THE AESTHETICS OF BLACK AMERICAN CINEMA
ENG 110 Introduction to Film and Media
Department of English
Fall 2017

Professor: Jordache A. Ellapen
Office: PLC 256
Office Hours:
• Tuesday: 10-11:30pm | Thursday: 10:30 -11:30 and/or by appointment
Email: jellapen@uoregon.edu

COURSE MEETINGS:
Class Meetings: T/Th: 2-3:50 pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This course introduces students to a wide range of popular, commercial films that examine the African American experience from different perspectives. Through film screenings, readings, and writing we will examine the African American image on screen and filmmaking practices from the silent era to the contemporary period. We begin by examining the crude, racist representation of films like King Kong (1933) and Birth of a Nation (1915), as well as the Hollywood entertainment musicals of the 1940s (Cabin the Sky), the Blaxploitation era (Shaft), the LA Rebellion films of the 70s (Killer of Sheep), independent black films of the 90s (Daughters of the Dust), and the films of contemporary Black directors like Spike Lee (Do the Right Thing) and Ava Duvernay (13th). This class will cover the debates and issues focused on the development of black American cinema, including the representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. We will consider the contributions African Americans have made to mainstream cinema as well as the importance of the independent productions that mark African American efforts to build an emergent, fully representational black cinema practice. This course will examine films made for, by, and about African Americans and students will develop the critical analytic tools to examine representations of blackness and to situate such representations within the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they emerge.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND COURSE OBJECTIVES:
Ideally, students will leave this course with tools and strategies that you will be able to use beyond the boundaries of a course on black American cinema. Thus, our examination in a course titled “The Aesthetics of Black American Cinema” is also linked to the following learning outcomes:

• An awareness of the diversity of Black American film and the historical and cultural contexts that influenced them

• Ability to engage critically in debates revolving around issues of black identity in the U.S. and their relationship to cinema

• To analyze the history of racial stereotyping in film, especially as it relates to the African American experience and to demonstrate a critical understanding of the ways in which black American cinema reflects national and global concerns over race and racism
• To develop students critical thinking, writing, and analytic skills related to race and representation

• The ability to think critically; analyze evidence carefully; develop original, creative, and rational opinions and arguments; and most importantly, communicate effectively

• the ability to use culturally-specific forms of knowledge, to recognize diverse cultural frames of reference, and to use alternate cultural perspectives to think critically

• the ability to explore your own identity in relation to other cultures, peoples, and histories

FILMS:
• Ethnic Notions (1986, dir. Marlon Riggs, 57 min)
• King Kong (1933, dir. Merian C. Cooper; 1hr 40min)
• Cabin in the Sky (1943, dir. Vincente Minnelli and Busby Berkeley; 1hr 38min)
• Killer of Sheep (1978, dir. Charles Burnett; 1hr 20min)
• Super Fly (1972, dir. Gordon Parks Jnr.; 1hr 33min)
• Do the Right Thing (1989, dir. Spike Lee; 2 hrs)
• Daughter’s of the Dust (1991, dir. Julie Dash; 1hr 52min)
• Moonlight (2016, dir. Barry Jenkins; 1hr 51min)
• The Birth of a Nation (2016, dir. Nate Parker; 2hrs)
• 13th (2016, dir. Ava DuVernay, 1hr 40min)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Grades will be based on the following:

Attendance and participation: 15%
Group Presentations, Discussions, and 1 page write up submission: 20%
Film/Viewing & Readings Journal: 30%
Final Comparative Film Review Essay: 35%

Explanation of Assignments:

Attendance and Class participation:
Students are required to attend class and be ready to actively participate in discussions based on the readings and screenings. Kindly note that all screenings are mandatory and failure to attend class or participate will result in a loss of points. (15%)

Film and Readings Journal:
All students are required to keep a film viewing and readings journal throughout this quarter. The journal format is up to you although it should be in the form of a traditional paper journal.
The journal must include at least **ONE** weekly entry based on the film screened/viewed in class. For this entry, a minimum of one paragraph (at least 6 sentences) must be a close analysis of the film, a scene from the film, a character, etc. When considering your entry approach the text critically and consider the following in your write up:

- Plot/Story (Ideas that drive the film)
- Historical Setting
- Racial issues presented in the film
- Were these issues resolved?
- How was the protagonist in the movie represented? (negative or positive manner)
- Identify any racial stereotypes or images in the movie (what do they mean? What are these stereotypes meant to convey?)
- What did you think of the film?

