From Mammies to Madea: Race and Representation in African American Film

SOC 230-403/AFRC 230-403
Spring 2013
Monday 2:00-4:50
Caster Building A19

Instructor: Maryann Erigha
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Office Hours: Wednesdays 2–4 PM

Course Description:
How have on-screen and behind-the-scenes representations of African Americans changed over time? Are some cinematic representations of blackness more authentic than others? What is a "black" film? This critical speaking seminar offers students the opportunity to improve their public speaking skills through multi-media individual and group presentations, class discussions, and debates that focus on African American film. We start by examining African Americans' roles and responsibilities throughout several periods of film, such as the silent film era and Blaxploitation. We then use this knowledge to discuss and critique past and contemporary films, roles, and representations. Topics include: blackface, fat suit comedies, African Americans and the Oscars, and black women filmmakers.

Course Objectives:
Speech plays a prominent role in this course. Part of learning about African American film involves reading texts and watching movies by and about African Americans. But to achieve a firm understanding of the history and key issues in which scholars and practitioners of African American film engage, you must participate in constant and active dialogue with others about these topics. This course will develop your skills as both a speaker and a listener. Students frequently speak and even more frequently listen to their peers when they speak. The goals of this course reflect learning about African American film using oral communication methods, such as presentations, debate, and discussion. The course objectives include:

1. Understanding the major periods of African American film and the on-screen and behind-the-scenes representations during each period.
2. Thinking critically about issues concerning African Americans in film.
3. Developing skills for communicating coherently and persuasively before an audience.
4. Getting accustomed to speaking publicly on a regular basis.
Course Requirements and Assignments:

Seminar Format

Critical Speaking Seminars utilize oral communication assignments as a primary method for learning and assessment. They have three key requirements:

• At least half of the course grade is based on two prepared oral presentations (one group and one individual). Delivery of presentation is not the only criteria for evaluation so novice speakers should not panic.
• Students will meet with an undergraduate speaking advisor outside of class at least twice—one rehearsal for each of the two required presentations.
• Students will be video-recorded and will watch the recording with the instructor.

You are expected to read all assignments and come to class prepared to engage in a discussion of the readings and films. Participation includes the completion of written and oral responses, debates, impromptu and prepared presentations, and various other exercises. These speaking exercises are intended to develop your critical speaking skills using a variety of formats. Regular attendance is necessary for discussion of the course material and the practice of oral communication skills. It will be nearly impossible to succeed in a seminar without excellent attendance. *Attendance for the two graded presentations is mandatory.*

CWiC Advisor

The CWiC speaking advisor is an undergraduate student trained to assist you with your oral presentation assignments. The advisor is not a TA and will not grade assignments. The advisor’s role is to assist you with presentations and not with course content. The advisor is assigned specifically to this course and you are not permitted to work with another CWiC advisor for help with presentations for this course. *Two advising sessions (outside of class) are required* – one for the group presentation and one for the individual presentation. You will meet with your speaking advisor before each presentation to rehearse. For the group presentation, all group members must arrange a time to meet together with the speaking advisor. The advisor communicates with the instructor often and will report if a student does not attend or is not prepared for an advising session. *The CWiC advisor will not meet with you within 48 hours of the due date,* so plan accordingly. Use the scheduler on the CWiC website to set up appointments. Failure to meet with the CWiC advisor will result in the lowering of your presentation grade.

Evaluation

Class participation 20% of grade
• Attendance
• Discussions, debates, informal speaking assignments

Oral presentations 60% of grade
• Individual presentation of at least 15 minutes
• Group presentation of at least 5 minutes speaking time per group member

Written paper 20% of grade
Policies

✔ Academic integrity:
Please note that the University of Pennsylvania has rules about academic integrity. Students are required to abide by this code.  
http://www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai_codeofacademicintegrity.html

✔ Use of Technology:
Laptops may be used in class for note-taking and referring to articles. However if other recreational uses of laptops interfere with the environment of the critical speaking seminar, which requires active participation and listening, the instructor may decide not to allow use of laptops in the classroom.

✔ Eating:
Eating is permitted during the seminar except for on the two days allocated to student presentations.

Additional Resources

✔ Weingarten Learning Resource Center (statement on disabilities)
www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc

✔ Writing Center
http://writing.upenn.edu/critical/writing_center/

✔ Communication Within the Curriculum (CWiC)
http://www.sas.upenn.edu/cwic

✔ Internet Movie Database
www.imdb.com

✔ Box Office Mojo
www.boxofficemojo.com

✔ Rotten Tomatoes
www.rottentomatoes.com

Readings and Films:

All assigned readings will be provided on Blackboard: 
http://www.library.upenn.edu/courseware.

