

## Descriptif d'enseignement / *Course descriptions*

3<sup>ème</sup> année internationale / International undergraduate program

*Semestre 1*

### Titre du cours - *Course title*

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#### Politics As Spectacle From Alcibiades To Trump

**Type de cours :** Séminaire d'ouverture - Seminar

**Langue du cours/Language of instruction :** English

### Enseignant(s) – *Professor(s)*

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### Résumé du cours – Objectifs - *Course description – Targets*

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Ever since Ancient Greece, spectacle has played a central, yet highly problematic part in Western societies. Although most of us would agree that social life is all but unimaginable without some form of spectacle, and that some societies have given particular importance to spectacle, we tend to equate spectacle with entertainment, or at the very least consider that it implies a fictional dimension, that it is based on illusion and make-believe—in other words, that it is ultimately futile, if not downright nefarious, especially when certain domains of social life— politics, justice, religion—seem unduly "theatricalized."

However, if we care to explore the nature of spectacle, setting aside the possible—but not inevitable—abuses that it may engender, we realize that it must be regarded as a normal, and even essential form of communication and social life. This requires an effort to redefine spectacle as a "neutral" practice (i.e., without a priori positive or negative value, and without inherent fictionality), but also to take as object of study not 'spectacle' as an abstract construct, but the "spectacle event," an entity with a specific duration and location in space that involves specific groups of people. Therefore, we can claim that (for instance) a political rally, a court trial, a religious service are all fundamentally spectacle events; they are defined as such by time/space coordinates and by the simultaneous presence of two parties—performers and spectators—who take on asymmetrical but complementary and equally important roles.

An event-based approach leads to innovative analyses of the functions of spectacle in social communication, and helps debunk a number of commonplaces, not just in the field of performing arts, but in political science and sociology as well.

### Evaluation - *Assessment*

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- Written case study (20-25K characters w/spaces) on a specific political spectacle event: 50%
- In-class exam [1h]: 30%
- Class presentation [10 min]: 20%

## Plan – Séances - Course outline

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### PART I

#### Session 1—Introduction

##### A) Presentation of the course

##### B) Introduction to the critical approach to the concept of 'spectacle' in reference to other germane operational concepts.

1. commonly held (mis)conceptions of 'spectacle' in various theories or models, esp. as pertains to politics (by Debord, Baudrillard, Schechner, Hedges, Vargas Llosa).

2. (re)defining operational concepts: 'event' ('non-event' 'pseudo-event') – 'perform' 'performer' 'performance' – 'spectator' 'spectation' – 'attend' 'attention' – 'presentation' 'representation' – 'front' 'persona' 'character' 'mask' – 'politics/policy'

3. 'spectacle' as a type of event in the context of communication.

### PART II

#### Session 2—The "spectacle controversy" from Ancient Greece to the 20th century

A) Plato condemns all representation in Republic; contradictory role of spectacle in classical Greek culture and society (See Simonton, 2017) – contradictory role of spectacle in classical Roman culture and society – Church Fathers (Tertullian, Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome...) condemn pagan spectacles and those who attend them – 692: the 6th Church Council ("in Trullo") excommunicates participants in all spectacles.

B) In the Renaissance, development of spectacle as a political tool (Machiavelli)(see Newman, 1986)

C) 17th century quarrels on the morality of theater in France and England (Conti, Prynne, Caffaro/Bossuet, Collier)

D) 18th century: Rousseau's *Lettre sur les spectacles* - The French Revolution as spectacle (Robert, 2009)

E) Evreinov's 'theatricality' (1908-1925) - Brecht's 'distancing effect' and 'epic theater' (1936-38) - Benjamin's loss of 'aura' (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936-39)

F) Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944-47) – Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* + Commentaries – Schwartzberg's *L'État-Spectacle* (1977) – Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981).

### PART III – Contemporary visions and debates

Session 3—The post-WWII turn: Orson Welles' vision of politics as spectacle in the age of mass media in *Citizen Kane* (1941) – Sartre provides a model for performance in the "Café waiter" episode from *Being and Nothingness* (1943) - Orwell imagines a dystopian society structured around political spectacle events in *1984* (1948) – Goffman lays down the parameters of social (non-fictional, non-representational) performance in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956)

Session 4—Post-Marxist critique of politics as spectacle: Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) – Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1993) – Glynn's "The 2004 Election Did Not Take Place" (2009)

Session 5—Presidential elections as spectacle today. Edelman's *Political Spectacle* (1988) – Rogin's "Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics" (1990) – Kellner's *Media Spectacle* (2003) – Miroff's "Media and Presidential Spectacle" (2016)

TEST (1 hour)

### PART IV.

Session 6— Student presentations (case studies of recent notable spectacle events in the political domain broadly conceived).

