles of representative government; whether the media glare of contemporary politics weakens the capacity of our leaders and institutions to govern; and whether modern candidate-centered campaigns pose as great a threat to popular democracy as some critics believe. Our goal is not to use politics as a basis for studying the mass culture; that is a course better taught elsewhere (say, in English or Fine Arts). Instead, we will be using elements of the mass culture as a means for better understanding the character of our politics.

Warning: Some of the assigned books and films contain strong language and/or adult themes. To facilitate a lively give-and-take, everyone is required to read – and be prepared to comment on – a few (usually) short internet or other articles relating to the week's main theme(s).

## Grades:

Information about grades and grading policies at UF can be found at:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

The nature of the different components on which your grade will be based are as follows:

### Attendance (10%)

- **How it works:** Show up in a timely fashion; points deducted if tardiness becomes a recurring issue.

### Short Pre-Class Reflections/Participation (15%)

- **How it works:** Students submit several (more than 2) key highlights in short paragraph form (approximately 150 words) with any substantive rhetorical questions as a reflection based on the week's readings. **Students must bring to class on Thursdays for discussion unless otherwise directed – these may be handwritten or typed!**

### Thought Pieces (30%):

- **How it works:** Students write *THREE* thought pieces **(3-4 pages double spaced)** explaining what they have drawn from selected books and films based on a specific political theme, component, or other relevant topic of their choice (based off of the instructor's prompt). **Due in Canvas on the assigned date in the course outline at the end of the syllabus.**

### Final Project (40%):

- **How it works:** Students will submit an original piece of political fiction **(10 pages double spaced)** as a novel, script or plot summary; students may also select a research topic approved by the

instructor as an alternative. This project should demonstrate your understanding of political dynamics through storytelling (or analysis if more research-oriented). Due in Canvas on the assigned date by 11:59PM in the course outline at the end of the syllabus.

**Presentation (5%):**

- **How it works:** Students will provide a 5-minute presentation on their draft final project in the last week of class. The presentation should include a background slide with imagery and (draft) title along with a summary slide(s) highlighting key elements.

**Attendance/Class Participation:** The first part of your grade here is attendance: you can't participate unless you're in class. The other part will be based on the extent to which you contribute to our discussions via short pre-class reflections, which will typically be turned in every Thursday.

**Writing** - Here are some basic guidelines that you may find helpful: • do not summarize at length (assume that I've read/watched the works you're writing about); • do not review the book/film, except insofar as you think that it does or does not provide insights into governmental or political processes in the United States; • do not simply regurgitate points made by myself or by other students during class discussion – bring some insight(s) of your own to the task; at the same time . . . • purely personal opinions are bad (e.g., you're opposed to the U.S. using nuclear weapons), analytical discussions are good (e.g., what does the book/film tell us about the likelihood that such weapons will be used in a particular situation, or about the political consequences if they are used); • it's usually best to focus on a single theme so that you're able to do it justice; • referencing outside sources isn't required, but it can often strengthen your essay – especially if you're dealing with a topic about which you have little personal knowledge; • cite any book, article, internet source, film, TV show, or idea that is not your own; moreover . . . • any assertion or observation that you make requires a supporting reference unless it is "common knowledge," e.g., Joe Biden was elected president in 2020 (a known fact) vs. the notion that President Trump's handling of the pandemic may have contributed to that outcome (supporting reference needed); and • always remember that your challenge is to discuss the political process and government through the prism of what you have watched and read; making connections to the real world is very important here, i.e., provide examples (all the better if they're not the most obvious ones).

If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor in this class. If you cite one or more outside sources in any of your essays, be sure to include a list of references (alphabetical by author or issuing organization, i.e., not by title of the article or book) at the end just as you would with a term paper in another class. In-text cites should take the following form: (Smith and Jones 2020) – do not use footnotes or insert full article/book titles in the text. If I want to know what (Smith and Jones 2020) is, I should be able to find out by looking at your list of references.

Before submitting any written assignment, review it carefully for errors in spelling, grammar, and/or capitalization. Regarding the latter, here is a partial list of terms that should be capitalized: Democrat (or Democratic Party), Republican (or Republican Party), Congress, Senate, House of Representatives, Supreme Court, White House, First Amendment, and the proper name of any individual. Terms that should not be capitalized include: president, vice president, senator, congressmen/women, governor (unless these are used as a title, e.g., President Biden), and constitution. Also, be sure to use paragraph breaks as appropriate; paragraphs that run on for the better part of a page (or longer) and encompass

more than one topic are difficult to read and will put your instructor in a grumpy mood as he decides what grade to assign to your work.

