

## FIL 4831: Black American Cinema

Class: TR 9:30-10:45am  
Screenings: R 5:00pm

Classroom: BSN 1310  
Screening: BEH 104

Instructor: Todd Jurgess  
Email: toddjurgess@usf.edu

Office: Cooper 378  
Office Hours: TR, 12-1pm



Oscar Micheaux directing *The Brute* (1920)

### Course Description and Purpose

FIL 4831: Black American Cinema provides students with the historical and intellectual grounds of cinema made by Black Americans. Over the course's four months, we'll cover a broad variety of cinema, moving from the birth of cinema all the way into web series and digital video installations. Along the way, we'll encounter corporate and independent productions, experimental and documentary films, art and genre cinema, and everything in between.

While we will cover many different bodies of thought in Black film studies, the course's organization is based around an interrogation of the film industry as a kind of mainstream, one that previously

excluded people of color from participating in their own image-making, and one that Black filmmakers have dealt with in varied, complex ways. As such, we will move backward and forward in period to show the continuities in various historical moments of Black American cinema, to show how the concept of developing a Black mainstream has varied over the course of cinema's 130 years. Key to this project is the conceptualization of history itself as a continual rewriting, one accomplished here through the artistic capacities of cinema.

## How to Succeed in This Course

- 1) Participate regularly: Discussion-based classes work when students are into the subject and actively participating. Make sure you keep up with course material, pose questions, and participate meaningfully in course activities. Needless to say, doing so will prepare you for exams and other assignments
- 2) Take notes: Taking and organizing notes is an essential student skill. It not only will help as a way to maintain pertinent information, but will also help you process information more effectively. Keep a notebook or a Google doc open when you're working with the course and record important names and perspectives discussed in class.
- 3) See/Read Thoroughly: During screenings or while reading for the course, be thorough and attentive to nuance. This tactic will allow you to be more attentive to the specifics of any given text. In turn, being attentive in this manner will benefit our discussions and your written work.
- 4) Plan ahead: For assigned readings and assignments, work in advance of the deadline. Papers especially benefit from intensive planning, as they often require revision processes.
- 5) Come to office hours: Coming to office hours is a good way to process or further understand course content. I also offer students the opportunity to go over drafts of papers as a way to improve their final product.

## Course Objectives

1. To understand the way race has been shaped and is being shaped by cinema's technology and aesthetics.
2. To analyze the relation between cinema's institutional structures (Hollywood) and alternative approaches to its institutional practices (i.e., independent and avant-garde cinemas).
3. To compare historically the imperatives and aesthetic strategies used by Black filmmakers to comment on society in various periods.

4. To develop students' analytical rigor in relation to Black American cinema's formal strategies.
5. To express analyses and socio-political and historical contexts in written and oral assignments.

## Student Learning Outcomes

Students completing this course will be able to:

1. Describe the historical shape of Black American cinema and its relationship to Hollywood in particular.
2. Identify and describe the formal composition of filmmaking.
3. Relate film and visual-based aesthetics to discursive contexts from Black film studies, critical race theory, and other approaches.
4. Articulate the relationship of media projects across various regions and historical periods, in the United States as well as in Africa and Europe.
5. Demonstrate critical thinking and analytical rigor both in course discussion and in formal oral and written assignments.
6. Analyze films using theoretical, critical, and historical approaches informed by scholarship.

## Required Texts

bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (1996, Routledge)

Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1936) (any edition)

Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* (2007, University of North Carolina Press).

Other course texts will be made available through Canvas, via the Course Reserves tool. Students should read assigned texts for the week before participating in discussions.

## Grading Scale

Final grades are discerned by the overall percentage you earn on each assignment, totaled into a percentage out of 100. In case of decimals, grades jump up to the next bracket if above the .5 decimal (so a 89.5 is an A-). Anything below a 60 is an F.