Additional entries could consider the following:

a) you can use the journal to make connections between films screened in class in a comparative manner
b) You can use the journal to make connections between films screened in class and other films and TV shows that focus on this particular topic
c) You can use the journal to speak to issues of representation and representations of blackness more broadly in film, television, visual, and other media cultures that focus on the African diaspora
d) You can use your journal to curate a set of images, memes, youtube videos, etc focusing on the topic of the class. Any visual material must be accompanied by a short (200 word minimum) write that gives context to the material and contextualized the material within the scope of the class.
e) You may also use the journal to ask a question and answer it. You may identify what you have learnt from the readings and screenings and explain why you find this aspect of a reading or screening (or both) illuminating, or interesting. How might you connect this week’s readings to what we have read in other weeks?

It is highly recommended that you plan on doing a minimum of **2 journal** entries a week (including the mandatory entry based on the weekly film screening) in order to attain a satisfactory grade for this assignment. Each entry should be a minimum of 300 words.

You will submit your journals to me every 3 weeks (total of 3 submissions). Journals must be submitted at the beginning of class.

**REMEMBER:** Your journal entries must clearly indicate that you understand key ideas and concepts, and you will be graded on your application of these ideas/concepts to films and other visual material both from class and from outside of the syllabus.

**Group Presentations:**
In small groups, students will sign up for a week and offer a short 15-minute presentation. Students will work with both the film and the readings for that particular week. Your presentation should offer an overview of the main points in the readings (you may choose to
focus on ONE reading, if there are multiple readings for that day) and the film, and to make connections to the week's theme and/or the broader course topics. This should be a fun exercise designed to get students to engage more directly with the course topic and to learn through interaction with classmates and the instructor.

Presenters should end with 2-3 discussion questions.

Each group member will submit a one-page write up of the group presentation at the end of the class. Your write up should include a summary of the presentation from your individual perspective (think about what you have taken away from the readings and your understanding the main ideas/concepts) and feel free to reflect on what you have learnt and how the class has shifted the way you think and understand this particular topic.

Look up the pronunciation of words and names you are not familiar with. Practicing what you will say in advance may make you feel more confident for the presentation.

Final Review Essay (Critical Film Review):
You are required to submit a double-spaced (4-5 pages), formally written review of a recent film directed by a black director. Please see the list of films below as an example. Your review must speak to and engage with the central issues/themes/discussions/critical contexts we have engaged with in class. For this review, consider the politics of representation, particularly representations of blackness and utilize film concepts, terminology and other information discussed in class. You are required to draw from material assigned in class as well as a minimum of 1 secondary source (outside of assigned class material) that speaks specifically to the director and film you have chosen.

- Ava Duverney
- Dee Rees
- Gina Prince-Bythewood
- Kasi Lemmons
- Cheryl Dunye
- Denzel Washington
- Ryan Coogler
- Jordan Peele

POLICIES

- Bring to each class meeting in digital or paper form the assigned readings for that day. All readings must be completed before the day they are assigned.
- If you have a question about an assignment or reading, please contact me at least 24 hours before the due date.
- Format for all written assignments: typed; double-spaced; 12 point, New Times Roman font; and standard one inch margins.
ATTENDANCE:

• After two absences, you should contact me before missing another class session. Take note of the following:
  o 0-2 absences – no penalty
  o 3 absences – 5% final grade reduction
  o 4 absences – 10% final grade reduction
  o 5 absences – automatic final grade of F

If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get the notes from someone in class. I do not post PowerPoint slides. In the event of a documented and/or university-approved emergency, you will need to contact me as soon as possible to make arrangements for make-up assignments – that is, not several weeks later or at the end of the semester. In short, if you encounter some kind of an emergency, always maintain contact.

