

Print the Legend

Film artists throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have, in many ways, grappled with the power of the mass media and its effects on the political and social sphere. With the relatively recent rise of Internet-based social media, we are experiencing new forms of news reportage, opinion, collective action, and the leverage of data in our everyday lives. But before this digital revolution, crucial public outlets such as newspapers, television, newsreels, and radio disseminated information one-directionally. Cinema has always had a strange, contentious relationship with the mainstream press, and so with *Print the Legend*, we look back not only at classic film examples of the mass media's portrayal of politics in the US, but also some of our favorite explicitly or implicitly political films that have resonated deeply with audiences over the years and which have often provided perspectives that the neither the media nor the people are normally able to access. With a focus on films that satirize the political sphere or the machinations of the media, *Print the Legend* seeks to be an antidote to and critical lens on the 24-hour news cycle. Take a break from the smartphone, be with others, laugh, cry, and consider a different perspective on the mediated theater of political reality, even just for two hours.

Saturday, September 10, 7 pm

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, US, 1962

dir. John Ford (123 mins., Western, 35mm)

“This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” That most famous of lines from John Ford’s late-career masterpiece is an excellent summation of the mythological aspects of not only the American West—a subject about which Ford was the undisputed master—but of American-style politics and its tenuous relationship to the mainstream media. Foundation myth is at the heart of *Liberty Valance*: Valance (Lee Marvin at his vicious best), a drunken and violent maniac, terrorizes the small frontier town of Shinbone, which promising young lawyer “Ranse” Stoddard (James Stewart) experiences firsthand when Valance and his gang rob Ranse’s stagecoach upon his arrival in town. Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), a tough rancher who lives on the outskirts of Shinbone and wants to mostly be left alone, runs across the aftermath and befriends Ranse. But as Valance is left unchecked in a lawless town like Shinbone, a showdown looms and the critical question of “who shot Liberty Valance?” comes to the fore, and the origin story of Ranse Stoddard, US Senator, is born. “The greatest American political movie. . . a movie about the moral burden of a life lived in the name of a myth and the ethical implications of direct action. Implicitly, the subject of the film is also that of a nation founded in this way.”—Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*.

Sunday, September 11, 4:30 pm

Ace in the Hole, US, 1951

dir. Billy Wilder (111 mins., Film noir, 35mm)

Out-of-work newspaper reporter Chuck Tatum (a perfectly smarmy, snarling Kirk Douglas in one of his best roles) moves west to New Mexico from New York following a string of firings for a variety of offenses, most notably libel and drunkenness. Now in the normal routine of covering small-town “interest” stories at an Albuquerque rag, he still longs for the thrill of the big story, and when a man becomes trapped in a collapsed cave on the outskirts of town, Chuck appears willing to go to any length not only to get the story, but to extend its grasp on the local (and national) attention as long as possible. The film, which won Wilder a best director nod at the 1951 Venice Film Festival, is a highly cynical vision of the role of the media in American society and one which only appears more accurate as time passes. “A perverse fascination underpins Wilder’s gaze. Chuck Tatum may be a callous sociopath, but there’s a striving energy to him—something Douglas brings out so vividly in his high-wire performance—that compels as much as it repels. After all, he’s as much looking for his own version of the American Dream as we all are, essentially.”—Kenji Fujishima, *Brooklyn Magazine*.

Sunday, September 11, 7 pm

The Grand Illusion, France, 1937

dir. Jean Renoir (114 mins., Drama, DCP)

Subtitles

A humanistic, sensitive masterpiece nearly unparalleled in cinema history, Renoir’s WWI drama concerns the trials and tribulations of a group of French POWs under German imprisonment. Most of the group are working-class, led by Lieutenant Maréchal (an unforgettable Jean Gabin); they scheme and plot—sometimes to the point of revolt—to escape the prison camp, meanwhile reveling in the stories of their lives at home during finer, non-combat times. Captain De Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), however, who was captured with Maréchal by the German von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim in one of his finest roles), develops a sympathetic yet ultimately tragic relationship with the German, who comes from a similarly upper-crust background. A deep and perceptive study of liberty, equality, and fraternity, Renoir’s masterwork is “one of the key humanist expressions to be found in movies: sad, funny, exalting, and glorious.”—Jonathan Rosenbaum, *The Chicago Reader*. In French with English subtitles.

