

Blacks in Film

TTH 3:40-5:30 pm

Professors:	Kristie A. Ford	Joshua C. Woodfork
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COURSE DESCRIPTION & OBJECTIVES

What are one's most memorable images of blacks in film? How have these images changed over time? Images in film reflect societal trends. One learns a great deal about the African-American experience – which includes racism, gender relations, intra-group color dynamics, and passing – by investigating the various representations of blacks in film. In this seminar, students will examine these questions. Additionally, students will explore the controlling images of blacks in film, including the Uncle Tom, Mammy, Coon, Buck, Tragic Mulatto, Jezebel, Sapphire, Aunt Jemima, and Black Sambo.

Through the lens of visual analysis, students will develop the skills necessary to critically analyze constructions of black identity. Readings and exercises involving intersectional analysis will help students to unpack the power and problematic nature of stereotypes.

This course will introduce students to disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on blackness in film. Further, this is a course about knowing, particularly about ways to identify problems, formulate productive questions, and go about answering those questions. Students in this course will demonstrate the ability to:

- ❖ distinguish among, and formulate, types of questions asked by different disciplines
- ❖ read critically, gather and interpret evidence
- ❖ distinguish among the evidence and methodologies appropriate to different disciplines
- ❖ consider and address complexities and ambiguities
- ❖ make connections among ideas
- ❖ recognize choices, examine assumptions, and ask questions of themselves and of their own work
- ❖ formulate conclusions based upon evidence
- ❖ communicate ideas both orally and in writing
- ❖ relate the results of the course to one's educational goals

- ❖ critique depictions of blacks in film
- ❖ understand the socio-historical context underlying media representations
- ❖ conceptualize the intersections of identity

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

In order to successfully complete this course, students are responsible for the following:

- ❖ **Readings:** Students are expected to complete all of the reading assignments and be prepared to discuss them in class each week.
 - **Texts:** The following books can be purchased at the Skidmore Shop; they are also on reserve at the Scribner Library:
 - Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film*. 4th Edition.
 - Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*.
 - McCluskey, Audrey Thomas. *Imaging Blackness: Race and Racial Representation in Film Poster Art*.
 - **Compilation of Articles / Book Chapters:** These materials can be found Scribner Library's Online Reserves Website.
(<http://www2.skidmore.edu/library/reserves/index.cfm>)
- ❖ **Attendance:** Students are responsible for work missed during absences. Students are allowed three excused absences. Students missing more than three classes will have their final grade lowered by 5 points for each day missed (e.g., if you have an 80 in the class, your grade will be lowered to a 75). According to the *Student Academic Handbook* and the *Faculty Advisor Handbook*, "any students who miss more than a third of the [class] sessions may expect to be barred from the final examination. In such cases, the course grade will be recorded as F."
 - Students are expected to arrive on time to class. Tardiness will not be permitted. Two late arrivals to class will count as one absence.
- ❖ **Class Participation (20%):** The bi-weekly meetings are your chance to critically digest the readings, reflect on the ideas raised in the materials, and critically engage with your classmates. Students are expected to take initiative for their own learning by attending and *actively* participating in all class discussions, activities, and assignments. In addition, students are required to attend one external lecture or event that is relevant to the course. Within a week of attending the chosen activity, students will write and submit a 2-page reaction paper. Both quantity and quality of class participation will be considered in grading. As a class, we will devise guidelines for classroom discussion.
- ❖ **Image Analysis (20%):** This is due on **Thursday, September 27**. Utilizing the steps outlined in Elspeth Brown's article, "Reading the Visual Record" and the chapters from *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, students will write a 3-4 page analysis of a visual image which will be provided by the instructors. The goal of this assignment is to further develop students' ability to critically read images.
- ❖ **Film Reviews (20%):** Students will be expected to submit two (5-page) response essays in which they reflect on the readings and concepts that have emerged in the film(s). Film reviews are due on **October 11 and November 8**. The topics will be distributed the week prior to the due date. A component of the film review will include an encyclopedic annotation assignment.