A+ (100-97)	A (96-94)	A- (93-90)	B+ (89-87)	B (86-84)	B- (83-80)
C+ (79-77)	C (76-74)	C- (73-70)	D+ (69-67)	D (66-64)	D- (63-60)

## Assignments

*note: all assignments will be submitted via Canvas and will be due on the date listed in the schedule below. Students are strongly encouraged to workshop drafts with the instructor either during office hours or over email (please note: emailed drafts must be sent a week before the assignment due date to receive comments).*

### Quizzes (10%)

Throughout the semester, students will take short online reading quizzes testing basic knowledge of concepts from class readings. These multiple choice quizzes should be straight-forward and are designed with the idea of keeping students active on class readings.

### Short Papers (x2) (30%)

Twice during the semester, students will write a short paper offering a close reading of one of the films viewed in the course. This assignment requires the close reading to focus on a specific sequence, with most of the paper's body focused on details from the film's formal qualities (mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound). Papers should tie the film's formal structure into a larger commentary on the film's themes and ideas.

### Midterm / Final (40%)

Twice during the semester, students will be administered a take-home essay exam to demonstrate advanced ideas about the course material. The exam will consist of a variety of prompts, from which students will choose a limited number to develop into short essays employing film analysis and discussion of course texts in relation to class ideas.

### Independent Research Project (20%)

The end of the semester project for this class is an independent research project for which students will choose the approach and modality. While students may engage this as an academic essay, students here are encouraged to consider other forms, including video essays, handmade books, graphic design (posters/flyers), or other projects that might help to articulate ideas from the class. While extremely open-ended, students will all complete some of the following tasks:

- 1) Opening Questionnaire - students will respond in some detail to a number of prompts meant to help get the assignment going
- 2) Check-Ins - twice during the lead-up to this assignments, students will arrange to meet with the instructor to discuss their project
- 3) Final Presentation - students will prepare and 'present' their project in some form (a submitted paper or class presentation). Students will choose this modality in the opening questionnaire.

## Course Schedule

Please note: Course calendar subject to change.

Content note: Many works shown in this course feature adult content (including graphic violence, sex, nudity) and sensitive topics regarding race (including spoken racial slurs by characters). Some works invoke images of sexual assault as well.

### Week 1 (1/9 to 1/13)

- T      Introductions  
      In-Class Screening of "Something Good" (1898, William Selig)

Read: Gillespie, "We Insist: The Idea of Black Film" (Course Reserves)

R Cinema, Television, and Media Representation  
Watch: Clip from *Color Adjustment* (1992, Marlon Riggs)  
Read: Robinson, *Forgeries*, pp. 37-50, 70-81

R Screening 1: *Nope* (2022, Jordan Peele)

F Drop/Add ends

Week 2 (1/16 to 1/20)

T Martin Luther King Jr. Day

R Discussion of *Nope*  
Doing Close Readings for Cinema  
Read: Robinson, *Forgeries*, pp. 127-148, 153-155

R Screening 2: *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920, Oscar Micheaux)

Week 3 (1/23 to 1/27)

T Race Films and Mainstream Cinema in the 1920s  
Read: Robinson, *Forgeries*, pp. 225-255, 265-271

R Black Culture and Mainstream Entertainment  
Read: Taylor, "Black Silence and the Politics of Representation"  
(Course Reserve)

R Screening 3: *Stormy Weather* (1943, Andrew L. Stone)

Week 4 (1/30 to 2/3)

T In Between Years: Black Performance in White Hollywood Cinema  
Read: Robinson, *Forgeries*, pp. 272-286

R Hollywood Cinema and Interpretive Apparatuses  
Read: hooks, *Reel*, "The Oppositional Gaze" (pp. 253-274)

R Screening 4: *Incense, Sweaters, and Ice* (2017, Martine Syms)

Week 5 (2/6 to 2/10)

T Digital Video, Self-Image, Aesthetics  
Read: Syms, Interview with Alex Fialho  
Due: Short Paper 1

