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

Gwen Bergner  *  Fall 2012  *  Wed. 4:00-6:50
239 Colson
Office Hours: T, Th 11:30-1:00, and by appt.
gbergner@wvu.edu
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.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Birth of a Nation (1915)</td>
<td>dir. D.W. Griffith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Our Gates (1919)</td>
<td>dir. Oscar Micheaux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jazz Singer (1927)</td>
<td>dir. Alan Crosland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline (1930)</td>
<td>dir. Kenneth MacPherson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emperor Jones (1933)</td>
<td>dir. Dudley Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home of the Brave (1949)</td>
<td>dir. Mark Robson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967)</td>
<td>dir. Stanley Kramer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaft (1971)</td>
<td>dir. Gordon Parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the Right Thing (1989)</td>
<td>dir. Spike Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris is Burning (1990)</td>
<td>dir. Jennie Livingston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyz N the Hood (1991)</td>
<td>dir. John Singleton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menace II Society (1993)</td>
<td>dir. Albert and Allen Hughes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 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
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)

Week 2—Aug. 29
The Birth of a Nation (1915), dir. D.W. Griffith (187 min.)
Timothy Corrigan, Ch.2 (18-35).

Week 3—Sept. 5
Within Our Gates (1920), dir. Oscar Micheaux (79 min.)
Jacqueline Stewart, “‘We Were Never Immigrants’: Oscar Micheaux and the Reconstruction of Black American Identity,” Migrating to the Movies (219-244).

Week 4—Sept. 12
The Jazz Singer (1927), dir. Alan Crosland (88 min.)
Timothy Corrigan, Ch. 3 (36-78).

Week 5—Sept. 19
Borderline (1930), dir. Kenneth MacPherson (63 min.)
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.)
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.)

Week 9—Oct. 17  *Home of the Brave* (1949), dir. Mark Robson  (88 min.)
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.)

Timothy Corrigan, Ch.6 (126-144).

Week 12—Nov. 7  *Do the Right Thing* (1989), dir. Spike Lee  (120 min.)
Week 13—Nov. 14  *Paris is Burning* (1990), dir. Jennie Livingston (71 min.)
*Daughters of the Dust* (1992), dir. Julie Dash (112 min.)

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.)

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)