

PSC 403
FALL 2025



WAR AND POP CULTURE

INSTRUCTOR: DR. JESS MORRISSETTE

MEETINGS: TU/TH 9:30-10:45, SMITH HALL 435

OFFICE HOURS: M 2-5 AND BY APPOINTMENT

OFFICE LOCATION: SMITH HALL 706

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

An exploration of evolving depictions of political violence in film, television, graphic novels, video games, and popular music (3 credit hours).

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR

My name is Dr. Jess Morrissette; I'm a Professor in the Department of Political Science, and this is my eighteenth year here at Marshall University. I earned my MA from Virginia Tech and my Ph.D. from the University of Georgia, where I wrote my dissertation about interstate conflict driven by water scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa. My areas of specialization are International Relations and Comparative Politics, and I have published on topics ranging from resource-based conflict to Russian foreign policy to the rise of extremist movements. In recent years, my research has focused increasingly on exploring the politics of popular culture and, more specifically, video games.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this course is to encourage students to think critically about how war is depicted in the pop culture they consume on a daily basis. More specifically, my goal is to help students construct original arguments about how specific works of popular culture either reinforce or challenge predominant views of war in our society.

Course Student Learning Outcome	How we will practice this outcome	How we will assess this outcome
<i>Analyze works of pop culture with regards to how they depict war and other forms of political violence.</i>	Lectures, discussions, in-class activities	Midterm and final exams, critical analysis essay
<i>Critically appraise how depictions of war in pop culture and news media influence target audiences.</i>	Lectures, discussions, in-class activities	Midterm and final exams, critical analysis essay
<i>Construct an original argument about the political messages embedded in pop culture.</i>	Lectures, discussions, in-class activities	Midterm and final exams, critical analysis essay

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING POLICY

Your grade is based on your performance on two exams, a critical analysis essay, and participation. No extra credit will be awarded (no exceptions). Your course grade is determined as follows:

5%	Participation	A =	90-100%
35%	Midterm Exam	B =	80-89%
25%	Critical Analysis Essay	C =	70-79%
35%	Final Exam	D =	60-69%
		F ≤	59%

Course grades are nonnegotiable and won't be changed unless there is a documented mistake in either calculating or recording your grade. Please note that failure to complete any assignment will result in a failing grade for the semester, regardless of the missing assignment's point value.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* by Samet.
- *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* by Alford.
- *The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy* by Kempshall.
- *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence* by Stevens.
- *Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept* by Jaramillo.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance is required in this class, and students are expected to have read and be ready to discuss all assigned readings prior to class. Students will also be graded based on their class participation—engaging in discussion of the readings and current political events, asking questions, and so forth. Once again, attendance is clearly important; if you aren't in class, you can't participate.

The participation grade will be determined as follows: 5 points will be awarded to students who attend class consistently and make valuable contributions to class discussion on a regular basis; 4 points will be awarded to students who attend class consistently and contribute to discussions occasionally; 3 points will be awarded to students who attend class consistently, but seldom participate in class discussions. Attendance grades of 2, 1, and 0 points are reserved for those students who fail to attend class regularly and therefore cannot participate meaningfully in class discussions.

CLASSROOM CONDUCT

Please silence your cell phone prior to the start of class.

Classroom discussions will be conducted in an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect. Differences of opinion and the challenging of viewpoints—including those of the instructor—are part of the learning experience, but they should occur in a manner that opens up dialogue without being disrespectful, hostile, or threatening toward others.

Unwelcome conduct directed toward another person based upon that person's actual or perceived race, color, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, political affiliation, disability, age, or veteran status will not be permitted. Failure to adhere to these guidelines will result in dismissal from class.

This course supports and respects all gender expressions and identities. If you use a name different than what is listed on the class roster, please let me know and I will gladly refer to you by your correct name and pronouns.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Students are expected to adhere to the University's policies concerning academic honesty. Cheating or plagiarism on any exam, quiz, or assignment will not be tolerated and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent under University policies. **The penalty for cheating or plagiarism is a failing grade for the course.**

Cheating is defined by the University as "[a]ny action which if known to the instructor in the course of study would be prohibited." This includes, but is not limited to, the use of any unauthorized materials or assistance during an academic exercise.