- ❖ **Midterm Examination (20%):** The midterm is divided into two equal parts. Part I is a take-home examination centering on the analysis of film posters from *Imaging Blackness: Race and Racial Representation in Film Poster Art*. In-depth analysis and contextualization will be required. This is due on **Thursday, October 25**. Please note, that same day, students will take an in-class examination covering key course concepts with evidence from the readings, class discussion, and screened films.
- ❖ **Final Exam (20%):** The final examination is scheduled for **Thursday, December 20th, 1:30-4:30 PM**. It will be divided into two parts.
 - Part I is due at the beginning of the final examination period. As a class, students will view a film in a local movie theater. Students will be expected to screen this film and write a 7-page paper as part of their final examination.
 - Part II will be held during the examination period. It will consist of a written exam based on course material, including readings and class discussion.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- ❖ **Class Decorum & Preparation:** Please be respectful of your fellow students, the learning process, and the instructors. In order to effectively use our time together, we expect you to come prepared for class each day. More specifically, we expect you to: arrive on time, turn off cell phones or other electronic devices, and bring your books, assignments, and other necessary materials to class. As noted above, if you are chronically late, unprepared, or otherwise distracted during class, your class participation score will be lowered. Inappropriate actions will not be tolerated and may be reported to the Dean of Studies Office.
- ❖ **Accommodations:** If you are a student with a disability, please bring the instructor your semester memo of accommodations as soon as you obtain it. If you think that you need accommodations but do not yet have them, set up a meeting with the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities in the Office of Student Academic Services, located in Starbuck Center. It is the student's responsibility to follow up with the instructor regarding all accommodations that require the instructor's participation. To ensure full use of testing accommodations the student is advised to speak with the instructor at least 7 days before any test or examination date listed on the syllabus.
- ❖ **Deadlines:** Assignment due dates and times are not negotiable. You must attend the exams when they are scheduled and hand homework and papers in on time (at the beginning of the class on the day that they are due). Please remember to be conscious of the due dates and plan accordingly, as missed deadlines will result in a grade of zero.
- ❖ **Paper Formatting Guidelines:** All papers and projects should be typed and doubled-spaced using 12-point font and one-inch margins throughout.
- ❖ **Citations:** Please remember to properly quote and cite your sources. Parenthetical notations are acceptable, but do not forget that any ideas taken from another source (even if not directly quoted) must also be properly referenced. If you have any questions about appropriate citation procedures, see the Skidmore Expository Writing Network:
<http://www.skidmore.edu/academics/writingbrd/Guide.htm>
- ❖ **The Skidmore Honor Code:** Because the College functions as a tightly integrated community of curricular and co-curricular experiences, a strict allegiance to its standards of conduct is essential for every student's well-being and intellectual growth. Students should make certain they understand the

high value we place on honesty, cooperation, and consideration and the penalties the College imposes for infractions in these areas. Skidmore not only promotes intellectual honesty vigorously but severely punishes such offenses as plagiarism and cheating on exams.

The Honor Code Commission requires students to write on their tests and exams the following statement:

“WHILE TAKING THIS EXAMINATION, I HAVE NOT WITNESSED ANY WRONGDOING, NOR HAVE I PERSONALLY VIOLATED ANY CONDITIONS OF THE SKIDMORE COLLEGE HONOR CODE.”

- ❖ **Academic Integrity:** Any of the following acts, when committed by a student in any academic exercise, will not be tolerated and shall constitute academic dishonesty:
- *Plagiarism:* intentionally or (un)knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one’s own, including direct quotation, paraphrase, or borrowed facts or information
 - *Cheating:* intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids
 - *Falsification:* intentional and unauthorized falsification or fabrication of any information or citation
 - *Facilitating academic dishonesty:* intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to violate any provision of this Code
 - *Other forms of Academic Dishonesty:* multiple submission, forgery, sabotage, or alteration will not be tolerated.

