

Spring 2006
034 Barret, MWF 3:00-3:50
034Barret, T 6:00-8:30

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1:00-2:00 and by appointment

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History 105.06: Celluloid Soul: An Introduction to the History of African-Americans in Film

This course examines filmic representations of African-Americans from “The Birth of a Nation” to “Malcolm X.” It considers the role of film in reflecting, creating and challenging popular ideas about race in the United States. Emphasis will be placed on the period between 1950 and 1992. Among the topics to be covered: minstrelsy and the creation of the black image in American popular culture and entertainment; D.W. Griffith and “The Birth of a Nation;” Oscar Micheaux and the first generation of African-American filmmakers; Hollywood’s role in the Civil Rights Movement; Sidney Poitier’s role in reshaping African-American cinema; the Black Power Movement, the new black culture of the 1970s and “blaxploitation” films; the *Roots* phenomenon; and the black film renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*
Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*

All other assigned readings indicated below are either available online or have been scanned and made available in my Public folder on the Academic Departments and Programs server at: \\fileserver1\Acad_Dept_Pgm\History\Pruitt_Dwain\Public\History 105

COURSE GOALS:

“Celluloid Soul: An Introduction to the History of African Americans in Film” has four primary goals. Understanding the course’s stated aims will give you insight into why certain readings and assignments have been chosen.

1. This course seeks to introduce first- and second-year college students to the academic study of history.
2. In addition to a general introduction to academic history, the course will also introduce students to the study of cultural history.
3. The course will work to improve students’ academic reading and writing skills through writing exercises based on assigned readings. The course will culminate with an original, primary source-based research project assessing students’ progress with historical writing and analysis.

4. The course introduces students to the evolution of mainstream American films' representations of African Americans and to how African-American filmmakers' thematic content and storytelling styles changed from 1913 to the present. Special attention is paid to the role of African-American comedians.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Final grades will be determined by the following:

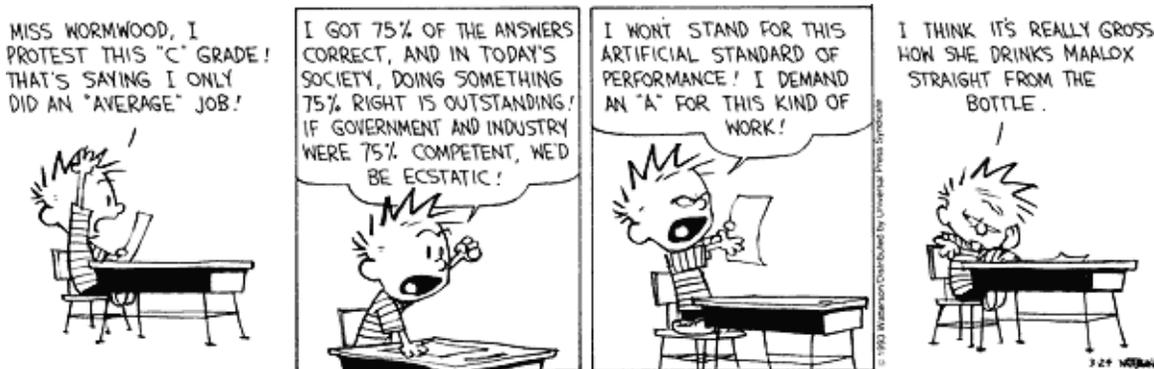
- 1) **CLASS PARTICIPATION:** Students must participate in all in-class discussions and activities, especially Tuesday evening film screenings. An additional statement concerning class participation can be found below. Class participation will account for 30% of the final grade.
- 2) **MIDTERM AND FINAL EXAMS:** Students will take two (2) in-class tests, a midterm exam and a final. These tests will each account for 15% of the final grade.
- 3) **FILM REVIEWS:** Students will be required to view and write reviews of five additional black or black-themed films over the course of the semester. Students may NOT review one of the films presented or screened in class as one of these required reviews. See due dates throughout the syllabus. Each paper will be due by 5 PM on the date indicated. Students may choose to view any film mentioned in course readings or available in the instructor's office. See the attached handout for guidelines on preparing film reviews. Each review should be two to three pages. Film reviews will account for 10% of the final grade.
- 4) **FINAL COURSE PROJECT:** Students will submit a 10 -page, primary source-based research project on a topic related to African-American film or representations of African Americans in film. These papers may focus on individual actors or filmmakers or may focus on representations of a theme or social issue. All topics must be approved by the instructor. A paper that has not been approved prior to its submission will NOT be accepted. This final project will determine 30% of the final grade.

