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Office Hours: Tuesday 2-4 PM
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Course Location: Olin 202; T/R 4:40-6:00 PM

(Super) Heroic Politics

Heroes have been a constant feature of Western culture stretching back to classical times. Yet their role in political orders is complex, varied, and dynamic—and frequently not aligned with the common good, or with democratic conceptions of politics. Our task in this course is to look at recent superhero movies as a continuation of this long tradition of heroic politics and to critically examine their potential for (or against) democratic practices: what kinds of political relationships do these stories imagine or support? Do superheroes function as good ethical and political role models that empower audiences? Or are they disempowering, teaching audiences to trust in the strengths of exceptional individuals (or exceptional states) instead of their own capacities? Can these stories teach us to be better citizens or are heroic narratives dangerous? To address these questions, this class will consider a selection of recent super-hero films alongside works of political theory, analyzing questions of democratic agency, courage, and state power.

**This course is part of the *Courage to Be* Seminar Series and students are required to attend 3 Monday evening dinner lectures associated with the series, to be held at Blithewood. More information can be found at <http://hac.bard.edu/ctb/> . The scheduled events are:

Rana Abdelhamid

6:00 PM, February 25th, 2019

Rana Abdelhamid is an acclaimed activist and organizer. She is the founder of MALIKAH, IM(WISE), and Hijabis of New York.

Deo Niyizonkiza

6:00 PM March 4th, 2019

Deo Niyizonkiza is the founder and chief executive officer of Village Health Works, a grassroots, non-profit organization providing quality healthcare to communities in rural Burundi.

Karen Scharff

6:00 PM April 15th, 2019

Karen Scharff is the Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York and a co-chair of the Working Families Party.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS & REQUIREMENTS:

Attendance at all class meetings is mandatory. Attendance means *attention*, showing up prepared to work and think about the readings with your fellow students. Be respectful of your classmates and show up on time, with **cell phones turned off and put away**, and yourselves

mentally prepared to discuss the assigned material. ****Because life happens, you get one freebie absence for a date of your choosing.****

Do the readings, in full, before class. Readings should be completed by the day they are listed on the course schedule below. Films should be viewed for the week listed. I have tried to keep the overall reading under 50 pages per class, or 100 pages per week (usually it will be less, especially if the work is particularly dense; sometimes more if there are many images). The texts are the heart and soul of this class. While there is no way to make the texts that we will study in this course “easy,” you are not expected to show up understanding every line. You *should* come into class with your questions. You should also **bring texts with you to class**. In our discussions we will take on some of the more confusing parts of the readings, and discuss how these works apply, or complicate, the themes and ideas in the assigned films of this course. Come prepared to work.

Respect: Heroism and its popular representations have given us some beautiful, astounding, and inspiring ideas. Also many brutal, repugnant, and difficult ones. It is imperative in this class that you treat yourselves and others with respect. Our task this quarter is to understand these films and texts, their assumptions, limits, and conclusions, and to see how different ways they offer us for thinking about politics (good and bad) work, conceptually. That does *not* mean that you have to agree with the positions taken in these texts; nor does it mean that you can’t disagree with other people (including me) about what they mean, or what is significant about their conclusions. In political theory, disagreement is often a sign of respect—it means you have said something worth engaging—but *rudeness never is*. You are expected to treat others with decency and generosity. If you are uncomfortable with some element of the course, the readings, or unsure what standards “respect” implies, please come talk to me about it in my office hours.

One further note on course content: The films and texts we study in this course contain mature, often explicitly sexual and violent content; and they do so in ways intended to provoke an emotional reaction. Some films use obscene and deliberately offensive language. If you find such content extremely difficult this may not be the class is for you; however I encourage you to come speak with me if you have any questions or concerns, or if you are not sure.