R Independent Cinema and Interpretive Apparatuses  
Read: Hurston, *Mules*, Intro and Chap 1

R Screening 5: "Two-Zone Transfer" (1978, Ulysses Jenkins)  
"Hair Piece" (1984, Ayoka Chenzira)  
*Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016, Arthur Jafa)  
*BLKNWS* (2019, Kahlil Joseph)

Week 6 (2/13 to 2/17)

- T "Listening to Images"  
Read: Camp and Jafa, "Love Is the Message, the Plan Is Death"  
Hurston, *Mules*, Chap 9
- R Worrying the Image  
View: "Deshotten 1.0" (2009, Arthur Jafa and Malik Sayeed)
- R Screening 6: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971, Melvin Van Peebles)

Week 7 (2/20 to 2/24)

- T Midterm Intro  
Blaxploitation and Post-Civil Rights Cinema
- R Community Objection and Hood Films  
Read: Guerrero, "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation" (Course Reserves)
- R Screening 7: "Hour Glass" (1971, Haile Gerima); "I and I: An African Allegory" (1979, Ben Caldwell); "Diary of an African Nun" (1977, Julie Dash); "Illusions" (1981, Julie Dash); "Cycles" (1989, Zeinabu Irene Davis)

Week 8 (2/27 to 3/3)

- T The LA Rebellion  
Read: Field, Horak, and Stewart, "Emancipating the Image" (Course Reserves)  
Hurston, *Mules*, Hoodoo Chaps 1 and 2
- R Individual Consultations
- R Screening 8: *Killer of Sheep* (1977, Charles Burnett)
- F Due: Midterm Responses

Week 9 (3/6 to 3/10)

- M Gender and Economic Networks  
Read: hooks, *Reel*, "Back to the Avant-Garde" (pp. 123-135)  
Skim: hooks, *Reel*, "A Guiding Light" (pp. 192-215)
- W The Orientation of (Black) Cinema  
Read: Arnaud and Lardau, "An Artisan of Daily Life" and Wali, "Life Drawings" (Course Reserve)
- R Screening 9: *She's Gotta Have It* (1986, Spike Lee)
- F Due: Research Project Questionnaire

Week 10 (3/13 to 3/17) - No Class - Spring Break

Week 11 (3/20 to 3/24)

T Black Mainstream Cinema and Pop Culture in the 80s  
Watch: Clip from *Color Adjustment* (1992, Marlon Riggs)  
Read: hooks, *Reel*, "'Whose Pussy Is This?' A Feminist Comment" (pp. 291-302)

R The 90s and the Hollywood Independents

R Screening 10: *Daughters of the Dust* (1991, Julie Dash)

Week 12 (3/27 to 3/31)

T Black Archival Writing and Biomythography  
Read: hooks and Dash, "Dialogue" (Course Reserves)  
Due: Short Paper 2

R Archives and Iconography  
Read: Hartman, excerpt from *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (Course Reserve)

R Screening 11: "Happy Birthday Marsha" (2018, Sasha Wortzel and Reina Gossett); "Looking for Langston" (1989, Isaac Julien); "She Don't Fade" (1991, Cheryl Dunye)

Week 13 (4/3 to 4/7)

T Historical Reenactment and Experimental Style  
Read: Francis and Dunye, "Structural Laughter and Constructed Intimacies" (Course Reserve)

R Individual Consultations

R Screening 12: "Affirmations" (1990, Marlon Riggs); *Erie* (2010, Kevin Jerome Everson)

Week 14 (4/10 to 4/14)

T Abstraction and Realism in Black Cinema  
Read: Gillespie and Everson, "B.A.D. (Black Abstraction Dreaming)" (Course Reserves)

R Black Cinema and the Gestures of Form

R Screening 13: *The Lies We Tell but the Secrets We Keep* (2011, Coquie Hughes)

Week 15 (4/17 to 4/21)

T Open Project Discussions

R Writing Day

R Screening 14: Class Vote

F Due: Final Exam

Week 16 (4/24 to 4/28)