GRADING SUMMARY:

Class participation	30%
Midterm Examination	15%
Final Examination	15%
Five film reviews	10%
Final course project	30%

GRADES: Students will receive numeric grades based on Rhodes' grade point system as represented below:

A	4.0	C	2.0
A-	3.7	C-	1.7
B+	3.3	D+	1.3
B	3.0	D	1.0
B-	2.7	D-	0.7
C+	2.3	F	0.0



ATTENDANCE: Students will be allowed three absences. **The fourth and any subsequent absences must be excused.** Valid excuses for missing class include but are not limited to religious observances, College-sanctioned academic or athletic travel, personal illness or injury, family illness or injury or bereavement. **The instructor will decide what constitutes an acceptable excuse.** Infrequent class attendance will negatively impact class participation grades. **Students will not receive a class participation grade higher than the percentage of classes that they attend except under extremely mitigating circumstances.**

CLASS PARTICIPATION: Simply coming to class, however, will not be deemed sufficient evidence of class participation. **Regular class attendance with little to no active involvement in day to day activities will result in a participation grade no higher than a C.** Students should come to class having read all assigned readings at least in part and ready for discussion or prepared to ask questions for clarification. Students are not necessarily expected to understand everything before they come to class, so there should be no shame in admitting to being confused. Talking in class is, of course, the easiest way to demonstrate engagement with the course material. No one should feel obligated, however, to babble incessantly to prove engagement. Quality is better than quantity. The instructor is aware that some students are uncomfortable with speaking in class and wishes to respect that (though such students are strongly encouraged to attempt to speak in class in order to grow in confidence). Stopping by during office hours to discuss course materials or submitting rough drafts of papers and acting on the instructor's comments, for example, also demonstrate interest in the subject and course participation.

PLAGIARISM AND THE HONOR CODE: Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course. There are two forms of plagiarism, direct and indirect. Direct plagiarism refers to copying another person's language without placing it in quotation marks and without appropriate citation. This is the easiest form of plagiarism to recognize and most students avoid it fairly well.

Indirect plagiarism, however, is somewhat more difficult to identify for some. Indirect plagiarism refers to those instances in which students paraphrase or take major ideas from another person's writing without citing the original inspiration. Using another person's ideas without attribution also constitutes plagiarism! Students who attempt to use others' work as their own will receive a failing grade for any offending paper and be referred to the Honor Council for further sanction. **Ignorance can only explain academic dishonesty; it cannot excuse it.** Students are advised to refer to the Rhodes Writing Center's web page on plagiarism located at: http://www.rhodes.edu/writingcenter/group_b/plagiarism.html.

SUBMITTING PAPERS: Papers may be submitted either as hard copies or electronically as file attachments. Electronically submitted papers, however, must arrive on time. Date and time are recorded on all incoming e-mail messages and the time recorded by the system will be considered the official time at which your paper was submitted. See course policies on late papers below. **Failure to attach a paper will not excuse a late paper. If you choose to submit papers electronically, be sure that you have attached the appropriate file before sending! If you decide to submit a paper electronically, you should carbon-copy yourself on the message. If you receive the message, you may safely assume that it reached me as well.**