The University defines plagiarism as "[s]ubmitting as one's own work or creation any material or an idea wholly or in part created by another." Furthermore, it is "the student's responsibility to clearly distinguish his/her own work from that created by others. This includes the proper use of quotation marks, paraphrase and the citation of the original source. Students are responsible for both intentional and unintentional acts of plagiarism."

GENERATIVE AI

Students are prohibited from using generative AI (e.g. ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, etc.) in any way on any assignment in this course. The use of generative AI in this course will be considered a violation of both Marshall's Academic Dishonesty Policy and the Student Code of Conduct. As noted above, **the penalty for academic dishonesty is a failing grade for the course.**

MAKE-UP EXAMS AND LATE ASSIGNMENTS

If you need to miss an exam, you should notify me in advance (if possible) and provide a University-approved excuse to be eligible for a make-up exam. It is your responsibility to schedule the make-up exam with me in a timely manner (ideally within one week).

There is a 24-hour grace period on all written assignments. Assignments submitted within 24 hours of the deadline will not receive a late penalty. This grace period allows flexibility in case of minor delays or technical difficulties. After the 24-hour grace period, a late penalty of 10% per week will apply to all late submissions. The maximum penalty is 30%. Please note that **the final deadline for submitting any missing assignments is Friday, December 5.** After this date, no further submissions will be accepted.

To ensure your assignment is considered "submitted," you must upload a proper document file to Blackboard that is accessible to the instructor. Missing or corrupt files, as well as links to cloud-based services like OneDrive or Microsoft 365, will not be accepted and will be considered late until a valid file is uploaded. To avoid unnecessary penalties, double-check your file after uploading to confirm it is complete, functional, and visible in Blackboard.

EMAIL POLICY

Please check your Marshall email account regularly. Important announcements may be sent to your "@marshall.edu" email address during the semester.

HEALTH AND SAFETY INFORMATION

All members of the Marshall University community are expected to always observe health and safety protocols. This includes general health and safety protocols as well as specific protocols that might emerge in response to community and campus health conditions.

CAMPUS CARRY POLICY

University Policy, UPGA-12 (Campus Carry Policy) derives its authority from West Virginia State law, including the Campus Self-defense Act (W. Va. Code § 18B-4-5b). It pertains to the exercise of Concealed Carry on Marshall University's campus, except in designated areas, by individuals with a valid permit to Conceal Carry.

Individuals who choose to Conceal Carry are responsible for knowing and understanding all applicable federal, state, and local laws and Marshall University Board of Governors Rules, University Policies, and Administrative Procedures. University Policy, UPGA-12 applies to areas of campus and buildings that are directly under the possession or control of Marshall University.

Concealed Handguns are not observable to others and must be holstered and concealed on the body of the permit holder or in a personal carrier, such as a backpack, purse, or other bag that remains under the exclusive and uninterrupted control of the permit holder. This includes wearing the personal carrier with a strap, carrying or holding the personal carrier, or setting the personal carrier next to or within your immediate reach at all times. If your participation in class activities impedes your ability to maintain constant control of your Handgun, please make alternate arrangements prior to coming to class.

OTHER UNIVERSITY POLICIES

By enrolling in this course, you agree to the following University Policies. Please read the full text of each policy by going to <https://www.marshall.edu/academic-affairs/policies/>.

- Academic Dishonesty Policy
- Academic Dismissal Policy
- Academic Forgiveness Policy
- Academic Probation and Suspension Policy
- Affirmative Action Policy
- Pre-Finals Week Policy
- D/F Repeat Rule
- Excused Absence Policy for Undergraduates
- Inclement Weather Policy
- Sexual Harassment Policy- Title IX prohibits the harassment of students based on sex, which includes pregnancy, childbirth, and related conditions. This includes that students will not be penalized for taking medically necessary leave related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related conditions. Marshall's Title IX Office may be contacted at TitleIX@marshall.edu.

- Students with Disabilities (Policies and Procedures)
- University Computing Services Acceptable Use Policy

ASSIGNMENTS

- **Exams:** You will complete take-home midterm and final exams this semester. I will distribute questions and additional details about these exams at least one week prior to their due dates.
- **Critical Analysis Essay:** Students will choose any work of popular culture that portrays war—a film, television show, video game, novel, comic, song, or other media—and write a paper (approximately **6–8 pages long**) analyzing its depiction. Consider not only what message the work sends about war, but also how it communicates that message through its narrative, visuals, sound, character arcs, and thematic choices. You may wish to think about tone (heroic, tragic, satirical, etc.), historical accuracy or inaccuracy, and whether the portrayal reinforces or challenges cultural attitudes toward war. Support all claims with specific, detailed examples from the work under consideration, such as scenes, dialogue, characters, imagery, or gameplay elements.