Any written assignment that does not constitute original work by the student will be subject to penalties consistent with the UF Code of Student Conduct, up to and including receiving a grade of zero and a failing grade in the class. More generally: UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code." On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment." The Conduct Code specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. [see <https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>]

### **Some concluding points:**

Attendance is required. Students who can reasonably anticipate an absence should inform me by email as soon as possible and prior to the anticipated absence. Absences will be excused with some form of documentation of a university, military, or legal obligation, illness, or bereavement. • As noted above, students are bound by the University of Florida's Student Code of Conduct. Anyone who commits an act of academic dishonesty, such as cheating on exams or committing plagiarism on the written essays, will suffer appropriate sanctions and be referred to university authorities for further action. • There will be times when I need to communicate with the class as a group. In those instances, I will do so either through Outlook (using a listserv) or, more often, via Canvas. Students should check their incoming mail regularly so as not to miss any important information • Students are allowed to record video or audio of class lectures (not including student presentations). However, the purposes for which these recordings may be used are strictly controlled. The only allowable purposes are (1) for personal educational use, (2) in connection with a complaint to the university, or (3) as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding. All other purposes are prohibited. Specifically, students may not publish recorded lectures without the written consent of the instructor. To "publish" means to share, transmit, circulate, distribute, or provide access to a recording, regardless of format or medium, to another person (or persons), including but not limited to another student within the same class section. Additionally, a recording, or transcript of a recording, is considered published if it is posted on or uploaded to, in whole or in part, any media platform, including but not limited to social media, book, magazine, newspaper, leaflet, or third-party note/tutoring services. A student who publishes a recording without written consent may be subject to a civil cause of action instituted by a person injured by the publication and/or discipline under UF Regulation 4.040 Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code.

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at <https://gatorevals.ua.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.ua.ufl.edu/publicresults/>

COVID guidelines: Given the diminished but ongoing threat of COVID-19, the following recommendations are in place to maintain your learning environment, to enhance the safety of our in-classroom interactions, and to further the health and safety of ourselves, our neighbors, and others. • Vaccines are readily available at no cost and have been demonstrated to be safe and effective against the COVID-19 virus. • If you're feeling ill, stay home. Please call your primary care provider if you are ill and need immediate care, or the UF Student Health Care Center at 352-392-1161 to be evaluated. • Course materials will be provided to you with an excused absence, and you will be given a reasonable amount of time to make up work. See below for a list of campus and academic resources.

### **Campus Resources:**

Health and Wellness U Matter, We Care: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact [umatter@ufl.edu](mailto:umatter@ufl.edu), 352-392- 1575, or visit U Matter, We Care website to refer or report a concern, and a team member will reach out to the student in distress. Counseling and Wellness Center: Visit the Counseling and Wellness Center website or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services. Student Health Care Center: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need or visit the Student Health Care Center website. University Police Department: Visit the UF Police Department website or call 352-392-1111 (911 for emergencies). UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608. Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website. GatorWell Health Promotion Services: For prevention services focused on optimal well-being, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the GatorWell website or call 352-273-4450.

### **Academic Resources:**

E-learning technical support: Contact the UF Computing Help Desk at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at [helpdesk@ufl.edu](mailto:helpdesk@ufl.edu). C

areer Connections Center: Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601.

Career assistance and counseling services. Library Support: There are various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources. Teaching Center: Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352-392-6420.

General study skills and tutoring. Writing Studio: 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers.

Student Complaints On-Campus: Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage for more information. On-Line Students Complaints: View the Distance Learning Student Complaint Process.