PAPER FORMATTING: Papers must conform to the following standards. Each paper should have a title page that includes all of the following information: the student's name, the paper's title, the course title, the date, the Honor Code pledge and the student's signature. For electronically submitted papers, students should "sign" by typing their name or scanning in their signature. Papers must be double-spaced in 11- or 12-point Times New Roman font. Use the default margin settings in your word processing software. No margin should be less than 1 inch or greater than 1.5 inches. Pages should be numbered. **Papers that do not conform to these standards will NOT be accepted.** Grades on papers will be assigned using the following criteria: 60% of the grade will be based on the content and analytical quality of the paper. The remaining 40% will be assigned based on stylistics (grammar, spelling, punctuation, use of appropriate fonts and margins, etc.). **PROOFREAD** your work carefully!

GRADES: **Grades are not negotiable.** The instructor will not discuss grades on any assignment for at least 24 hours after the paper is returned. Discussions after this time period has elapsed will be limited to computational errors that the instructor might have made and ways in which a student's performance might have been improved.

LATE PAPERS: Unexcused late assignments will NOT be accepted. **SERVER AND PRINTER PROBLEMS WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED ACCEPTABLE EXCUSES FOR LATE PAPERS.**

MISSED TESTS: Students who miss a scheduled examination for an excusable reason may take a make-up exam. Such students should contact the instructor and arrange a mutually convenient time within seven days of the student's return. Students who miss a scheduled exam for an unexcused absence or who fail to make appropriate arrangements with the instructor upon returning to class after an excused absence will earn a grade of F.

LEARNING CHALLENGES: Rhodes College makes provisions for students who face learning challenges. The instructor will honor reasonable accommodations needed by students

once they have been approved by Student Disability Services. Request for accommodations that do not come through Student Disability Services will not be honored.

ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT: Students owning cell phones, pagers or any other electronic devices that could prove to be disruptive during class are asked to turn them off upon entering class.

PRELIMINARY CLASS SCHEDULE

W Jan 11: Introduction to the course

F Jan 13: African-American history, 1865-1877

For W JAN 18: Read Mel Watkins, “Minstrelsy...the die is cast” and “Black Minstrelsy to Vaudeville...black on black,” in Mel Watkins, *On The Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy From Slavery to Chris Rock*, Chapters 2-3.

M Jan 16: Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday observance. Class canceled.

W Jan 18: White on Black: Ethnological show business and early American stage images of blackness. Discussion of Watkins reading.

For W JAN 25: Read Donald Bogle, “Black Beginnings: from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *The Birth of a Nation*,” in Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Chapter One.

F Jan 20: The Racial Politics of Reconstruction and Jim Crow

M Jan 23: White on Black, Part II: American images of blackness after Reconstruction.

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: “The Birth of a Nation” (1915)

W Jan 25: Donald Bogle’s “Five Basic Types.”

F Jan 27: “The Birth of a Nation” and the birth of African-American filmmaking

For F FEB 3: Read Watkins, “The New Negro: Harlem and Hollywood...exotics, imposters, and other misshapen identities,” Chapter 6

M Jan 30: Race Films: African-American Filmmakers and Filmmaking, 1910-1920

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: “Hallelujah!” (1929)

W Feb 1: Oscar Micheaux: “Within Our Gates” (1919) and “Body and Soul” (1925)

For W FEB 8: Read Bogle, “The 1930s: The Servants,” Chapter 3.

F Feb 3: Race and America in the 1930s. Discussion of Watkins reading.

FIRST FILM REVIEW: Each student must watch and review a black or black-themed film made between 1930 and 1940. This review will be due by FEBRUARY 17.

M Feb 6: Early American Cinematic Racial Liberalism: King Vidor's "Hallelujah!" (1929), "Imitation of Life" (1934), "The Green Pastures" (1936) and "Gone With the Wind" (1939)

For M FEB 13: Read Bogle, "The 1940s: the Entertainers, the New Negroes, and the Problem People," Chapter 5

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Imitation of Life" (1934)

SECOND FILM REVIEW: Each student must watch and review a black or black-themed film made between 1940 and 1950. This review will be due by FEBRUARY 27.