I will grade the papers based on overall quality of analysis, application of course concepts, and writing style.

- Please consider the following guidelines while completing your writing assignments:
 - You will submit your paper electronically via MUOnline.
 - Always cite your sources! You are welcome to use any widely accepted citation style (e.g. MLA, APA, APSA, Chicago). Be sure to make it clear where you found any “outside” information in your essay. This includes not only citing direct quotations, **but also any paraphrased material or statistics**. As a rule of thumb, any information those you decide to include in the paper and didn’t know before you began working on the project merits a citation. Also, include a “works cited” page at the end of your essays and exams. Failure to properly cite your sources constitutes **PLAGIARISM**.
 - Proofread your essays! Most grammatical and typographical errors can be easily caught with a simple read-through before a paper is submitted.
 - Papers should conform to the suggested lengths provided above (title pages and works cited pages do not count toward the suggested length). Papers should be double-spaced with 1” margins and typed using the standard 12-point Times/Times New Roman font (or the Macintosh equivalent). **Please include page numbers** in the upper right-hand corner of your pages.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week of August 19: What Do We Study When We Study War?

- Levy and Thompson, "Introduction to the Study of War" (online)

Week of August 26: Studying Popular Culture

- Weinstock, "What is Popular Culture?" (online)

Week of September 2: War Is Hell

- Screening: *All Quiet on the Western Front*
- *Looking for the Good War*, Introduction and Chapters 1-3

Week of September 9: What Is the "Good War"?

- *Looking for the Good War*, Chapters 4-5 and Epilogue
- Recommended viewing: *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)

Week of September 16: Nuclear Paranoia, Satire, and the Cold War

- Screening: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*
- Maland, "*Dr. Strangelove*: Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus" (online)

Week of September 23: Pop Culture During the Cold War

- Dodds, "Screening Geopolitics: James Bond and the Early Cold War Films" (online)
- Sandbrook, "How Pop Culture Helped Win the Cold War" (online)
- Recommended viewing: *From Russia with Love* (1963)

Week of September 30: Militarism in American Popular Culture

- *Reel Power*, Chapters 1-4
- Recommended viewing: *Top Gun* (1986)

MIDTERM EXAM
Due Monday, October 6

Week of October 7: The Military-Entertainment Complex

- *Reel Power*, Chapters 5-9
- Recommended viewing: *Black Hawk Down* (2001)
- No class on Thursday!

Week of October 14: War in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

- Screening: *Star Wars* (1977)
- *History and Politics of Star Wars*, Introduction and Chapters 1-2

Week of October 21: Fantasy, Science Fiction, and War

- *History and Politics of Star Wars*, Chapters 3-5
- Noriega, "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare" (online)
- Recommended viewing: *Godzilla* (1954)

Week of October 28: Superheroes and War

- *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, Chapters 1-4
- Recommended viewing: *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)

CRITICAL ANALYSIS ESSAY DUE
Due Friday, October 31

Week of November 4: The Semiology of Captain America

- *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, Chapters 5-9
- Recommended viewing: *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014)

Week of November 11: The Media and War

- *Ugly War, Pretty Picture*, Introduction and Chapters 1-3
- Recommended viewing: *Control Room* (2004)

Week of November 18: How the News Media “Sells War”

- *Ugly War, Pretty Picture*, Chapters 4-6 and Conclusion
- Recommended viewing: *Wag the Dog* (1997)

Week of November 25: Thanksgiving Break!

Week of December 2: Video Games and War

- Mirrlees, “*Medal of Honor: Militarism*” (online)
- Huntemann, “*Playing with Fear: Catharsis and Resistance in Military Video Games*” (online)
- Nieborg, “*Training Recruits and Conditioning Youth: Soft Power of Military Games*” (online)
- Recommended game: *This War of Mine* (2014)

FINAL EXAM
Due Friday, December 5

Please note that all assignments are tentative. Readings, papers, and exams may be removed, added, or moved to a different day based on our progress in the semester. If there are any changes to the syllabus, the version currently posted on Blackboard is the “official” version.