### **Course Outline:**

#### **Week 1 – Course Overview (Aug. 21)**

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#### **Week 2 – Foundations: Politics, Fiction, and Representation (Aug. 26)**

- Readings:

- Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book I, Ch. 2, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html>
  - Arendt, *The Human Condition* – “The Public Realm” (pp. 50–58)
  - Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* – Introduction
  - **Clips:** All in the Family, “Sammy’s Visit” (Season 2, Episode 21, aired February 19, 1972) & “Cousin Liz” (Season 8, Episode 3, aired October 9, 1977)
  - **Themes:** What is political fiction? What shapes public reality?
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### Week 3 – Founding Myths, Revolution, and the Origins of Power (Sept. 2)

- **Film:** *Road from Runnymede* (1992)
  - **Readings:**
    - *Persian Letters* (1721)
    - *Federalist No. 1* (Hamilton – “Utility of the Union”)
    - Arendt, *The Human Condition* – “Action” (pp. 175–185)
    - Jonathan Bernstein, “The Presidency Is All About Politics,” *Washington Post* (8/29/12)
    - Isabelle Thelen’s “The ‘benign prerogative’: Political theory and executive pardoning”
  - **Themes:** Constitutional legacy, ideal vs. practice
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### Week 4 – Democracy, Performance, and Institutional Decay (Sept. 9; NO CLASS on Sept. 11)

- **Film:** *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007)
- **Readings:**
  - David Pepper, *The People’s House* (2016)
  - Arendt, *The Human Condition* – “Power and the Space of Appearance” (pp. 199–207)
  - Nick Corasaniti and Reid J. Epstein, “How a Cure for Gerrymandering Left U.S. Politics Ailing in New Ways,” *New York Times* (11/17/21).
  - Sarah Bush and Lauren Prather, “How Do Americans React When Warned That Other Countries Are Meddling in U.S. Elections,” *Washington Post* (8/21/20).
  - David E. Clementson, “6 Ways AI Can Make Political Campaigns More Deceptive Than Ever,” *The Conversation* (7/21/23).
  - Jill Lepore, “The Lie Factory: How Politics Became a Business,” *The New Yorker* (9/24/12).
- **Themes:** Corruption, democratic ideals, political courage

**\*\*\* THOUGHT PIECE DUE by 11:59PM, Sept. 14\*\*\***



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### Week 5 – National Identity (Sept. 16)

- **Film:** *Team America: World Police* (2004)
- **Clips:** *The Patriot* (2000); *Lincoln* (2012)
- **Readings:**
  - *True Tales of the Dai-Uy* (2019)
  - Krishnadev Calamur, "A Short History of 'America First,'" *The Atlantic* (1/21/17).
  - Sidney Blumenthal, "Sidney Blumenthal on How Lincoln Played the Political Game to Win," *Newsweek* (10/15/12).
  - “[Why American Exceptionalism Is Different From Other Countries’ “Nationalisms”](https://www.heritage.org/american-history/commentary/why-american-exceptionalism-different-other-countries-nationalisms)”. Kim Holmes, PhD, Heritage Foundation, 9/29/2020: <https://www.heritage.org/american-history/commentary/why-american-exceptionalism-different-other-countries-nationalisms>

**Themes:** National memory, justifying war, civic mythmaking

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### Week 6 –Satire and Leadership Substitution (Sept. 23)

- **Film:** *Borat* (2006)
  - **Clips:** Three Stooges’ “You Nazty Spy!” (1940); Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (1933)
  - **Readings:**
    - *Carter Beats the Devil* (2001)
    - Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* – “The Implosion of Meaning” (pp. 79–86)
    - Arendt, “Appearance” (pp. 50–55)
    - Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, "The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs," *American Politics Research* (January 2013).
    - Diana C. Mutz and Lilach Nir, "Not Necessarily the News: Does Fictional Television Influence Real-World Policy Preferences?" *Mass Communication and Society* (2010).
  - **Themes:** Substitution, media personas, authenticity in leadership
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### Week 7 – Global Crisis and the Fiction of Control (Sept. 30)

- **Films:** *Mars Attacks* (1996)
- **Readings:**
  - *The Atlas Maneuver* (2024)
  - **FIND** a recent news or journal article on dystopias now



- **Themes:** Manipulation, annihilation as entertainment, political illusion
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#### **Week 8 – Ambition, Betrayal, & Campaigns (Oct. 8; NO CLASS on Oct. 10)**

- **Film:** *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Primary Colors* (1996), *Bulworth* (1998), or *Ides of March* (2011)
- **Clips:** *MacArthur* (1977)
- **Read:** Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (2004)
- **Readings:**
  - Arendt, *The Human Condition* – “Power” (pp. 200–206)
  - Thomas L. Friedman, "Trump's Wag-the-Dog War," *New York Times* (7/21/20)
- **Themes:** Political compromise, betrayal, populist danger