W Feb 8: Discussion of Bogle reading; Images of Africa: "King Kong" (1933)

For W FEB 15: Read Watkins, "Radio and Early Television...racial ventriloquy, black soaps and servants," Chapter 7.

F Feb 10: The Forties in America and African-America: World War II and Civil Rights

For F FEB 17: Read Watkins, "Race Records and Black Films...sounds and visions in black and blue," Chapter 8.

M Feb 13: "Problem Pictures": "Home of the Brave," "Intruder in the Dust", "Lost Boundaries" and "Pinky." Discussion of Bogle reading.

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Intruder in the Dust" (1949)

W Feb 15: African Americans in radio and early television. Discussion of Watkins reading.

For W FEB 23: Read Bogle, "The 1950s: Black Stars," Chapter 6

F Feb 17: African Americans on African Americans: Black music and filmmaking. Discussion of Watkins reading.

FIRST FILM REVIEW DUE TODAY BY 5 PM

M Feb 20: The Civil Rights Movement, 1950-1965.

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "No Way Out" (1950)

THIRD FILM REVIEW: Each student must watch and review a Sidney Poitier film made between 1950 and 1967. Pay particular attention to Poitier's character in the film. Were the contemporary criticisms of his roles valid in your view? Why or why not? This review will be due by MARCH 10.

W Feb 22: Sidney Poitier and African-American cinema. Discussion of Bogle reading.

F Feb 24: MIDTERM EXAM

M Feb 27: Begin in-class screening of Sidney Poitier's Oscar-winning performance in "Lilies of the Field" (1963)

SECOND FILM REVIEW DUE TODAY BY 5 PM

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "To Kill a Mockingbird" (1962)

W Mar 1: "Lilies of the Field" continued

For W MAR 8: Read William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, Introduction.

F Mar 3: "Lilies of the Field" concluded

For F MAR 10: Read Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, "White Power: The Colonial Situation" and "Black Power: Its Need and Substance," Chapters 1-2.

Read Van Deburg, "What is 'Black Power?'," Chapter One.

M Mar 6: The Civil Rights Movement, 1965-1968

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" (1967)

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT OF RESEARCH INTEREST DUE TODAY.

W Mar 8: Black Nationalism. Discussion of Van Deburg reading.

For M MAR 20: Read "E Pluribus Plures: From Racial Integration to 'Diversity,'" in Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, Chapter Two

Read Van Deburg, "Black Power in Afro-American Culture: Folk Expressions," Chapter Five.

F Mar 10: Black Nationalism: Black Power. Discussion of Carmichael and Hamilton and Van Deburg readings.

For M MAR 28: Read Watkins, "The New Comics...what you see is what you get" and "Pryor and thereafter...on the real side," Chapters Twelve and Thirteen. For Chapter Thirteen, read only through p. 563.

THIRD FILM REVIEW DUE TODAY BY 5 PM.

SPRING BREAK

M Mar 20: The 1970s: Race, Media and the Cultural Politics of the New Decade. Discussion of Schulman and Van Deburg readings.

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "The Liberation of L.B. Jones" (1970)

For W MAR 30: Read Bogle, "The 1970s: Bucks and a Black Movie Boom," Chapter Eight

FOURTH FILM REVIEW: Each student must watch and review a black or black-themed film made between 1965 and 1975. Is the film "blaxploitation?" Why or why not? This review is due by APRIL 5.

W Mar 22: The Black Media Explosion of the 1970s: Music and Television

F Mar 24: The 1970s: The Black Media Explosion: Film. Discussion of Bogle reading.