When completing your writing assignments, please consult the “Academic Integrity Checklist” and the *Skidmore Guide to Writing* (both available online). All questions regarding academic integrity should be directed to the instructor. Academic dishonesty has serious consequences and may result in failure of the assignment, failure of the course, referral to the Integrity Board, probation, suspension, or dismissal.

COURSE CALENDAR

WEEK 1 Thurs. Sept. 6	OVERVIEW Overview, Syllabus, Community Norms
WEEK 2 Tues. Sept. 11	Black Beginnings Bogle, Chapter 1: “ <i>Black Beginnings: from Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Birth of a Nation.</i> ” Vincent F. Rocchio, “ <i>Birth of a (Racist) Nation(al) Cinema</i> ” in <i>Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood’s Construction of Afro-American Culture</i> (2000). Screening Clips from <i>Birth of a Nation</i> (D.W. Griffith, 1915)
Thurs. Sept. 13	Collins, Chapter 2: “The Past is Ever Present: Recognizing the New Racism.” Van Peebles, “Foreword” in <i>Imaging Blackness</i> McCluskey, “Introduction: Film, Poster Art, and Racial Representation” in <i>Imaging Blackness</i> Mentoring: RAP Letter
WEEK 3 Tues. Sept. 18	1920s Bogle, Chapter 2: “Into the 1920s: The Jesters.”

- Screening: *Midnight Ramble: Oscar Micheaux and the Story of Race Movies* (Bestor Cram, 1994)
 5:30 PM: Reception at the President's House
 6:30 PM: Dinner with Scribner Seminar in the Dining Hall
- Thurs. Sept. 20 Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, "Popular Signs: Or, Everything You Always Knew about American Culture (but Nobody Asked)," "Writing about Popular Culture," and "Citing Sources" in *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* (2006).
- WEEK 4**
- Tues. Sept. 25 **1930s**
 Bogle, Chapter 3: "The 1930s: The Servants."
 McCluskey, "Drama" in *Imaging Blackness*
 Screening: *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934)
- Thurs. Sept. 27 **IMAGE ANALYSIS DUE**
 Discussion
 Mentoring: SSP Team
- Fri. Sept. 28 Potential External Lecture Event: Dr. Mary Helen Washington (University of Maryland), "African Americans Writers and the Cold War" @ 5:15 PM in Gannett Auditorium
- WEEK 5**
- Tues. Oct. 2 **1940s**
 Bogle, Chapter 4: "The Interlude: Black-Market Cinema."
 Bogle, Chapter 5: "The 1940s: The Entertainers, the New Negroes, and the Problem People."
 McCluskey, "Musical" in *Imaging Blackness*
 Screening: *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincente Minnelli, 1943)
- Thurs. Oct. 4 Discussion
 Mentoring: Time and Stress Management (peer mentors)
 Dinner & Screening: *Rosewood* (John Singleton, 1997)
 [Please note that this will be an extended class meeting.]
- WEEK 6**
- Tues. Oct. 9 **1950s**
 Bogle, Chapter 6: "The 1950s: The Stars."
 McCluskey, "Documentary" in *Imaging Blackness*
 Screening: *Ethnic Notions* (Marlon Riggs, 1987)
 Screening Clips: *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000)
 Discussion
- Thurs. Oct. 11 **FILM REVIEW DUE**
 Mentoring: Panel of Student Organizations: Mariel Martin and Student Representatives
 Note-taking and Preparing for Midterm Exams (peer mentors)
- WEEK 7**
- Tues. Oct. 16 **1960s**
 Bogle, Chapter 7: "The 1960s: Problem People into Militants."
Loving v. Virginia (1967) Supreme Court case
<http://laws.findlaw.com/us/388/1.html>
- Wed. Oct. 17 Review for Midterm
 Potential External Lecture Event: Dr. Sarah Willie (Swarthmore College), "Acting Black: College, Identity, and the Performance of Race" @ 7:30 PM in Gannett Auditorium
- Thurs. Oct. 18 Screening: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (Stanley Kramer, 1967)