Monday, September 12, 7 pm

Duck Soup, US, 1933

dir. Leo McCarey (68 mins., Slapstick, DCP)

Despite its relative box-office failure upon initial release (a fact that remains shocking to this day), *Duck Soup* has become one of the best-loved comedies in cinema history and perhaps the preeminent Marx Brothers film—in addition to the most cinematic, foregoing the asides and interludes normally

characteristic of their work and due in part to the directorial artistry of Leo McCarey. The focus of the film is the republic of Freedonia, a failing state upheld by the wealthy donor Mrs. Teasdale (Margaret Dumont) on one side and a war-hungry neighbor, Sylvania, on the other. Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho) is the newly-installed leader of Freedonia, Zeppo is his right-hand man, while Chico and Harpo play Sylvanian spies out to ruin their rival at the behest of the Sylvanian head-of-state Trentino (Louis Calhern), who has eyes for Mrs. Teasdale and her riches. War breaks out, nationalist fervor reaches fever pitch, and chaos reigns—presciently familiar to observers of the remainder of the 20th century. “The primary reason *Duck Soup* transcends the rest of the Marx [brothers] output is its target—Groucho’s Escher-like language contortions never found a better foil than governmental bureaucracy, and the hall-of-mirrors conversations dominating this war spoof rank alongside Heller and Vonnegut. For all their good intentions, contemporary antiwar filmmakers might do well to take a page from this, which, in its gleeful skewering, reminds us what about humanity might be worth saving.”—Mike King, *Cine-File Chicago*.

Friday, September 16, 7 pm

Born in Flames, US, 1983

dir. Lizzie Borden (80 mins., Sci-fi comedy, 35mm)

Borden’s landmark, low-budget revolutionary treatise addresses a semi-documentary, semi-fictional parallel world to ours, where competing feminist groups wander the streets and control the radio waves, and where the “Social Democratic” administration in power is powerless to stop the tide of progress stemming from racial and gender injustice. Focused on the different paths resistance to power can take, Borden’s vision unspools through inventive set-pieces intercut with monologues from two radical radio DJs (Adele Bertei and Honey) who rousingly hold forth on a variety of issues facing the world community. An instant hit upon its premiere at the 1983 Berlin Film Festival, *Born in Flames* has since influenced countless feminists. This “unruly, unclassifiable film—perhaps the sole entry in the hybrid genre of radical-lesbian-feminist sci-fi vérité—premiered two years into the Reagan regime, but its fury proves as bracing today as it was back when this country began its inexorable shift to the right.”—Melissa Anderson, *The Village Voice*.

Saturday, September 17, 7 pm

Being There, US, 1979

dir. Hal Ashby (130 mins., Comedy, 35mm)

In one of his most memorable roles, Peter Sellers plays Chance, a hermetic housekeeper at a wealthy man’s sprawling, lavish residence in Washington, DC. Apparently having not left the estate in some time, he is unceremoniously flung into the world when his patron unexpectedly dies. The problem is that Chance’s only knowledge of the world has come from televised depictions. Soon he is involved in international politics through a series of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, Ashby and screenwriter Jerzy Kosinski gleefully incising the vapidness of electoral politics and the US’s collective fascination with mainstream media versions and distortions of reality. “There’s an exhilaration in seeing

artists at the very top of their form: It almost doesn't matter what the art form is, if they're pushing their limits and going for broke and it's working. We can sense their joy of achievement—and even more so if the project in question is a risky, off-the-wall idea that could just as easily have ended disastrously. *Being There* is a movie that inspires those feelings. . . confoundingly provocative.”—Roger Ebert, *The Chicago Sun-Times*.