M Mar 27: Melvin Van Peebles and "Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song"

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Shaft" (1971)

W Mar 29: Gordon Parks, Sr. and "Shaft" (1971)

F Mar 31: Gordon Parks, Jr., Curtis Mayfield and "Superfly" (1972); In-class screening begins

M Apr 3: "Superfly" continued

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Across 110th Street" (1972)

W Apr 5: "Superfly" concluded. Discussion: Representations of black male sexuality in films of the 1970s

FOURTH FILM REVIEW DUE TODAY BY 5 PM

FIFTH FILM REVIEW: Each student will watch and review a black or black-themed film made between 1985 and 2000. Assess this film within its historical context. Is this movie a "good" race movie, a 1960s-1970s-styled protest piece, blaxploitation or something new? If it is something new, how would you define its novelty? This review is due by APRIL 19.

F Apr 7: In-class screening of "Coffy" (1974)

M Apr 10: "Coffy" concluded. Discussion: Representations of African-American female sexuality in the 1970s.

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Cooley High" (1975)

For F APR 22: Read Bogle, "The 1980s: Black Superstars and the Era of Tan," Chapter Nine.

W Apr 12: 1975 in Black Film: The End of an Era? Portions of "Dolemite" (1975) screened

EASTER RECESS

M Apr 17: 1977: The Roots phenomenon. Portions of "Roots" screened.

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "The Color Purple" (1985)

W Apr 19: Black Films and Stars of the 1980s. Discussion of Bogle reading.

FIFTH FILM REVIEW DUE TODAY BY 5 PM

F Apr 21: Black Film Renaissance of the 1990s. In-class screening of "Do the Right Thing" (1989) begins

M Apr 24: "Do the Right Thing" continued

TUESDAY EVENING SCREENING: "Malcolm X" (1992)

W Apr 26: "Do the Right Thing" concluded.

F Apr 28: CLASS CANCELED: Honors Convocation/Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Symposium

FINAL COURSE PAPER DUE TODAY BY 8 PM.

FINAL EXAM: Wednesday, May 3, 5:30-8:00 PM

NOTE: The instructor reserves the right to revise this syllabus as necessary.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING FILM REVIEWS

For the purposes of this course, film reviews should be roughly 1/3 plot summation, 1/3 historical analysis and 1/3 criticism. This is why I suggested that they be approximately three pages, or one page per element. Note that I said the 1/3-1/3-1/3 rule is a rough guide. Some films will require more space to summarize adequately than others. Some will require more space for a discussion of their historical context. Some might be so thought-provoking or mind-numbingly awful that your whole response needs to be critical. Let the individual film dictate what you write and how you write it.

How do you write a summation? First, you DO NOT try to summarize everything that happens in the movie. You should never find yourself writing something like, “The movie opens with X. Next, Y happens. Then, we see Z.” You are not writing a blow-by-blow account of the movie; rather, you are trying to capture the essence of the film and then discuss its underlying themes and/or historical significance.

How do you write “historical analysis?” Start with when the movie was made. What was going on in America at that time period? What was going on in African-America? Was it a period of unrest in race relations? If so, how and why? This might require that you do a bit of outside reading in general texts treating American or African-American history. John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom* is the classic African-American history survey, but you can find other useful books in the library or in the bookstore. This big picture consideration should not overwhelm you. The purpose of these reviews is not for you to write a research paper. You should, however, demonstrate awareness of the cultural and historical contexts in which films were made. For example, why were films featuring blacks or black-related themes far more positive in 1949 than they were in 1939? Once you can answer questions like that, you will be able to use film to illustrate moments in American history more effectively, which is this course’s goal. Once you have located your film within its historical context, ask yourself how it conforms to or challenges prevailing notions about blackness, the place of African-Americans in American society or the politics of its era.

How do you write effective criticisms? Everyone has opinions. This is your opportunity to present yours. Ask and answer some very basic questions. Did you like it? Why or why not? Was it well-made for its time period and the budget with which the producers were working? Would you recommend it? Why or why not? Does it have real historical value? If so, why? What does it reflect about the time period in which it was made that is important for those of us seeking to understand the role of film in shaping and challenging American cultural attitudes about African-Americans? It is perfectly acceptable to like a film and to offer more favorable comments than critical ones or to hate it with an absolute passion and spend a page ripping it to shreds.

