

UST 251 – THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMAGE IN FILM

Instructor : Norman Krumholz  
Meeting Time : Tue. – Thurs. 1:00 p.m. – 2: 50 p.m.  
  
Meeting Room : UR 112  
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Office Hours : By appointment

Course Description

From the enslavement of Africans beginning in the 1600s, racism has been one of America’s most enduring and intractable problems. Race relations continue to affect many areas of American life. In the last few years, the Rodney King trial and ensuing riot in Los Angeles, the reaction to the O.J. Simpson trial, and Louis Farrakhan’s “Million Man March” were examples of events that made news and were related to issues of race. The 2005 Katrina hurricane in New Orleans and rebuilding efforts also carried explicit racial issues to our TV screens.

Not as newsworthy, but also related to race were such matters as the popularity of The Bell Curve which argued that African Americans were intellectually inferior, probably genetically; the book was a best seller during much of 1995. The switch of political parties seems also to be race-related. Beginning with the Goldwater campaign in 1964, the Republican Party actively pursued a “southern strategy” and sought the support of white Southerners and discarded its legacy of positive action for civil rights for African Americans. Today, its support is quite polarized along racial lines and, as the results of the 2008 Presidential election make clear, the Republican Party routinely gets the votes of more than 65% of white Southerners.

How do we explain current statistics which show African Americans far below whites in median family income, measured IQ and life expectancy itself? Why is race such a continuing issue in American society? Is racism now mostly “over”? If not, how does it continue to impact our culture? Can the movies, among the most powerful shapers of American culture, have played a significant role in the nurturing of racism? These are some of the questions we will try to answer in this course.

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Course Goals

1. To provide an historic overview of race relations and racism as seen through the evolution of American cinema.
2. To examine traditional racial perceptions and stereotypes and study how they have changed over time.
3. To see how various films and videos reflect American social and moral thinking at different periods.
4. To explore the treatment of racial issue in current films and documentaries
5. To promote skills in writing and critical thinking

Course Methods

This course will consist of one film or videotape to be screened in each of the 15 weeks of the semester. Each screening will then be followed by a discussion of the issues raised in the film and the assigned supplementary readings. Artistic style will be analyzed. Outside experts with particular knowledge of an issue, may be invited to speak perhaps in a two-commentator format. For example, a black minister with extensive civil rights experience might be asked to comment on the “nadir” of race relations (1899-1920), or a politician might discuss the workings and inevitable compromises of urban politics and the emergence of such figures as President Barack Obama.

Course Requirements and Grading

Grades will be based on:

1. A typed set of screening reports on the first eight films from Birth of A Nation through Do the right thing which tells the instructor (and yourself) what you learned from each film or video. You should begin writing these reflective reports shortly after each film is completed so that the material will be fresh in your mind. A suggested format is attached to this syllabus (on page 7). These reports will be collected on Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup> and the set will be graded at 20 points max.
2. A mid-term test on Thursday, March 5 graded at 20 points max.
3. A term paper of approximately 10 pages (Due on May 7<sup>th</sup>).

The paper should describe and explain the transformation of the black images in Birth of A Nation with those in Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner. What economic, social and/or political events assisted the transformation? How was President Obama assisted by those

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events? Did any character(s) remain the same? You may use text, pictures, photographs or other media to create an interesting, informative study.

This term paper will be graded at 30 points max. It is due on Thursday, May 7th.

4. A final exam on Tuesday, May 12<sup>th</sup> at 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. based on all materials covered during the course and will be graded at 30 points max.

### Grading

Max Points:

A = 100 - 90 pts.

B = 89 - 80 pts.

C = 79 - 70 pts.

D = 69 - 60 pts.

F = below 60 pts.

### How to Pass The Course

1. Attend classes & participate in class discussions. Your participation is crucial to the success of the class. We must trust each other not to respond negatively to a classmate even when discussing emotionally charged issues.
2. Hand in your screening reports and term paper on time. Late papers and papers with excessive spelling errors will be downgraded.
3. Be prepared in some cases for the level of profanity and sexual suggestion familiar in “R” rated films.

### Course Materials

There are two textbooks for this course: Paula J. Massood. 2003. Black City Cinema; and Reframing Blackness by Ed Guerrero. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. In addition, students will find copies of supplementary readings on the web of the main Library’s Home Page. (<http://www.ulib.csuohio.edu>) These readings will amplify the basis for each class discussion, so keep up with the readings. The quality of the discussion will depend as much on the student’s preparation as on the professor’s.

### Attendance Policy

Students will be expected to attend all classes and keep up with all reading assignments. Students will be asked to sign an attendance sheet.

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University Policies

Refer to the undergraduate CSU Bulletin for procedures on course add/drop and withdrawal, grading, and incomplete procedures.

Special needs: Anyone anticipating needing special accommodations to take exams or complete assignments must identify themselves to the instructor by the end of the second week of classes. These include accommodations for physical handicaps, learning disabilities, and English as a second language.