ACADEMIC HONESTY:

Cheating or plagiarizing will not be tolerated. All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. Please consult Rules for Writers for a definition of plagiarism and information on documentation, and refer to the Student Conduct Code on the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards website, http://policies.uoregon.edu/vol-3-administration-student-affairs/ch-1-conduct/student-conduct-code. In cases where academic dishonesty has been clearly established, the award of an F for the final course grade is standard practice. Please see me if you have any questions about your use of sources.

ACCESS:

If you have a disability (physical or learning) that you think may affect your performance in this class, please see me during the first week of the term so we can make arrangements, if necessary, for your full access to all classroom activities. It is also important that you consult a counselor at the Accessible Education Center (aec.uoregon.edu).

TECHNOLOGY POLICY:

The use of cellphones is strictly prohibited in this class both during lecture/discussion periods and during screening sessions. Cell phones and other electronic devices must be silenced and stowed away.

LATE WORK:

All assigned work is due at the beginning of class. If you must miss class due to an emergency, turn in your work before our class meeting to receive credit. If you know you will be absent ahead of time, you must contact me at least 48 hours in advance of the deadline for other possible arrangements, or else your late work will not be accepted. Additionally, late work will not be accepted if it is an assignment due a day you were present in class.
COURSE CONTENT AND INTELLECTUAL DISCUSSION

Due to the ongoing histories/experiences of settler colonialism, institutional racism, gender violence, state violence, dispossession, and incarceration that inform both our contemporary moment and the topics and readings for the term, this course will openly engage these and related issues without censorship. If content makes attendance and participation impossible, please see me to make alternative arrangements.

A Word on Mutual Respect and Civility: Over the course of the semester, we may encounter difficult or controversial issues with which you may not be entirely comfortable. These issues may also provoke a strong reaction from you or fellow students. It is imperative that we maintain a level of mutual respect at all times. While differing opinions can often lead to lively, productive discussions, they can just as easily eliminate the possibility for any discussion, if a level of respect is not maintained. Only in civil environment is productive dialogue possible.

ABOUT VIEWINGS

We will watch all required media in class. If you miss a viewing for any reason, you are responsible for watching the film (s) on your own. However, please note: because of the topic, many of the films will not be easily or readily available outside of class. There is no makeup for missed viewings that are difficult or impossible to find on your own. Some films are available through HULU, Netflix, Amazon, and the library.

CLASS COMMUNICATION

Get in the habit of checking your UO email account regularly (i.e. daily) as this will be our primary means of communication outside of class.

A few words regarding email (with thanks to my colleague, Dr. Denise Cruz):

- Use my email address jellapen@uoregon.edu for all correspondence/communication.
- I will make the commitment to respond to an email you send me by the next business day (Monday through Friday). You can certainly email me after 5 p.m. or over the weekend, but be aware that I will not respond to emails sent after 5pm or on the weekend until the next weekday.

Email etiquette matters. Informal language is normal and appropriate in many of the missives we most use today: text messages, IMs, facebook posts, and emails to good friends. But writing an email to a professional associate—a professor, a supervisor at work, a graduate school admissions committee, a potential employer—requires a formality that we rarely practice. So below I’ve detailed the components of professional email etiquette. I’ve also included some examples that you might use as models, and some counterexamples that ought to make you cringe.

Subject Line: a short, detailed description of your email content. Keep in mind that people get a lot of email. Your reader should be able to scan his/her inbox and, by reading your subject line, he/she should know something about your email’s content

*Good Examples: Re: AMST A200 Analysis/ Re: Questions on Skin*
Cringe-worthy: Re: Hello/Hey/Hi (or similar variation)/ Re: (nothing at all)

Greeting: Formal letters begin with “Dear ________.” The informality of email has led us to drop this greeting, but communicating with a professor should still be professional even via email, and should therefore begin with an appropriate greeting.