Films are available on Netflix - www.netflix.com, VanPelt Library Reserve, and/or YouTube www.youtube.com. It is recommended that you purchase a Netflix subscription for online streaming (approx. $7.98/month with the first month free) for the duration of the semester to facilitate the screening of films.
Course Schedule:
The schedule is tentative. I will consult with you over the course of the semester in case we need to rearrange/replace readings or films.

PART ONE: AN OVERVIEW OF BLACK CINEMA

1.14 Introduction

1.21 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY – No class

1.28 Silent Film Era
Film: *Within Our Gates* (Oscar Micheaux, 1920)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1E0NrcnwAE
Donald Bogle – “Black Beginnings: From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Birth of A Nation”
Anna Siomopoulos – “The Birth of a Black Cinema: Race, Reception, and Oscar Micheaux’s Within Our Gates”
Mark Reid – “Early African American Film Companies”

*In class: Formal Introductions*

2.4 “Race Movies” and Problem Pictures
Film: *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954)
Ryan Jay Friedman – “Black Became the Fad: White High Brow Culture and Negro Films”
Donald Simpson – “Black Images in Film – The 1940s to the Early 1960s”

*In class: Formal Introductions*

2.11 Blaxploitation and Black Independents
Film: *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974)
Mark Reid – “Black Action Film”
Yvonne Sims – “Reshaping African American Femininity: Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, and Action Heroine”
Symposium on Gordon Parks, Sr.
Mark Reid – *Black Lenses, Black Voices* (select pages)
Yvonne Sims – “Here Comes the Queen” (recommended)

*In class: Formal Introductions*
2.18 **New Black Independents**  
*Film: Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (Leslie Harris, 1992)  
Jacquie Jones – “The New Ghetto Aesthetic”  
Paula J. Massood – “Street Girls With No Future? Black Women Coming of Age in the City”  
S. Craig Watkins – “Black Cinema and the Changing Landscape of Industrial Image Making” (recommended)

*In class: Present on a director*

2.25 **Group Presentations**

*Friday, February 22 – Last day to meet with your speaking advisor for the group presentation*

3.4 **SPRING BREAK – No class**

3.11 **Contemporary Black Cinema**  
*Film: Love & Basketball* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000)  
Ed Guerrero – “Black Film in the 1990s”  
David J. Leonard – “Is This Really African American Cinema? Black Middle-Class Dramas and Hollywood”  
E. Franklin Frazier – *Black Bourgeoisie* (select chapter/s)

*In class: Present on a director*

PART TWO: ISSUES IN BLACK CINEMA

3.18 **Critical Discussion About Film**  
*Film: School Daze* (Spike Lee, 1988) or *Do The Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)  
S. Craig Watkins – “Producing the Spike Lee Joint”  
Reviews of *School Daze* or *Do The Right Thing*

*In class: Film review*

3.25 **Fat Suit Comedies: Funny or Offensive?**  
*Film: Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Darren Grant, 2005)  
Mia Mask – “Who’s Behind That Fat Suit? Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dressing”  
Hilton Als – “Mama’s Gun: The World of Tyler Perry”

*In class: Debate*
4.1 What Is A Black Film?
Film: Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975 (Göran Olsson, 2011)
Mark Reid – Introduction to Redefining Black Film.
Thomas Cripps – “Definitions” in Black Film As Genre
David Leonard – “Defining African American Cinema”
Symposium – The Battle over Malcolm X

In class: Debate

4.8 African Americans and the Oscars
Film: The Help (Tate Taylor, 2011)
Nancy Wang Yuen – “Playing Ghetto: Black Actors, Stereotypes, and Authenticity”
Pamela Lambert – “Hollywood Blackout”
Samantha Miller – “Hollywood Blackout, the Sequel”
Symposium on The Black Best Friend

In class: Script reading

PART THREE: THE FUTURE OF BLACK CINEMA

4.15 Rethinking Distribution and Exhibition
Marcia Wade Talbert – “ACTION!”
Jesse Rhines – “Black Film/Black Future”

In class: Expert opinion

Friday, April 19 – Last day to meet with your speaking advisor for the individual presentation

4.22 Individual Presentations

5.8 Due date for written paper