

**362.200.11 Race and Power in American Cinema**  
**Summer 2017, Day and Time *tbd***  
**Instructor: Dr. Adam Culver [culverad@gmail.com](mailto:culverad@gmail.com)**  
**Office Hours: by appointment**



### **Course Description**

This course will examine changing norms of racial representation in American cinema from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Casablanca* (1942) to *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). We will analyze specific representations of racial difference in film and will consider those images in relation to the operations of the film industry and to specific moments in US history when “race relations,” international politics, economic factors, legal policy, and social rights movements informed cinematic representations of race. Although the course is organized according to a loose chronology beginning with silent film and ending with recent black-directed films, it is not intended to plot out a complete or linear history of race in American cinema. Instead, we will focus on exploring how representations of racial difference function as allegories for different visions of American social and political life. This means that we will be analyzing film as a social practice that creates meanings for its makers and audience, meanings that inform both everyday practices and deliberations over many of the most important issues and debates in American society. Through this analysis we will also have occasion to examine race’s complex and ever-shifting relationship to class, gender, and sexuality in both cinema and American politics more generally. The goal is to gain a better appreciation for how the stories films tell us shape our personal and collective identities and inform our understanding of political life.

### **Requirements**

*Participation* [%30 of final grade]

This course is structured as a seminar, with each meeting devoted to examining a particular film and a set of related readings. We will begin each class with a brief lecture and then will view the film, followed by a discussion. Attendance is essential and constitutes a significant portion of the grade for this class. Participation is more than being present, it includes active and thoughtful discussion in class. This means that students must come to class having carefully read the assigned readings. I also highly recommend that students take notes while watching the films so that they are prepared to make meaningful contributions to class discussion. One absence is allowed (though discouraged because the summer term goes by so quickly). Each additional absence will lower your class participation grade by one letter grade. You will be required to turn in make-up work for any absence.

### *Weekly Assignments* [%30]

Over the course of the term students will be required to write brief (1 page) critical response papers for each film marked with an asterisks (\*) in the syllabus. Rather than give a summary of the film, these critical responses should provide an interpretation of a particular scene with reference to how the film represents race in general, discuss the recurrence and use of a particular trope or theme throughout the film, or relate the film to our course readings. These response papers will be due at the start of the next class following the screening.

### *Final Paper and Presentation* [%40]

An 8-10 page paper that you will present to the seminar on the final day of class. The final paper will engage a key course theme or issue through a critical analysis of one or more films. Papers may be on a topic of your choosing, but every student must meet with the instructor to discuss his or her topic during Week 4 of the term. Your final paper may build upon work you have begun with your weekly critical response papers.

### **Required Texts**

Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

All other readings will be made available through the library's electronic reserve service.

Films to be watched outside of class will be made available on reserve at the library

### **Course Outline**

#### ***Week One – Reading Race and Film***

**1:** Course Introduction

*In-class viewing:*

*The Birth of A Nation* (1915) (selections)

*Gone With the Wind* (1939)(selections)

**2:** *Readings:*

Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*. 9-40

Gooding-Williams, Robert. "Look, a Negro!" in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*. Ed. Robert Gooding-Williams. New York: Routledge, 1993 157-177.

Eco, Umberto, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage." in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*. Trans. William Weaver. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986. 197-212.

*In-class Viewing:* Casablanca\* (1942)

## ***Week Two – White Desire, White Normativity, and Black Experience***

3:

*View before class:*

*In the Heat of the Night*\* (1967) [response paper due at start of class #4]

*Readings:*

Gooding-Williams, Robert. "Black Cupid, White Desires." in *Look, a Negro! Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture, and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 17-33.

Sanders, Charles L. "Sidney Poitier: Man behind the Superman," in *Ebony* (Chicago), April 1968.

Cripps, Thomas. "The Death of Rastus: Negroes in American Films since 1945," *Phylon* 28.3 (1967): 267-275

*In-class viewing:*

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

4:

*Readings:*

Baldwin, James. *The Devil Finds Work*. 505-521

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" *Ebony* 23 (January 1968): 56-62.

Mason, Clifford. "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" *New York Times*, September 10, 1967.

Neal, Larry. "Beware of the Tar Baby." *New York Times*, August 3, 1969.

5:

*Readings:*

Baldwin, James. *The Devil Finds Work*. 530-536

Fanon, Frantz. "The Lived Experience of the Black Man." in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 1952. 89-119.

Lott, Eric. "White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness." in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. 474-495.

*In-class viewing:*

Watermelon Man\* (1970)

**Week Three -- Blaxploitation and the Politics of Representation**

- 6:**            *View before class:*  
*Cotton Comes to Harlem\** (1970) [response paper due at the start of class #7]
- Readings:*  
Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* 231-234
- Guerrero, *Framing Blackness* 69-82
- Hall, Stuart. "What Is the 'Back' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*. Ed. Valerie Smith. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 123-135.
- Bobo, Jacqueline. "The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audiences." in *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. 65-74
- Canby, Vincent, Review of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *New York Times*, June 11, 1970.
- In-class viewing:*  
*Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (1971) (selections)
- 7:**            *Readings*  
Guerrero, *Framing Blackness* 82-111
- Riley, Clayton. "Shaft Can Do Everything—I Can Do Nothing." *New York Times*, August 13, 1972
- Broun, Hale. "Is It Better to Be Shaft than Uncle Tom?" *New York Times*, August 26, 1973, an interview with Donald Bogle and Rosalind Cash
- In-class viewing:*  
*Superfly* (1971) (selections)
- 8:**            *Readings:*  
Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pg 113-135
- Jacque Jones, "The Construction of Black Sexuality: Towards Normalizing the Black Cinematic Experience." in *Black American Cinema*. Ed. Manthia Diawara. New York: Routledge, 1993. 247-256
- In-class viewing:*  
*48 Hrs\** (1982)

**Week 4 – Racism and “Social Death”**

**9:**

*Readings:*

Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pg 41-68

Butler, Octavia. “Bloodchild.” in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005. 1-32

*In-class viewing:*

*The Brother From Another Planet* (1984)

**10:**

*Readings:*

Frank B. Wilderson, “Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination—Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*,” *Black Camera* 7.1 (Fall 2015): 134-149

*In-class viewing:*

*12 Years a Slave\** (2013)

**11:**

*Readings:*

Frank B. Wilderson. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. selections *tbd*

**Week 5 – Race, Masculinity, and the “Inner City”**

**12:**

*Readings:*

Sophocles, “Antigone.” *The Oedipus Trilogy*

*In-class viewing:*

*Do the Right Thing\** (1989)

**13:**

*Readings:*

Guerrero, *Framing Blackness* 137-208

*In-class viewing:*

*Boyz n the Hood* (1991)

**14:**

***Student Presentations***