Each film should then be rated on the Afro scale:

the BadAZZ MOFO[®] RATING SYSTEM

or, how to tell if something sucks

	<p>- 4 Afros - EXCELLENT</p>
	<p>- 3½ Afros - ALMOST EXCELLENT</p>
	<p>- 3 Afros - VERY GOOD</p>
	<p>- 2 ½ Afros - NOT QUITE VERY GOOD</p>
	<p>- 2 Afros - GOOD</p>
	<p>- 1 ½ Afros - SORT OF GOOD</p>
	<p>- 1 Afro - FAIR</p>
	<p>-Jeri Curl- SUCKS</p>

GRADING EXPLANATION

An **A** paper is a well-developed, sustained, clearly articulated argument supported by an accurate, creative interpretation and/or criticism of sources and readings. It maintains a sharp focus on exactly what the student has been asked to address. It evidences originality of thought, expanding on materials presented in class instead of simply parroting class lectures or discussions, demonstrating that the student has thought about the material outside of class. It demonstrates both depth and breadth of understanding. The student is able to read between the lines and tease out of the sources something beyond the immediately obvious surface details. An **A** paper will contain no factual errors. It will be well written, containing only minor grammatical problems, if any, such as typographical errors or simple word omissions.

A **B** paper will contain most of the elements of an **A** paper. Its argument may not be as well-developed as that of an **A** paper, but the argument will be well-organized, coherent and clear. It remains focused tightly on the assigned topic. It will have a strong factual basis and provide strong analysis of the source materials, but it will not evidence the same degree of originality and creativity of thought as shown in an **A** paper. It will simply not penetrate as far beneath the surface. A **B** paper will contain interesting ideas that indicate the student has read and thought about the material, but his or her argument might be more problematic or not as fully/clearly supported and defended as the argument in the **A** paper. It will be well-written, but it will contain more problematic usages than the **A** paper. Its grammatical difficulties might include awkward sentence structures and mild incoherence in addition to comparatively minor problems like typographical errors or omitted words.

A **C** paper will be less well focused than the **B** paper as described above. Stylistically, it will feature more grammatical problems and in greater number than the ones in **B** papers. It will evidence signs of compositional breakdown such as sentence fragments and run-on sentences. Its organizational structure will be far more chaotic than those of the **A** or **B** papers. It will seem choppy and poorly thought out to the reader. Its thesis will be vague. The argument will be equally muddy and, while the analysis will be largely correct, it may contain moderate to severe interpretative errors. Unlike the **A** and **B** papers, a **C** paper will evidence little to no penetration beneath the surface of the subject under consideration. A **C** paper will not demonstrate consistently that the student has given the topic under consideration much extended thought.

A **D** paper is even less developed than the **C** paper. Its structure and organization will be poor and confused. It will lack clear focus and it will take the reader considerable effort to determine exactly what its point is. Its internal logic will break down quickly. It will vaguely address the question being asked of the respondent, but will often stray from the topic into odd, inappropriate areas. Its grammatical problems will be even more severe than those of the **C** paper, being so bad as to be a distraction to the reader. A **D** paper will be confused in its handling of sources and even basic background information, misrepresenting source materials and arguments oftentimes grossly. There will be enough of the subject matter apparent for the instructor to see that the student has read the material, but there will be little sign of comprehension much less intellectual engagement.

The F paper is a complete disaster. Papers that earn an F based on content and not plagiarism will be incoherent, completely off topic, sub-literate, rife with grammatical errors and utterly inappropriate as responses to classroom assignments. It will fail at even the most basic levels to engage the material and will demonstrate that the student has either not read the assigned materials or has thoroughly failed to grasp their content.