Good Examples: Dear Professor Ellapen: (note that formal emails, like business letters, use the colon instead of the comma)/ Dear Prof. Ellapen:
Cringe-worthy: Dear Jordache,/ Hi Jordache/ Hey Jordache/ Hi J, etc. / Hello,/ Hey there

Closing: End with a formal closing and your first and last name.

Good examples: Sincerely, / Regards, / Best,
Cringe-worthy: See you! / Later,

SCHEDULE:

***This schedule is subject to change.***

Below you will find a schedule of readings and assignments. Unless otherwise noted, where I’ve listed material for a particular day, you should read/view the work before you walk in class on that day. For this course, “read” means that you should be able to summarize the argument of the piece and have more detailed thoughts and notes for discussion. It’s a great habit to mark passages and phrases that strike you as important as you read.

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<th>WEEK 1</th>
<th>STEREOTYPES AND BLACKNESS</th>
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<td>Introduction</td>
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<td>Screening: Ethnic Notions (1986, dir. Marlon Riggs, 57 min)</td>
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<td>Thursday 9/28</td>
<td>Readings:</td>
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<td>Screening, Clips from a Birth of a Nation (dir. D.W. Griffith)</td>
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<td>Tuesday 10/3</td>
<td>Screening: King Kong (1933, dir. Merian C. Cooper; 1hr 40min)</td>
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<td>Thursday 10/5</td>
<td>Readings:</td>
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<th>WEEK 3</th>
<th>BLACKNESS AND/AS ENTERTAINMENT</th>
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<td>Tuesday 10/10</td>
<td>Screening: Cabin in the Sky (1943, dir. Vincente Minnelli and Busby Berkeley; 1hr 38min)</td>
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***FILM AND READINGS JOURNAL SUBMISSION*** (1)

### WEEK 4  THE LA REBELLION

**Tuesday 10/17**
*Screening: Killer of Sheep* (1978, dir. Charles Burnett; 1hr 20min)

**Thursday 10/19**
*Readings:*

### WEEK 5  BLAXPLOITATION

**Tuesday 10/24**
*Screening: Super Fly* (1972, dir. Gordon Parks Jnr.; 1hr 33min)

**Thursday 10/26**
*Readings:*

### WEEK 6  SPIKE LEE

**Tuesday 10/31**
*Screening: Do the Right Thing* (1989, dir. Spike Lee; 2 hrs)

**Thursday 11/2**
*Readings:*

***FILM AND READINGS JOURNAL SUBMISSION*** (2)

### WEEK 7  INDEPENDENT BLACK FILM: THE 1990s

**Tuesday 11/7**
*Screening: Daughter’s of the Dust* (1991, dir. Julie Dash; 1hr 52min)

**Thursday 11/9**
*Readings:*
  - Mark Reid “New Wave Black Cinema in the 1990s” in *Redefining Black Film*
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<th>WEEK 8</th>
<th>BLACK CINEMA AND SEXUALITY / QUEER BLACK AMERICAN CINEMA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 11/14</td>
<td>Screening: <em>Moonlight</em> (2016, dir. Barry Jenkins; 1hr 51min)</td>
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<th>WEEK 9</th>
<th>BLACK AMERICAN CINEMA TODAY: Debates and Issues</th>
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| Tuesday 11/21 | Screening: *The Birth of a Nation* (2016, dir. Nate Parker; 2hrs)  
***FILM AND READINGS JOURNAL SUBMISSION*** (3) |
| Thursday 11/23 | THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY |

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<th>WEEK 10</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 11/28</td>
<td>Screening: <em>13th</em> (2016, dir. Ava DuVernay, 1hr 40min)</td>
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