

ETHN 189 , Wed 5-7:50, PCYNH 106  
University of California, San Diego  
Winter, 2007

Jonathan Markovitz  
Office: Social Science Bldg 249  
Office Hours: Tu 5:10-6:40;  
W 3:10-4:40

## BLACK CINEMA

Mainstream cinema has been one of the primary sites for the production and rearticulation of meanings of “blackness” since D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the dawn of the studio system. Griffith’s film consolidated and disseminated powerful racist myths to a national audience, helping to solidify white supremacy while providing ideological justification for lynching. While 1915 marks a low point in cinematic depictions of American race relations, much of the latter history of Hollywood film making is similarly problematic when it comes to representations of African Americans. There is, however, an alternative cinematic tradition that has only begun to receive the attention it is due. Just a few years after *Birth*, an African American film maker named Oscar Micheaux released *Within Our Gates* (1919), challenging the racism of *Birth*, and putting forward an alternative understanding of lynching and the brutality of white supremacy. In subsequent years and decades there has been a vibrant tradition of African American independent filmmaking. This course will examine that tradition, focusing on the work of filmmakers ranging from Micheaux to Gordon Parks to Spike Lee to Julie Dash. We will also venture briefly outside of the United States and address film making within the black diaspora. Throughout the course, we will focus on the social critiques posed by various black film makers, the relationships between mainstream and independent cinema, and the power of film as a social force.

### REQUIREMENTS:

**Attendance is mandatory.** There are only ten class meetings, and you are expected to attend them all. Any absences will severely impact your final course grade (unless you are ill and provide a doctor’s note). Your final grade will be based upon:

A take-home midterm paper (40%) **Wed, 2/7**

A take-home final paper (40%) **Tentative Due Date: Mon, 3/19 at 7PM Sharp , but Check Final Exam Schedule to be sure.**

Class Participation (10%)

A 5-10 page reading and screening journal, to be completed in stages throughout the quarter, and due when you hand in your final paper. **The journal requirements will be provided in a separate handout.** (10%)

**The 10% figures for Participation and the Reading and Screening Journal are approximate.** Basically, as long as you attend all class meetings, participation can either raise or lower your grade by one partial grade. (So, active participation can push your final course grade up from a B+ to an A-, for example. Alternatively, if you never participate, except when called on and under duress, your final course grade could be pushed down from an A- to a B+.) Similarly, as long as you complete the journal adequately and on time, it can raise or lower your final course grade by one partial grade. (The reading journal will be graded check, check plus, or check minus, and will not receive comments.) Missing class meetings can adversely affect your final course grade much more severely. And the reading journal must be completed, and must meet assignment requirements, in order to pass the course.

**Readings for the course:**

A reader containing most course readings can be purchased at Cal Copy, 3251 Holiday Ct. (453-9949, in the shopping center just past the Mobil station off campus -- near St. Germain's liquor and deli.). A few additional readings will be available on-line, and the syllabus provides the web addresses. (If the address won't work for any reason, you'll be able to find the article through google or another search engine.)

**The course reader must be brought to class each time we meet.**

**CELL PHONES SHOULD NEVER GO OFF DURING CLASS TIME!!!**

In order to get the most out of this class, I suggest that, *before* a film is screened in class, and *before* you read about it, you watch the films once on your own (most films will be available at the film and video reserves). It is much easier to watch a film critically the second time around, and this will ensure that course materials do not ruin your initial viewing experience (by giving away endings, for example).

**Note about "Presentation of Self":** This is almost certainly an unnecessary caution, but you should be aware that we will be viewing and discussing films that deal with sexuality in fairly explicit ways throughout the quarter. You will be expected to react as mature audience members in an academic setting. While I would very much like for the classroom to be an arena for the free exchange of ideas, behaviors that threaten to create a "hostile environment" for any group of students will not be tolerated. If, after browsing through the syllabus, you think that this will be a problem for you, you may want to consider dropping the course.

**Course Materials:**

A course reader containing the required readings can be purchased at Cal Copy, 3251 Holiday Ct. (453-9949, in the shopping center just past the Mobil station off campus -- near St. Germain's liquor and deli.)

**THE COURSE READER MUST BE BROUGHT TO CLASS EACH TIME WE MEET.**

The outline that follows will provide you with a relatively structured idea of what we will be examining, although specific dates for readings and films may change as the quarter progresses.

**Week 1 (1/10): Introduction, Historical Context: Race and Representation, Defining Black Film**

**Films:** Selections from *The Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*

Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*" in *Representations*, 1985

<http://www.jstor.org/view/07346018/dm992114/99p0399y/0> (please access article on-line -- it's probably easiest to google the title, instead of typing the url)

Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Chapter 1 "From *Birth* to Blaxploitation: Hollywood's Inscription of Slavery," pp 9- 40

"Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," by Jane Gaines, in *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara, ed., Routledge, 1993

**Week 2 (1/17): Blaxploitation**

**Film:** *Shaft*

## READINGS:

Reena Mistry, "Can Gramsci's theory of hegemony help us to understand the representation of ethnic minorities in western television and cinema?" <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol6.htm> (please access article on-line)

Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, Chapter 4, "Black Action Film," pp 69-91

Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Chapter 3 "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation" pp 69-111

J. Wlodarz, "Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation" in *Velvet Light Trap*, 2004 [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the\\_velvet\\_light\\_trap/v053/53.1wlodarz.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_velvet_light_trap/v053/53.1wlodarz.html) (please access article on-line)

### Week 3 (1/24): **The L.A. School of Black Filmmakers**

**Film:** *To Sleep With Anger*

## READINGS:

Ntongela Masiela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers" in M. Diawara, ed. *Black American Cinema*, pp. 107-117

bell hooks, "A Guiding Light: An Interview with Charles Burnett," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*, pp 98-109.