Screening Clips from *Guess Who* (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2005)

WEEK 8

Tues. Oct. 23
Thurs. Oct. 25

1960s Continued

Mentoring: Saratoga Springs Downtown Walking Tour: Ken Klotz
TAKE-HOME MIDTERM DUE
IN-CLASS MIDTERM

WEEK 9

Tues. Oct. 30

1970s

Bogle, Chapter 8: "The 1970s: Bucks and a Black Movie Boom."
Todd Boyd, "Hot Buttered Soul" and excerpts from "Up in Hollywood" in *The Notorious PhD's Guide to the Superfly '70s*
McCluskey, "Action/Crime" in *Imaging Blackness*
Screening: *BaadAsssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70's Blaxploitation Films* (Isaac Julien, 2002)

Thurs. Nov. 1

Discussion
Discussion
Mentoring: Counseling Center: Julia Routbort and Jen Burden
Registration (peer mentors)
Dinner with Scribner Seminar in Dining Hall

WEEK 10

Tues. Nov. 6

1980s

Bogle, Chapter 9: "The 1980s: Black Superstars and the Era of Tan."
Marita Golden, Excerpts from *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey through the Color Complex* (2004).

Thurs. Nov. 8

Screening: *School Daze* (Spike Lee, 1988)
FILM REVIEW DUE
Marita Golden, "Imitation of Life; or, The Revolution will not be Televised" from *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey through the Color Complex* (2004).
Screening Clips from *A Question of Color* (Kathe Sandler, 1993)
Screening Clips from *One Drop* (James Banks, 2001)
Screening: *A Girl Like Me* (Kiri Davis, 2005)
Discussion

WEEK 11

Tues. Nov. 13

1990s

Bogle, Chapter 10: "The 1990s: New Stars, New Filmmakers, and a New African American Cinema."

Thurs. Nov. 15

Collins, Chapter 4: "Get Your Freak On: Sex, Babies, and Images of Black Femininity."
Screening: *Love Jones* (Theodore Witcher, 1997)
Collins, Chapter 8: "No Storybook Romance: How Race and Gender Matter."
Discussion
Fieldtrip to Movie Theater: *American Gangster* (Ridley Scott, 2007)

WEEK 12

Tues. Nov. 20

Flashback to the 1980s

Screening: *Illusions* (Julie Dash, 1983)

Thurs. Nov. 22

Discussion
No Class: Thanksgiving Break

WEEK 13

Tues. Nov. 27

2000s

Collins, Chapter 5: "Booty Call: Sex, Violence, and Images of Black

	Masculinity.” McCluskey, “Comedy” in <i>Imaging Blackness</i> Screening: <i>Barbershop</i> (Tim Story, 2002) Discussion Mentoring: Final Exam Preparation (peer mentors) Potential External Lecture Event: <i>Akeelah and the Bee</i> (Doug Atchison, 2006) Film Screening and Discussion with the Black Faculty and Staff Group @ 7:00 PM in Gannett Auditorium
WEEK 14	2000s
Tues. Dec. 4	Selected Readings on the Harlem Renaissance Collins, Chapter 3: “Prisons for Our Bodies, Closets for Our Minds: Racism, Heterosexism, and Black Sexuality” Screening: <i>Brother to Brother</i> (Rodney Evans, 2005)
Thurs. Dec. 6	Discussion Mentoring: Reflection on your First Semester
WEEK 15	Wrap Up
Tues. Dec. 11	Evaluations and Wrap-Up Mentoring: Off-Campus Celebration Dinner
WEEK 16	EXAM DAYS
Thurs, Dec. 20	Final Exam

NOTE: The structure of this course and the topics we discuss should be based on the needs, goals, and concerns of the group and its individual members. In hopes of meeting these needs, it is possible that we will rearrange, amend, eliminate, add, get ahead, and get behind as the semester unfolds.