Monday, September 19, 7 pm

Citizen Ruth, US, 1996

dir. Alexander Payne (106 mins., Dark comedy, 35mm)

Alexander Payne's (*Election*, *Sideways*, *Nebraska*) debut feature tackles the circa-1996 reproductive rights debate but plays it as a new kind of slapstick comedy, following Ruth Stoops (Laura Dern), a glue-sniffing teenage miscreant who ends up both pregnant and subsequently at the center of a mainstream-media firestorm as the poster child of teen pregnancy. Payne's biting satire skewers both sides of the debate in equal measure but stays unpredictable throughout, while Dern displays her physical comedy chops as she callously seeks to profit from her newfound yet fleeting fame. Featuring a heavy-hitting cast of supporting players—including Tippi Hedren and Swoosie Kurtz on the pro-choice side, and Kurtwood Smith and Burt Reynolds on the pro-life side—*Citizen Ruth* is one of the finest American comedies of the '90s, but unfortunately remains relevant during our current election cycle.

Thursday, September 22, 7 pm

Medium Cool, US, 1969

dir. Haskell Wexler (111 mins., Drama, Digital)

Legendary cinematographer Haskell Wexler's (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Days of Heaven*) directorial debut is one of the most radical experiments of '60s new Hollywood and one of the finest films of the period. The film follows disillusioned news cameraman John Cassellis (Robert Forster) as he moves from careerist opportunities to political radicalization following the revelation that his company provides information to the FBI. As Cassellis prepares to film the famous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, he meets Eileen and her son Harold, and the trio's fates converge around and within the very real riots at the convention. Merging exhilarating, often brutal documentary footage shot by Wexler with Cassellis's story, "*Medium Cool* is a film remarkable for its insistence that no one exists outside of politics, whether one experiences it as a backdrop to daily life (a wrinkled Bobby Kennedy poster in a cramped apartment) or as a nightstick to the gut."—Thomas Beard.

Saturday, September 24, 4:30 pm

Bulworth, US, 1998

dir. Warren Beatty (108 mins., Comedy, 35mm)

Jay Bulworth, a democratic US Senator from California up for re-election in 1996, is losing on several fronts: in his race to a young up-and-comer, with his constituents who are flocking away in droves, and his previously radical socialist views have disappeared in favor of corporatist centrist views he adopts only to stay in power. Despondent, he ups his life insurance payouts and orders a hit on himself. But when at rock bottom and blisteringly drunk, Bulworth begins telling his version of the truth (gasp!) at rallies, campaign stops, and debates, meanwhile falling in love with activist Nina (Halle Berry) while his manager (a nervy, sweaty Oliver Platt) looks on in horror, until he sees the turning tide of public opinion. Warren Beatty wrote, produced, directed, and stars as the titular rapping politician who becomes an overnight media sensation. “*Bulworth* works, with both urbanity and chutzpah, by viewing political puppeteering with an all-purpose jaundiced eye.”—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*.

Thursday, September 29, 7 pm

The Insider, US, 1999

dir. Michael Mann (157 mins., Drama, 35mm)

A scalding exposé of big tobacco, government lobbying practices, and the methods that power will leverage to silence its critics, Mann’s most critically-acclaimed film focuses on Jeffrey Wigand (Russell Crowe in an Oscar-nominated turn), a big tobacco whistleblower whose troubling claims about his employer, Brown & Williamson (now part of tobacco conglomerate Reynolds American Inc.), are investigated by 60 Minutes’ power producer Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino). Wigand, threatened by the B&W legal—and extralegal—machine, and Bergman, blocked in by CBS corporate policy and a tumultuous media landscape, must work together to get the story out despite Wigand’s deep, almost paranoid distrust in the media. “One of the film’s canniest qualities is the manner in which it folds conspiratorial intrigue into processes we tend to think of as silently efficient and unmitigated by outside pressures, from broadsheet reportage at a major national newspaper to the recording of disposition in an ordinary court of law: Here the checks and balances on which we rely for the sanctity of the system are themselves subject to coercion from sources with money and power, and any man intent on confronting this kind of injustice is liable to be paid off, silenced, or worse.”—Calum Marsh, *Slant Magazine*.