**\*\*\* THOUGHT PIECE due by 11:59PM, Oct. 13\*\*\***

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#### **Week 9 – The Politics of Bureaucracy, Secrecy, and Conspiracy (Oct. 15)**

- **Film:** *Parallax View* (1974)
  - **Read:** Steve Berry, *The Jefferson Key* (2011)
  - **Readings:**
    - Baudrillard, “Political Simulation” (pp. 28–32)
    - “Conspiracy Theories Abounded in 19th-Century American Politics.” *Smithsonian* (4/11/2019). <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/conspiracy-theories-abounded-19th-century-american-politics-180971940/>
  - **Themes:** State secrecy, paranoia, the rewriting of history
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#### **Week 10 – Politics of Erasure & Spectacle (Oct. 22)**

- **Film:** *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) or *JFK* (1993)
- **Readings:**
  - *1984* (1949) or *America* (1986)
  - "Conspiracy, Power, and the Spectacle: Baudrillard and the Politics of the Media in 'The Manchurian Candidate'" in *Journal of Political Theory and Cinema* (2004)
  - “Anna Paulina Luna says KGB documents will help Congress find truth about JFK assassination.” *Florida Politics*, 8/14/2025: <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/751710-anna-paulina-luna-says-kgb-documents-will-help-congress-find-truth-about-jfk-assassination/>

**Themes:** Blacklist culture, the politics of forgetting

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**Week 11 – Lobbying and the Ethics of Influence (Oct. 29)**

- **Film:** *Thank You for Smoking* (2005)
  - **Readings:**
    - *Sick Puppy* (2000)
    - Lee Drutman, "What We Get Wrong about Lobbying and Corruption," *Washington Post* (4/16/15).
    - Sara Sadhwani et al., "When Lobbyists and Legislators Socialize, Lobbyists Are More Likely to Get What They Want," *Washington Post* (1/12/22).
    - "Buying Time: Moneyed Interests and the Mobilization of Bias in Congressional Committees". Richard L. Hall and Frank W. Wayman. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 797-820.
  - **Themes:** Free speech, persuasion vs. manipulation, corporate lobbying
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**Week 12 – Religion and Political Theater (Nov. 4)**

- **Film:** *Evan Almighty* (2007), *Spotlight* (2012), or *Inherit the Wind* (1960)
- **Read:** Roland Merullo, *American Savior* (2008)
- **Readings:**
  - Arendt, "Action and the Human Condition" (pp. 7–16)
  - *Federalist No. 51* (Madison – human nature; virtue in politics)
  - Rebecca Leppert and Dalia Fahmy, "10 Facts about Religion and Government in the United States," Pew Research Center (7/5/22).
- **Themes:** Charisma, messianic politics, the sacred in the state

**\*\*\*THOUGHT PIECE DUE by 11:59PM, Nov. 9\*\*\***

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**Week 13 – Journalism and Institutional Exposure (Nov. 11)**

- **Film:** *Frost/Nixon* (2008)
- **Readings:**

- *Federalist No. 84* (Hamilton – press and liberty)
  - Lisa Lerer, "In the Age of Trump, Can Scandal Still Sink a Politician?" *New York Times* (12/4/18).
  - **Themes:** Media, accountability, public trust
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#### **Week 14 – Violence and Fragility (Nov. 18)**

- **Film:** *Bowling for Columbine* (2002)
  - **Readings:**
    - Lee Drutman, "How Hatred Came to Dominate American Politics," *fivethirtyeight.com* (10/5/20).
    - Joel Achenbach, "Science Is Revealing Why American Politics Are So Intensely Polarized," *Washington Post* (1/20/24)
  - **Themes:** Violence as spectacle, collapse of discourse, fear-based governance
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#### **Week 15 – Thanksgiving Week (Nov. 25) – NO CLASS**

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#### **Week 16 – The Fiction of Politics Today (Dec. 2; NO class on Dec. 4)**

- **Evaluations**
- **Presentations**
- **Themes:** Can politics still be “real”? What remains after spectacle?

**\*\*\*FINAL PROJECT DUE by 11:59PM, DEC. 5!\*\*\***