

English 693S—U.S. Film in Black and White

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| Gwen Bergner | * | Fall 2012 | * | Wed. 4:00-6:50 |
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| Office Hours: T, Th 11:30-1:00, and by appt. | | | | 304.293.9705 |

Course Description

The origins of the film industry are integrally bound up with the history of race in America. Four movies about race form the backbone of American film history: Uncle Tom's Cabin (1903), The Birth of a Nation (1915), The Jazz Singer (1927), and Gone With the Wind (1939). These four films stand out for their box office success, ideological significance, formal innovation, and shifts in the cinematic mode of production. They also extend the tropes of minstrel performance and consolidate American nationhood against them. Hollywood thus serves as an important mechanism in the making of race and the making of Americans. But just as important, race has worked as a pivotal mechanism in the making of Hollywood.

This course will examine the representation of race, limited to whiteness and blackness, in American film in the 20th century. Beginning with the technically innovative and ideologically notorious Birth of a Nation and ending with representations of "inner city" Los Angeles from the 90s, we will examine the politics of race involved in film representation, performance, production, and consumption. In addition to considering the mutually informing relationship between film history and American history, we will examine how race plays in a range of film genres, including problem pictures, buddy pictures, melodrama, and blaxploitation. To some extent, we will consider the politics and economics of mainstream and independent filmmaking and of film viewership. The course introduces students to the basics of film theory, analysis, and history, as well as to the history of minstrelsy and theories of race and gender performativity.

Films *You are responsible for watching all films on your own before class.**

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| <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915) | dir. D.W. Griffith |
| <i>Within Our Gates</i> (1919) | dir. Oscar Micheaux |
| <i>The Jazz Singer</i> (1927) | dir. Alan Crosland |
| <i>Borderline</i> (1930) | dir. Kenneth MacPherson |
| <i>The Emperor Jones</i> (1933) | dir. Dudley Murphy |
| <i>Home of the Brave</i> (1949) | dir. Mark Robson |
| <i>Imitation of Life</i> (1934, 1959) | dir. John Stahl, dir. Douglas Sirk |
| <i>Guess Who's Coming to Dinner</i> (1967) | dir. Stanley Kramer |
| <i>Shaft</i> (1971) | dir. Gordon Parks |
| <i>Lethal Weapon</i> (1987) | dir. Richard Donner |
| <i>Do the Right Thing</i> (1989) | dir. Spike Lee |
| <i>Paris is Burning</i> (1990) | dir. Jennie Livingston |
| <i>Boyz n the Hood</i> (1991) | dir. John Singleton |
| <i>Daughters of the Dust</i> (1992) | dir. Julie Dash |
| <i>Menace II Society</i> (1993) | dir. Albert and Allen Hughes |

* Films are available for streaming through eReserves: <https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu/>

Textbook: Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, 8th ed.

Secondary Texts: Available through eReserves. *Please bring them to class in hard or e-copy.*

Course Work

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| Discussion questions/paragraphs (9@ 2pt/ea. + 2 free pts.) | 20 points | 20% |
| Short Critical Paper (4-5 pp) | 20 points | 20% |
| Point Person/Discussion Facilitator | 10 points | 10% |
| Seminar Paper Prospectus (2-3 pp) and Annotated Bibliography | 10 points | 10% |
| Conference Length Paper (8-10 pp, plus notes & works cited) | 40 points | 40% |
| Total | 100 points | 100% |

Discussion Questions/Paragraphs: Over the course of the semester (Weeks 2-6 and 8-14), you will complete nine DQ/P assignments. You get to choose which weeks you want to do them. A DQ/P consists of either two questions to prompt discussion of the week's viewing and reading or one full paragraph of analysis of the viewing and reading. You get full credit (two percentage points) for completing each DQ/P (they aren't graded). You get two free points.

Short Critical Paper: You will sign up to write a 4-5 pp. critical paper related to the viewing/reading for a particular week. You will circulate your paper by email to the class by Tuesday, 4 pm, of the same week. This paper should respond critically to at least one of the assigned readings and films for that week. Although this paper is, in a sense, a response paper, it should follow the conventions of academic writing, including those of quotation and citation. For the week of your paper, you'll be the point-person for class discussion.

Conference Paper: You will write a conference-length paper (8-10 pp) on a text of visual culture (film, television, video, visual art) related to questions of race. You can tailor your topic to your personal research interests; you are not required to write on a film from the syllabus, and you can consider "race" more broadly than the black/white dynamic that is the focus of this class. To write this paper, you will need to become familiar with the scholarship on and history of your topic, develop an argument that engages with current debates on the topic, and use both primary and secondary sources to support and enrich your argument.

Conference Paper Prospectus: To help you define your conference paper topic and plan your research, you will turn in a paper prospectus (1-2 pp) that describes your provisional thesis, defines your major terms of analysis, outlines your critical approach, situates your argument within a context of critical discussion, and identifies your key sources.

Annotated Bibliography: To help you organize your research and argument for the conference-length paper, you will prepare a short annotated bibliography of 10-12 sources on your paper topic. Sources should be relevant and appropriate to your topic and should reflect a range of types (electronic and non-electronic; books, chapters, and journal articles; criticism and theory). Brief annotations should summarize the focus, approach, and arguments of each source.

Participation: Graduate students are expected to be prepared for class and to participate in discussion; attendance is required. You are expected to engage in a meaningful way in class discussion with your classmates' short papers that will be circulated by email. Complete all assignments on time, attend class, and participate regularly for a passing grade.

Guidelines: Separate guidelines will be provided for all graded components of course work.