GRADING: *your grade will be determined as follows:*

Participation: 15%

This includes attendance (5%) and contributions to the discussion (10%). I ask that you try to speak in every class—note, this is a *minimum* suggestion for participation. This grade also includes your participation and engagement with other students in the class, including online forum posts, or in class presentations. If the idea of speaking in class terrifies you, please come talk to me in office hours.

Weekly Reading Responses: 15%

Each week you will submit a short (about 250 words to a page) response to the week’s required readings. This response is to be **posted by Monday evening by 11:59 PM, prior to the week’s**

first class, through the course website. *These responses should be your own critical analysis of the readings.* Some weeks I may ask you to respond to specific questions to prepare for our discussion. The point of this exercise is to identify one way in which you see the readings speaking to each other (you may compare readings across weeks); alternatively, you may use this exercise to define a central idea that you think is important within the text, or analyze a specific character or passage and explain its significance. Consider these as writing and thinking exercises. I will be looking for thoughtfulness, careful reflection on the reading, and clear analysis. ****You may miss one week of your choosing without penalty.****

Short Scene Analyses: 15% each (30% total)

You will be responsible for **two** short scene analyses (3 pages double spaced) that choose a scene from one of the films and connects them to an idea one of the readings for a specific week. More specific instructions for this assignment will be circulated in class. You may choose which week to hand these in, and on which material you wish to write these; but **one should be turned in to me before spring break** and cover material from the first half of class; **the other before our final class**, covering material from the second half.

40% Final Paper. In this class you will write an 6-8 page final paper, analyzing a film/superhero of your choice. (I will circulate a more specific description of this project and its guidelines further along in the quarter.) Note that this project will be broken down into two distinct parts—an outline and a final paper—each worth a portion of your final grade.

5% Outline + Thesis
35% Final Paper

LATE PAPER POLICY: Late papers are penalized at a rate of a full grade if turned in within the first 24 hours after a deadline has passed, then a half-grade a day for every 24 hours after that. The *maximum* grade a paper turned in within 24 hours after the due-date can receive, for instance, is an 89 (B+); after 48 hours, an 84 (B); 72 hours, a 79 (C+), etc.

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism:

In keeping with Bard's honor code and standards for personal behavior and integrity, I take academic honesty very seriously. *Anyone found to be cheating, plagiarizing, or otherwise in breach of Bard's standards for academic integrity will fail the relevant assignment, and all instances of cheating will be reported to the dean. No exceptions.* You may find Bard's policies here: <http://www.bard.edu/dosa/handbook/index.php?aid=1201>

If you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism or cheating for any of these assignments, you should feel free to ask me, or make an appointment at the writing center.

Special Academic Accommodations:

If you have special circumstances or need any special accommodations for your assignments, please come and see me as early in the semester as possible, so that we can take them into

consideration. If you are not sure what resources are available to you, you can learn more here: <http://www.bard.edu/dosa/handbook/index.php?aid=1215>

FILMS AND ASSIGNED READINGS:

Below is a schedule of weekly assignments. You should consider the assigned films listed in the week's title as required reading: all are available online to rent from services such as Amazon Prime, Youtube, iTunes, or GooglePlay. All required texts should be stocked in the Bard bookstore, but if you prefer to shop around for the best price or buy used, many of these can be bought or rented for quite cheap through your favorite online source. In an effort to keep your costs low, I have also put as many readings as possible online through our class website.

I do ask that if you shop online, you get the same editions I've ordered. In general this is a good practice as it means we will all have the same page numbers and, for translated texts, the same words. I've included ISBN numbers below to make searching for these books simple.

Required texts are:

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*; ISBN: 0226025985
Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*; ISBN: 0140449493
Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*; ISBN: 0226738922
Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*; ISBN: 014303653X
Tillich, *The Courage to Be*; ISBN: 030018879X

NOTE: Texts marked below with a ** are *optional*. The rest are assigned and should be read by the day listed.

WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:

Week 1: Mythologies. *Superman: Man of Steel*

January 29th, R. Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992) Ch. 1, Ch. 3, Epilogue [Online]

January 31st Wolin, *Democracy, Inc.* 1, 3 [Online]

**Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*

** Peter Koogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* Ch. 1-3

Week 2: Good of Film? *Iron Man I*

February 5th Neil Postman *Amusing Ourselves to Death* "Forward," "The Medium is the Metaphor," "Media as epistemology," "The Huxleyan Warning" (xix- xx; 3-29; 155-163)

Taylor Ramos & Tony Zhou: "Every Frame a Painting" video shorts (online)

"The Marvel Symphonic Universe"

"What is Bayhem?"

"How does an Editor Think and Feel?"

February 7th Cavell, "The Good of Film" [Online]

Emerson, "Self-Reliance" [Online]

Week 3: Doing and Knowing: *Batman Begins*

February 12th Aristotle: Ethics Book 1-2 selections (p. 3-10; 13-49)

February 14th Aristotle, Ethics Book 3, 5 selections (p. 50-74; 112-133; 138)

B.F. Skinner “Freedom and the Control of Men” [Online]

Week 4: Soldierly Courage: *Captain America*

February 19nd Plato, *Laches* [Online]

Perikles’ *Funeral Oration* [Online]

February 21th Gray, *The Warriors*, Ch. 2 [Online]

Arendt, “Introduction to the Warriors”

**Gray, Ch. 1 (optional)

**George Kateb, “Courage as a Virtue”

Week 5: Tragic Morality: *Black Panther*

February 26th Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands” [Online]

February 28th Bernard Williams, “Politics and Moral Character” [Online]

Melvin Rogers, “[The Many Dimensions of Black Panther](#)”

Clint Smith, “[What would WEB DuBois make of Black Panther?](#)”

**Chris Lebron “[Black Panther is Not the Movie we Deserve](#)”

**Lisa Yazik, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future”
Socialism and Democracy (17:12) 2011.

Week 6: Foundations: *The Avengers*

March 5th Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book 1 & 2 p. 49-65; 69-96 [Online]

March 7th Rousseau, “On the Virtue of Heroes” [Online]

Rousseau, “Letter to D’Alembert” pt. 2 [Online]

Week 7: Emergencies and Scapegoats: *The Dark Knight*

March 12th Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Ch. 2 [Online]

March 14th Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 19-53

****Last day to turn in your first scene analysis assignment, March 14th****

March 19th SPRING BREAK

March 21st SPRING BREAK

Week 8: Failure and Fugitivity: *The Dark Knight Rises*

March 26th Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 53-79

March 28th Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” [Online]

Week 9: Hero Worship: *Thor: Ragnarok*

April 2: Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes and Hero Worship, Ch. 1 [Online]

April 4th **SPECIAL CLASS/TIME: Evening Event with Joshua Dienstag**

Week 10: Freedom and Security: *Captain America: Winter Soldier*

April 9th Judith Shklar: "The Liberalism of Fear" [Online]
Duncan Bell, "Under an Empty Sky" [Online]
April 11th Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" [Online]

Week 11: 'Here I Stand': *Captain America: Civil War*

April 16th Bernard Williams, "Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence" [Online]
Bonnie Honig, "Moral Survival" [Online]
April 18th **NO CLASS**: *Professor Barringer out of town.*

Week 12: Freedom & Others: *Logan*

April 23rd Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pt. 1 [Online]
Pippen, "On Westerns" (selection) [Online]
April 25th Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pt. 2 [Online]

Week 13: Heroic Politics? *Wonder Woman*

April 30th Friedrich Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest* [Online]
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* 1-21; 175-188
May 2nd Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188-207; 230-247

Week 14: The Courage to Be

May 7th Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 1-39
May 9th Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Ch. 4 p. 86-90; 103-112; Ch 5, 113-116; 151-154;
Ch 6, 155-180.

Final paper outline due in class, May 9th
Last day to turn in your second scene analysis, May 9th

Week 15: Completion days: Potential Makeup Classes

****Final Paper Due May 14th ****