Sunday, October 2, 7 pm

Starship Troopers, US, 1997

dir. Paul Verhoeven (129 mins., Sci-fi, DCP)

Ostensibly a huge dumb sci-fi blockbuster starring mid-’90s Hollywood lukewarm up-and-comers, in lesser directorial hands *Starship Troopers* would have been just that. Instead, we’re treated to Paul Verhoeven’s (*Total Recall*, *Robocop*, *Basic Instinct*, *Showgirls*) positively perverted and highly

subversive angle on a 23rd-century, heavily-militarized and very US-like “Earth federation,” which, while pursuing its imperialistic annexation of as many planets as it can land upon, upsets a murderous race of insects who subsequently become single-mindedly focused on destroying Earth and its inhabitants. Johnny Rico (Casper Van Dien) and his new-recruit pals—including Denise Richards and Neil Patrick Harris—have enlisted to help the cause of saving humanity, but fighting The Bugs is not as simple as mindless wanton killing, while the film’s on-point propaganda commercials keep asking: Do you want to know *more*? “A vicious, all-barrels-firing piece of social satire. . . few American movies have been as extreme in their methods and at the same time as miscomprehended as Verhoeven’s. . . the most misunderstood and underappreciated sci-fi blockbuster of all time.”—Michael Atkinson, *Turner Classic Movies*.

Thursday, October 6, 7 pm

Brazil, UK, 1985

dir. Terry Gilliam (142 mins., Dystopian sci-fi, 35mm)

A shape-shifting film like few others, *Brazil* stands as Terry Gilliam’s foremost masterpiece and one of the finest political/dystopian satires ever committed to celluloid. Following the low-level bureaucrat Sam Lowry (an unforgettable Jonathan Pryce), who’s determined to keep his low-level position lest he be absorbed into the managerial class that has taken over society. Sam’s dream life (in the literal sense) consists of heroic fantasies where he romances his dream woman (Kim Greist), who turns out to be his neighbor in the Orwellian housing block. In the meantime, Sam meets Tuttle (Robert De Niro), a radical, fly-by-night air-conditioning repairman who is a government target since his business consists of actually improving the lives of the populace. With *Brazil*, Gilliam created a wholly singular world, and a “ferociously creative black comedy. . . filled with wild tonal contrasts, swarming details, and unfettered visual invention—every shot carries a charge of surprise and delight.”—Dave Kehr, *The Chicago Reader*.

Thursday, October 13, 7 pm

In the Loop, US, 2009

dir. Armando Iannucci (106 mins., Dark comedy, 35mm)

Before his brilliant HBO series *Veep* took US cablewaves by storm, writer/director Armando Iannucci created the British sitcom-of-sorts *The Thick of It*, which shrewdly skewered the UK political machine. *In the Loop*—a feature-length spin-off dealing with simultaneous UK/US invasions of Iraq—features many of *Thick*’s main characters, including brilliant turns by Tom Hollander (*Gosford Park*) as a milquetoast bureaucrat and Peter Capaldi (*Doctor Who*) as the foul-mouthed Malcolm Tucker, a fitting Director of Communications, on opposite sides of the invasion debate. James Gandolfini plays a US general concerned about the lack of troops to successfully invade, while Steve Coogan pops up as only he can—memorably—as a disgruntled constituent. *In the Loop*, a huge box-office success on release and still relevant as ever, is “a sharply written, fast-talking, almost dementedly articulate satire

on modern statecraft. . . line by filthy line, scene by chaotic scene, by far the funniest big-screen satire in recent memory.”—A.O. Scott, *The New York Times*.

Sunday, October 16, 4:30 pm

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, US, 1964

dir. Stanley Kubrick (95 mins., Dark comedy, DCP)