Syllabus (subject to change, as necessary)

- Week 1—Aug. 22** Introduction—Origins in Minstrelsy
 Marlon Riggs, dir., *Ethnic Notions* (documentary, 58 min., watch in class)
 Eric Lott, “Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture,” **Love and Theft** (15-37).
- Week 2—Aug. 29** *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), dir. D.W. Griffith (187 min.)
 Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation,” *Representations* 9 (1985): 150-195.
 Josh Glick, “Mixed Messages: D.W. Griffith and the Black Press, 1916-1931,” *Film History* 23 (2011): 174-195.
 Timothy Corrigan, Ch.2 (18-35).
- Week 3—Sept. 5** *Within Our Gates* (1920), dir. Oscar Micheaux (79 min.)
 Jesse Algeron Rhines, “The Silent Era,” *Black Film/White Money* (14-27).
 Jacqueline Stewart, “‘We Were Never Immigrants’: Oscar Micheaux and the Reconstruction of Black American Identity,” *Migrating to the Movies* (219-244).
 Michele Wallace, “Oscar Micheaux’s Within Our Gates: The Possibilities for Alternative Visions,” in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle*, ed. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (53-66).
 Jane Gaines, “Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (49-70).
 Dan Flory, “Race, Rationality, and Melodrama: Aesthetic Response and the Case of Oscar Micheaux,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63.4 (2005): 327-338.
- Week 4—Sept. 12** *The Jazz Singer* (1927), dir. Alan Crosland (88 min.)
 Michael Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 417-453.
 Matthew Frye Jacobson, “Becoming Caucasian, 1924-1965,” *Whiteness of a Different Color* (91-135).
 Timothy Corrigan, Ch. 3 (36-78).
- Week 5—Sept. 19** *Borderline* (1930), dir. Kenneth MacPherson (63 min.)
 Susan McCabe, “Borderline Modernism: Paul Robeson and the Femme Fatale,” *Callaloo* 25.2 (2002): 639-653.
 Jean Walton, “White Neurotics, Black Primitives, and the Queer Matrix of Borderline,” in *Out Takes*, ed. Ellis Hanson (243-270).
 Mary Ann Doane, “Deadly Women, Epistemology, and Film Theory,” *Femmes Fatales* (1-14).

- Week 6—Sept. 26** *The Emperor Jones* (1933), dir. Dudley Murphy (76 min.)
 Carme Manuel, “A Ghost in the Expressionist Jungle of O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones,” *African American Review* 39.1-2, 2005: 67-85.
 Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism* (10-22, 185-228)
- Week 7—Oct. 3** *Imitation of Life* (1934), dir. John Stahl (111 min.)
 Timothy Corrigan, Ch. 4 (83-96).
 No class meeting; discuss on Oct. 10
- Week 8—Oct. 10** *Imitation of Life* (1959), dir. Douglas Sirk (125 min.)
 Lauren Berlant, “National Brands, National Body: Imitation of Life,” in *Comparative American Identities*, ed. Hortense Spillers (110-140).
- Week 9—Oct. 17** *Home of the Brave* (1949), dir. Mark Robson (88 min.)
 Michele Wallace, “Race, Gender and Psychoanalysis in Forties Film: Lost Boundaries, Home of the Brave, and The Quiet One,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (257-271).
 Kaja Silverman, “Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity,” *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (15-93).
- Week 10—Oct. 24** *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), dir. Stanley Kramer (108 min.)
Shaft (1971), dir. Gordon Parks (100 min.)
 Susan Courtney, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner with Eldridge Cleaver and the Supreme Court, or Reforming Popular Racial Memory with Hepburn and Tracy,” in *The Persistence of Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (187-217).
 Matthew Henry, “He Is a “Bad Mother*\$%@!#”: Shaft and Contemporary Black Masculinity,” *African American Review* 38.1 (2004): (119-126).
- Week 11—Oct. 31** *Lethal Weapon* (1987), dir. Richard Donner (110 min.)
 Ed Guerrero, “The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood’s Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara, 237-246.
 Cynthia Fuchs, “The Buddy Politic,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, 194-210.
 Timothy Corrigan, Ch.6 (126-144).
- Week 12—Nov. 7** *Do the Right Thing* (1989), dir. Spike Lee (120 min.)
 Andrew Ross, “Ballots, Bullets, or Batmen: Can Cultural Studies Do the Right Thing?,” *Screen* 31.1 (1990): 26-44.
 James McKelly, “The Double Truth, Ruth: Do the Right Thing and the Culture of Ambiguity,” *African American Review* 32.2 (1998): 58-76.

- Week 13—Nov. 14** *Paris is Burning* (1990), dir. Jennie Livingston (71 min.)
Daughters of the Dust (1992), dir. Julie Dash (112 min.)
 Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," *Bodies That Matter* (121-140).
 Angela Gourdine, "Fashioning the Body [as] Politic in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*," *African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 499-511.
- Week 14—Nov. 21** *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), dir. John Singleton (112 min.)
Menace II Society (1993), dir. Albert and Allen Hughes (97 min.)
 Paula Massood, "Mapping the Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society*," *Cinema Journal* 35.2, 1996: 85-97.
 Andrew Light, "Boyz in the Woods: Urban Wilderness in American Cinema," in *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Space*, ed. Michael Bennett and David Teague, 137-156.
 Robyn Wiegman, "Feminism, 'The Boyz,' and Other Matters Regarding the Male," in *Screening the Male*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, 173-193.

Thanksgiving

- Week 15—Dec. 4** Due: Conference Paper Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography
 In class: Workshop
- Thur., Dec. 5 and Fri., Dec. 6**—Optional Paper Conferences (Time TBA)
- Wed., Dec. 11, 4:00 p.m.**—**Due:** Conference-Length Paper (in my mailbox in Colson Hall)