Race and the Film Musical

**Course Objectives:** The musical is a cinematic genre that has proved surprisingly resilient and rich in social and historical significance. As one of the defining genres of the Hollywood studio era, it provides an excellent opportunity to examine the ways popular entertainment—especially the Hollywood film—speaks to large audiences while adapting itself to changing historical conditions. In this course, we will study how the musical provides both moments of utopian pleasure depicted through music and dance, as well as glimpses of more complex social realities.

The musical’s ties to gay audiences and camp sensibilities have long been known. However, its connection with race has not been as widely acknowledged despite the fact that of all Hollywood genres, none so consistently raises the issue of race both in its thematic content and in its artistic conventions. Built around song and dance, the musical provides compelling evidence of American entertainment’s debt to African-American and other ethnic and racial traditions.

We will begin by studying several theoretical approaches to entertainment, race and representation, and then move into a more detailed study of the Hollywood musical. As we develop this theoretical framework, we will build an historical understanding of the evolution of the film musical by viewing important films from the early sound era to the present. The syllabus may be revised, depending on class interest and background.

**Attendance, late work and other policies:** If you are absent from class, you will need to make your own arrangements for locating and watching the material you have missed. *Three absences will affect your grade, without notice. Four absences will result in failure for the course.* Show up punctually. If you arrive late, it is your responsibility to see me after class or you will be marked absent. Chronic lateness will constitute absences, at my discretion.

No incompletes will be given and no late papers accepted unless you contact me *in advance* about a serious illness or other emergency. Hard copies of assignments are due at the beginning of class on the day listed. I do not accept e-mailed work.

Please maintain professional etiquette in your communication with me. For e-mails, put the course title in the subject line of e-mails and address me as “Dear Professor Karlyn.” If you have a serious matter to discuss with me, arrange to meet me in my office.

**Classroom Standards:** Take active responsibility for creating a respectful learning environment within the classroom. Pay full attention to whoever has the floor. Refrain from side-conversations. Turn all laptops and cell phones off (not to “vibrate”). Don’t eat. Do your best to avoid leaving and re-entering the classroom during screenings, lectures or discussions. Be prepared to engage with controversial subjects in a thoughtful manner. Disagreements are certain to arise, but it is imperative that the classroom remain a place for inquisitive thought and respectful debate. Think before you speak.
Writing Standards: All written work must use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and all assignments must adhere to standards of academic honesty outlined in the Student Handbook. Do not turn in work prepared for other classes. Document all sources consulted in preparing your work, including websites and other material obtained on the Internet. If in doubt, document. Plagiarism will result in failure for the course and additional sanctions determined by the director of Student Judicial Affairs.

Evaluation: Grades will be based on a midterm (20 percent); a take-home final (30 percent); term paper (30 percent); group presentation (10 percent); and class participation (10 percent). Graduate students, you will not take the final exam but prepare a longer paper. Consult with me early in the term about projects you are interested in.

Texts: The primary texts include the films shown in class and assigned for out-of-class viewing; The Hollywood Musical, second edition, by Jane Feuer; and additional readings posted on Blackboard.

1: Reading Hollywood Genre Films
James Snead, “Mass Visual Productions”
Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia”
Mar. 29 Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933, with Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell; Busby Berkeley production numbers)
Mar. 31 Discuss film and readings; assign groups

2. The Roots: Race, Ethnicity and the Musical
Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Ethnicities in Relation”
Michael Rogin, “Uncle Sammy, My Mammy”
Apr. 5 The Jazz Singer (1927, with Al Jolson); Black and Tan Fantasy (1932, with Duke Ellington)
Apr. 7 Discuss film and readings

3: The Roots con’t: Blackface, Whiteness, Gender
Mark Reid, “African-American Comedy Film”
Steven Cohan, “Feminizing the Song and Dance Man: Fred Astaire”
** Watch Bamboozled (Spike Lee, 2000) outside class
Apr. 12 Top Hat (1935, with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers)
Apr. 14 Discuss film and readings
Panel 1: Bamboozled

4. Two Formal Paradigms: Backstage and Integrated
Richard Dyer, “A Matter of Whiteness” (graduate students)
Jane Feuer, Chapter 1 “Mass Art as Folk Art”
Apr. 19 Showboat (James Whale, 1936, with Irene Dunne and Paul Robeson)
Apr. 21 Discuss film and readings
Panel 2: Showboat 1936 and 1953

5. Performance and the Stars
Feuer, Chapter 2 “Spectators and Spectacles”
Apr. 26 MIDTERM EXAM, followed by Stormy Weather (1943, with Lena Horne,
Apr. 28  Discuss film and readings

**Panel 3:** Stormy Weather

6. Post-War America: Self-Reflexivity and Camp
Feuer 3, “Celebration of Popular Song”
Steve Cohan, “Introduction to Camp Interventions”
Matthew Tinkcom, “Like a Homosexual: Camp Visual Codes”
May 3  Singin’ in the Rain (1952, with Gene Kelly)
May 5  Discuss film and readings

**Panel 4:** Gene Kelly

7. The Art Musical
Feuer 4, “Dream Worlds and Dream Stages”
**Watch West Side Story (1961, Leonard Bernstein) outside class**
May 10  Cabaret (1972, with Liza Minnelli and Joel Grey)
May 12  Discuss film and readings

**Panel 5:** West Side Story

8. The (Wonderful) World of Disney
Eric Smoodin, “Introduction: How to Read Walt Disney”
Laura Sells, “Where Do the Mermaids Stand?”
May 17 Disney film, TBA
May 19

**Panel 6:** Disney

9. Class and the Teen Musical
Richard Dyer, “In Defense of Disco”
May 24  Saturday Night Fever (1977, with John Travolta)
May 26  Discuss film and readings

**Panel 7:** The Musical Today: Old Forms, New Influences (hip hop, Bollywood, rockumentary)

10. Conclusions: Bringing It All Back Home (to Baltimore?)
Feuer 6, “A PostScript for the 90s”
May 31  Hairspray (1988, directed by John Waters)
June 2  Discuss film and readings; distribute take-home exam

Additional musicals to watch and think about this term:
Shirley Temple films with Bill Robinson
Wizard of Oz (1939) and more Judy Garland films
Carmen Miranda films
Vincente Minnelli films (especially The Pirate 1948)
Oklahoma, Carousel, My Fair Lady, Sound of Music, South Pacific, Calamity Jane and other classics of the 50s and 60s
Elvis Presley
Carmen Jones (1954 with Dorothy Dandridge)
Hair (1979)
All That Jazz (1979) and other films by Bob Fosse
School Daze (1988, Spike Lee)
Pennies From Heaven (1988)
Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975)
Little Shop of Horrors (1986)
Strictly Ballroom (1992) and Moulin Rouge 2001
8 Mile (2002) and Carmen, a Hip Hopera (2001)
Tap (1989)
South Park: Bigger Longer Uncut (1999)