A nuclear-age parable of unmatched film-historical importance and generalized hilarity, Kubrick’s vision of the day before doomsday remains frightening—and side-splitting—over fifty years after its original release. When über-patriotic General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) decides, of his own accord, to launch a nuclear attack against the Soviet Union without a war order, jittery British Colonel Mandrake (Peter Sellers) must try to stop him; simultaneously, Major “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) commands the aircraft with the warhead as the plane hurtles toward its destination; finally, in the “war room,” president Merkin Muffley (Sellers again) presides over the negotiations with the Soviets, fending off the xenophobic strategies of General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) and the very troubling theories of his “scientific” advisor Dr. Strangelove (Sellers #3). Perhaps Kubrick’s greatest and most lasting creation, *Dr. Strangelove* is at base a film about the dangers of unchecked machismo in the war room and on the battlefield, where there is no room for error. “Half a century after Stanley Kubrick unleashed his most perverse provocation (about a bombing run no one can stop), it’s amazing that we’re even here to see it. By a whopping margin, this is Kubrick’s most radical film and greatest dramatic gamble.”—Joshua Rothkopf, *Time Out New York*.

Sunday, October 30, 4:30 pm

Meet John Doe, US, 1941

dir. Frank Capra (122 mins., Drama, 35mm)

A film about an unexpected media sensation run amok on the American public, *Meet John Doe* stars Barbara Stanwyck as about-to-be-unemployed newspaper reporter Ann Mitchell, who, as a final act of defiance, pens a fake letter to the editor about a John Doe who will commit suicide on Christmas in protest of rampant social injustice and deepening income inequality. But when the public latches on to the letter, Ann is hired back to find the fictional John Doe; instead, she recruits bum-armed baseball pitcher Long John Willoughby (a perfectly-cast Gary Cooper) to fill in. But when the John Doe doctrine catches fire with the public even further, can Ann and Willoughby handle it gracefully, or will they be subsumed to the money machine pervading every corner of public-eye life? His final Hollywood film before enlisting in the military and producing the *Why We Fight* series, *Meet John Doe* is “pure Capra, run through with the tension between idealism and corruption, faith in the goodness of the common man and acknowledgment in the easy manipulation of people and processes by the rich and powerful for their own gain.”—Sean Axmaker, *The Parallax View*.

Sunday, November 6, 4 pm

A Face in the Crowd, US, 1957

dir. Elia Kazan (126 mins., Drama, 35mm)

A parable about the dangers of media sensationalism, the problems with “15-minute” fame culture, and unchecked greed, Kazan’s film came at the tail end of a string of masterpieces—among them *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront*, and *East of Eden*—and is a scathing indictment of the power of the media in American culture. From a script by long-time collaborator Budd Schulberg, *Face* follows the meteoric rise of folk singer Larry “Lonesome” Rhodes (Andy Griffith) as he moves from local drunkard to regional celebrity to national fame (with attendant political influence) due to his magnetic personality and “folk hero” persona. Behind the scenes, Lonesome is disparaging of his fans, writing them off as easily manipulated, unintelligent masses—a viewpoint which both shocks and disappoints Marcia Jeffries (Patricia Neal), a producer who sprang Lonesome from prison in the first place. A film that “speaks volumes about the media’s complicit involvement with corrupt governments owned by faceless corporations. . . *A Face in the Crowd* is, in fact, as fresh and relevant as tomorrow’s headlines.”—Thomas Beltzer, *Senses of Cinema*.

Monday, November 7, 6:30 pm

Modern Times, US, 1936

dir. Charlie Chaplin (87 mins., slapstick, 35mm)

Perhaps Chaplin’s foremost contribution to the preeminent art form of the 20th century and routinely voted amongst the greatest films ever made, *Modern Times* slyly moves through the various stages of mass labor, with Chaplin’s Little Tramp (now The Worker) as the repeated fall guy. Factory worker, repeat offender and prisoner, mechanic, accidental protester, nightclub waiter: he does it all. Meanwhile, other factory workers, protesters, and prisoners are depicted with a sensitive and humane edge. Along the way, The Worker meets the orphan Ellen (Paulette Goddard), perpetually in trouble and on the run, trying to make ends meet. The duo, who protect and look out for each other, finally find peace in the precarity of their situation. Modern times, indeed. “A historical event. . . [*Modern Times*] criticizes not just industrial capitalism but work itself—as well as authority, the family, and the very nature of adult behavior. Look at the early [Chaplin] movies and then look around you. See if you can’t find Chaplin—our contemporary—out there on the street.”—J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*.