

Descriptif d'enseignement / *Course descriptions*

3ème année internationale / International undergraduate program

Semestre 1

Titre du cours - *Course title*

Politics as Spectacle from Alcibiades to Volodymyr Zelensky

Type de cours : **Cours magistral**

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

Enseignant(s) – *Professor(s)*

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

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. This class focuses on events that can be qualified as « political », with the understanding that « politics » is essentially spectacular (as opposed to « policy »).

Evaluation - *Assessment*

- Written case study (20-25K characters w/spaces) on a specific political spectacle event: 50%
- In-class exam [1h]: 35%
- Class presentation [5 min]: 15%

Plan – Séances - *Course outline*

This class in six sessions will be divided in four parts:

Part I. Session 1 will provide an introduction to the critical approach to the concept of 'spectacle' in reference to other germane operational concepts ('performance', 'spectation', 'attention', 'event', 'politics/policy') and to commonly held (mis)conceptions in various theories or models (by Debord, Baudrillard, Schechner, Vargas Llosa). We will frame spectacle as a type of event in the realm of communication.

Part II. Session 2 is devoted to a historical perspective on the "spectacle controversy" from Ancient Greece to the 20th century, with an aim to show that through the centuries and across cultures, the same elements keep recurring: defiance towards representation (*mimesis*), an assumption that spectators are passive, belief that all spectacle relies on illusion and deception—but also a conviction that spectacle is a powerful political instrument.

Part III. Sessions 3-4-5 will be devoted to readings and analyzing post-WWII foundational documents on the relationships between politics, society and spectacle such as Orwell's *1984* (1948), Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1993), and Kellner's *Media Spectacle* (2003). A series of films that deal with this issue will also be examined, from Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) to Nolfi's *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011).

Part IV. In Session 6, students will present case studies of recent notable spectacle events in the political domain broadly conceived. A particular focus will be the often neglected but essential difference between "spectacle" and 'media.

Bibliographie - Bibliography :

Titles with the mention **PDF** are 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**

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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>.

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, n° 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, N° 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 (Winter1990), p. 99–123. [PDF](#)
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Café waiter." *Being and Nothingness [L'Être et le néant, 1943]*, trans. Hazel Barnes. London, Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 93-95. [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.
- Munzenrieder, Kyle. "Why Do Presidential Debate Stages Look Like Bad Game Shows?" *W Magazine*, July 31, 2019. [PDF](#)
- Taibi, Matt. *Insane Clown President: Dispatches from the 2016 Circus*. New York, Spiegel and Grau, 2017.