Nathan Grant, "Innocence and Ambiguity in the Films of Charles Burnett," in Valerie Smith, ed. *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, pp. 136-155

### Week 4 (1/31): **Spike's Joint: Black Independent Filmmakers in the 80s**

**Film:** *Do the Right Thing*

## Readings:

Wahneema Lubiano, "'But Compared to What?': Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse" in *Black American Literature Forum*, 1991 <http://www.jstor.org/view/01486179/dm980387/98p0117a/0> (please access article on-line -- probably easiest to search in google instead of typing url)

Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, Chapter 5, "Black Comedy on the Verge of a Genre Breakdown," pp 92-108

Vincent Rocchio, *Reel Racism*, Chapter 8: "*Do the Right Thing*: Style as Confrontation," pp153-172

### Week 5 (2/7): **The Rise of the 'Hood**

**Film:** *Menace II Society*

## Readings:

Paula Masood, "Mapping the Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in "Boyz n the Hood" and "Menace II Society" *Cinema Journal*, 1996.

Paul Gormley, "The Affective City: Urban Black Bodies and Milieu in *Menace II Society* and *Pulp Fiction*" in *Screening the City*, Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, eds., pp 180-199

Sheril Antonia, *Contemporary African American Cinema*, Chapter Six, *Menace II Society*, pp 83-99

James McKelly, "Raising Caine in a down Eden: *Menace II Society* and the death of Signifyin(g)," *Screen* 39:1, Spring 1998, pp 36-52

#### Week 6 (2/14): **Filmmaking in the Black Diaspora, Part I**

**Film:** *Lumumba*

##### **Readings:**

J. Watson, "Raoul Peck's *Lumumba*: A Film for Our Times," *Research in African Literatures*, 2002

Ron Briley, "*Lumumba*," *Cineaste*, Winter 2001, 37-39

Julia Watson, "Raoul Peck's *Lumumba*: A Film for Our Times," *Research in African Literatures*, V 33, No 2, Summer 2002, 230-235

Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, "Introduction" and "Chapter 1"

#### Week 7 (2/21): **The Black Diaspora, Part II**

**Film:** *Hyenas*

##### **Readings:**

Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*, Chapter 10, "African Cinema Today," pp 140-166

Mamadou Diouf, "History and Actuality in Ousmane Sembène's *Ceddo* and Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas*," in Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham, eds. *African Experiences of Cinema*, pp 239-251

Elizabeth Mermin, "A Window on Whose Reality? The Emerging Industry of Senegalese Cinema," in Kenneth Harrow, ed., *African Cinema*, pp 201-221

#### Week 8 (2/28): **Black Women Independent Filmmakers Part 1: Julie Dash**

**Film:** *Daughters of the Dust*

##### **Readings:**

Gourdine, "Fashioning the Body [as] Politic in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*" *African American Review*, 2004

Gladstone Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice*, Chapter 7 "Narration as Cultural

Memory in *Daughters of the Dust*,” pp 217-228

Vincent Rocchio, *Reel Racism*, Chapter 9: “*Daughters of the Dust* and the Figurative as Mode of Resistance,” pp173-189

Toni Cade Bambara, “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement,” In M. Diawara, ed. *Black American Cinema*, pp 118-144

Ntongela Masilela, “Women Directors of the Los Angeles School,” *Black Women Film and Video Artists*, Jacqueline Bobo, ed., pp 21-42

**Week 9 (3/7): Black Women Filmmakers Part 2: Kasi Lemmons**

**Film:** *Eve’s Bayou*

**Readings:**

Mia Mask, “*Eve’s Bayou*: Too Good to be a ‘Black’ Film?” *Cineaste*, 26-7

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Troping the Body: Gender, Etiquette, and Performance*, Chapter 10, “Kasi Lemmons’s *Eve’s Bayou* as Conduct Text,” pp 115-125

Sandra Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, Chapter 5, “Mirroring Narrative/Reflecting Past: *Eve’s Bayou*, Tradition, Preservation,” pp 53-74

**Week 10 (3/14): Black Noir**

**Film:** *Devil in a Blue Dress*

**Readings:**

Berrettini, “Private Knowledge, Public Space: Investigation and Navigation in” *Devil in a Blue Dress*” *Cinema Journal*, 1999

Julian Murphet, “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious,” *Screen* 39:1, Spring 1998 pp 22-35

Janey Place, “Women in Film Noir,” in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. *Women in Film Noir*, p.47

Kate Stables, “The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema,” in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. *Women in Film Noir*

B. Ruby Rich, “Dumb Lugs and Femmes Fatales,” in *Sight and Sound*

A series of magazine articles on *Devil in a Blue Dress*