UST 251 Topics and Screening Schedule – Spring 2009

- Week 1:           Topic: Setting the Stage.  
Film: “Birth of A Nation” (1915, D.W. Griffith, 125 minutes). The Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan, and Reconstruction from a Racist Perspective  
Read: “From Birth to Blaxploitation” in Framing Blackness by Ed Guerrero, (2004)  
Massood Introduction.
- Week 2:           Film: “Glory” (1989, Edward Zwick) The Civil War’s first all-black volunteer company. With Denzel Washington & Matthew Broderick; won three Oscars.  
Guerrero, Chapter 2 – “Slaves, Monsters & Others”
- Week 3:           Film: “Hallelujah” (1929) Directed by King Vidor. Set in the rural south where cotton is king.
- Week 4:                           Topic: Fighting Back  
Film: “Midnight Ramble” by Oscar Micheaux, and “Baadass Cinema,” A look at early black-made films and later black exploitation films of the 1970s.  
Read: Winokur, Mark. (1995.) “The Green Pastures and an Allegory of Accommodation” in Film and History, Vol. 25, No. 1-2, pp. 6-16.  
Massood Chapter 1  
Guerrero, Chapter 3 “The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation”

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- Week 5:       Topic: Urban Design & Architecture  
Film: Arcosante by Paolo Solari (30 min.) Home Economics by Jenny Cool, 2001.
- Read: H. Gans. (1967) The Levittowners, Chapter 1 “The Planners of Levittown”. David Brooks, “Patio Man and The Sprawl People”, Weekly Standard, 8/19/2002 pp. 28-29.  
Massood, Chapter 3
- Week 6:       Topic: Transportation.  
Film: Taken For A Ride (55 min) 1996 & Bus Riders Union (2001)  
Massood, Chapter 4  
Question: Given the message of the film,(cars replacing transit), are we better off? Is anyone worst off? Who and how?
- Week 7:       Topic: Housing Discrimination  
Film: Raisin In The Sun (Sidney Poitier stars in a script by Lorraine Hansberry.  
Read: Kenneth Kusmer. 1980. A Ghetto Takes Shape: Cleveland 1870-1930.  
Guerrero, Chapter 4 “Recuperation, Resistance, and Representation.”
- Week 8:       Topic: Urban Conflict.  
Film: Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989, 120 min. Depiction of Life and a long, hot day in the neighborhood.  
Read: Massood, Chapter 6, “Caricature Acting” New York Times, Nov. 27, 2005.  
Guerrero, Chapter 5 “Black Film in the 1990s”.
- Note: March 5th       Mid-Term Test**
- March 12<sup>th</sup>       Screening Reports Due**
- Note:               Spring Break March 15-21**
- Week 9:       Topic: New Orleans After Katrina, 2005.  
Film: Spike Lee: When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts  
Read: Massood, Epilogue  
Read: “So Poor, and so Black: Hurricane Katrina & the Issue of Race.” Camilla Stivers. 2008. Public Administration Review; and Ken

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Reardon, et. al. 2007. “Overcoming the Challenges of Post-Disaster Planning in New Orleans.”

- Week 10:      Topic: Black History  
                   Film: Black History: Lost Stolen or Strayed (narrated by Bill Cosby) 55 min. 16 mm. film  
                   Read: Special Focus: The Black Image in Film. Film and History Vol. 25, No 1-2, 1995.
- Week 11:      Topic: Black Males and Their Coming of Age  
                   Film: Boyz in the Hood (1991). John Singleton’s violent discourse on the nation’s racial predicament, Read: Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation” 2008. By Turner, M.; Popkin, S. & Rawling, L. The Urban Institute
- Week 12:      Topic: Urban politics.  
                   Film: City of Hope by John Sayles. 1991, Gritty Tale of Political Corruption and Racial Politics.  
                   Read: J. Wilson and G. Kelling. (1982) “Broken Windows” in The Atlantic Monthly, March. F. Siegel. (2001) “Mayors and Morality”. Partisan Review, Spring.
- Week 13:      Topic: Social Class & Lifestyles in the city in the 1960s  
                   Film: Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner? Stanley Kramer, 1967, 108 min. (Racial and class issues gently explored by Poitier, Hepburn and Tracy). Oscar winner for story and screenplay.
- Week 14:      Topic: Contemporary Urban Racism  
                   Film: Crash (2005). A tense and heartbreaking film about intolerance and the mutual abrasions of white, black, Latino, Asian citizens in the strange city of Los Angeles.
- Week 15:      Topic: The Myth of “Race”  
                   Film: Black Family History with Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. , Oprah Winfrey, Quincy Jones & Others.

**NOTE: May 7th Term Paper Due**

Cleveland State University  
College of Urban Affairs

Spring 2009  
Department of Urban Studies  
UST 251  
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Suggested SAMPLE SCREENING REPORT – Please type your Reviews

YOUR NAME \_\_\_\_\_

TITLE OF FILM \_\_\_\_\_

STUDIO/DIRECTOR \_\_\_\_\_

YEAR RELEASED \_\_\_\_\_

1. PLOT (Ideas that drove the film).
2. HISTORICAL SETTING
3. RACIAL ISSUES DISCUSSED
4. HOW WERE THESE ISSUES RESOLVED?
5. WAS THE STORY REALISTIC, OR MYTHIC?
6. WAS AN IDEOLOGY EXPRESSED?
7. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE FILM?

8. WHY DID YOU LIKE IT OR NOT?