## Bibliographie - Bibliography :

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(titles with the mention "PDF" will be made available to students electronically through the Moodle platform)

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. [La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu, Paris, Galilée, 1991.] Trans. Paul Patton. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995. PDF

Crary, Jonathan. "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory." *October* 50 (Autumn 1989), p. 96–107. PDF

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. [La Société du spectacle, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1967]. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York, Zone Books, [1995], 2006.

- Trans. Ken Knabb. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm>. (See especially the notes).
- Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988. "Some Premises about Politics," Ch. 1, p. 1-11 ; "The Construction and Uses of Social Problems," Ch. 2, p. 30-35 ; PDF 1; Ch. 5, "The Ambiguities of Political News," p. 90-102 ; Ch. 7, "The Political Spectacle as Tactic and as Manipulation," p. 120-130 PDF 2
- Glynn, Kevin. "The 2004 Election Did Not Take Place: Bush, Spectacle, and the Media Nonevent." *Television & New Media*, 10:2 (March 2009), p. 216-245. PDF
- Goffman, Ervin. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1956]. New York, Doubleday, 1959.
- Heninger, Daniel. "Donald Trump as Lady Gaga." *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday-Sunday, December 9-11, 2016, p. A11. PDF
- Kellner, Douglas. *Media Spectacle*. London, Routledge, 2003. Preface, p. vii-xiii ; Ch. 1, p. 1-33 ; "Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle." Ch. 6, p. 160-178, "Presidential Politics, the Movie." PDF
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Media Spectacle and the 2008 Presidential Election." *Critical Methodologies* vol. 9, no 6 (December 2009), p. 707-716. PDF
- Miroff, Bruce. *Presidents on Political Ground: Leaders in Action and What They Face*. Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2016. Introduction, p. 1-9 PDF 1; "Media and Presidential Spectacle," p. 10-44 PDF 2 ; Conclusion, p. 158-152 ; PDF 3 ; Notes, p. 163-181 PDF 4.
- Newman, Karen. "The Politics of Spectacle: La Pellegrina and the Intermezzi of 1589." *Modern Language Notes* vol. 101, No 1 (January 1986), p. 95-113. PDF
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. [1949]. New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
- Robert, Yann. "La Politique Spectacle: A Legacy of the French Revolution?" *French Politics, Culture & Society* 27:3 (Winter 2009), p. 104-115. PDF
- Rogin, Michael. "'Make My Day!': Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics." *Representations* 29 (Winter 1990), p. 99–123. PDF
- Simonton, Matthew. "The Manipulation Of Information." *Classical Greek Oligarchy: A Political History*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2017. Ch. 5, p. 186-223. PDF
- Vargas Llosa, Mario. *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*. [La Civilización del espectáculo, México, Alfaguara/Santillana, 2012.] Trans. John King. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
- Schwartzberg Roger-Gérard. *L'État-Spectacle: Essai sur et contre le Star System en politique*. Paris, Flammarion, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *L'État-Spectacle 2. Politique, casting et médias*. Paris, Plon, 2009.
- Taibi, Matt. *Insane Clown President: Dispatches from the 2016 Circus*. New York, Spiegel and Grau, 2017.

#### FILMOGRAPHY (in chronological order)

- Citizen Kane*, dir. Orson Welles, screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Welles (U.S.A., RKO, 1941).
- The Best Man*, dir. Franklin Schaffner, screenplay by Gore Vidal [from his play] (U.S.A., MGM, 1964).
- The Candidate*, dir. Michael Ritchie, screenplay by Jeremy Lerner (U.S.A., Warner Bros., 1972).
- 1984, dir. Michael Radford, screenplay by Radford [from Orwell's novel](U.K., MGM, 1984).
- Primary Colors*, dir. Mike Nichols, screenplay by Elaine May [from the novel by Joe Klein] (U.S.A., Universal, 1998).
- Wag the Dog*, dir. Barry Levinson, screenplay by Hilary Henkin and David Mamet [from the novel by Larry Beinhart](U.S.A., New Line, 1997).
- The Adjustment Bureau*, dir. George Nolfi, screenplay by Nolfi [from Philip K. Dick's story *The Adjustment Team*] (U.S.A., Universal / Gambit Pictures, 2011).