- T Individual Consultations
- R Topic Discussion for Research Paper  
Class wrap-up
- R Screening 15: Class Vote

Week 17 (5/1 to 5/5)

- T Due: Presentation/Submission of Research Projects

## Course Policies

### **Attendance:**

Students must maintain good attendance throughout the semester. Students may miss up to 6 class sessions without penalty. Each additional absence results in a one-third letter grade drop (i.e., a student who has a B+ who misses six class sessions will end the semester with a B). *Please note that students arriving to class after roll has been called will not be added to the roll and are marked absent for the day.*

### **Sexual Misconduct / Sexual Harassment Reporting:**

USF is committed to providing an environment free from sex discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. In compliance with Title IX and under USF System Policy, faculty must report incidents of sexual harassment and gender-based crimes, including sexual assault, stalking, and domestic / relationship violence, to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities (OSSR). This includes incidents disclosed in class, in papers, or in personal conversations with the instructor. The USF Center for Victim Advocacy and Violence Prevention (813-974-5757) is a confidential resource for students in need. It files reports with the OSSR and the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity (DIEEO) only at the request of students.

### **Student Accessibility Services:**

Students requiring enhanced access to services for disabilities or other reasons are responsible for registering with Student Accessibility Services in order to receive academic accommodations. SAS encourages students to notify instructors of accommodation needs at least 5 business days prior to needing the accommodation. A letter from SDS must accompany this request. For more information on USF's accommodations policy consult the following link: <http://www.asasd.usf.edu/Students.asp>

### **Late Work:**

While exceptions might be made on a case-by-case basis, late papers or assignments will face grade-related penalties. Late submissions are docked a third of a letter grade for every day after the deadline has passed (so a paper that would earn an A would be reduced to an A- after a day, a B+ after the second, and so on). Students, however, are encouraged to turn in a late assignment rather than not turn anything in at all (even a 50% is better than a 0%).

### **Plagiarism:**

Students should familiarize themselves with the university's guidelines on academic integrity. Students are specifically reminded that plagiarism, which includes the use of others' words or ideas without proper attribution or the

submission of the same assignment in two courses, is a serious academic offense. To help detect potential plagiarism, students will be asked to submit their assignments to turnitin.com. For more information on USF's policies, please consult the following link: <http://www.ugs.usf.edu/policy/AcademicIntegrityOfStudents.pdf>

Please note that plagiarized assignments will be automatically given a zero for the assignment and will be reported as an official violation of the student honor code. Please also note that plagiarism can be unintentional and covers uncited conceptual borrowing in addition to straight-up copy-and-pasting. So if your paper has content that's featured in a Khan Academy page, it doesn't matter if you have rewritten or restructured it, if the material isn't original or cited.

*Plagiarized papers receive a 0/100 without exception.*

Two words of advice:

- 1) Don't use the internet to work on assignments unless directed otherwise
- 2) Don't turn in a plagiarized assignment

**Incompletes:**

The current university policy concerning incomplete grades will be followed in this course. An "I" grade may be awarded to a student only when a small portion of the student's work is incomplete and only when the student is otherwise earning a passing grade. The time limit for removing the "I" is to be set by the instructor of the course. For undergraduate students, this time limit may not exceed two academic semesters, whether or not the student is in residence, and/or graduation, whichever comes first. For graduate students, this time limit may not exceed one academic semester. "I" grades not removed by the end of the time limit will be changed to "IF" or "IU," whichever is appropriate.

**Graded Materials:**

Students are responsible for maintaining duplicate copies of all work submitted in this course and retaining all returned, graded work until the semester is over. Should the need arise for a re-submission of papers or a review of graded papers, it is the student's responsibility to have the material and to make it available.

**Email:**

Email is the best way to get in touch with me outside of class and office hours. Please allow 24 hours for a response.

**Course Materials and Student Recordings:**

Course materials may not be sold or licensed to sites like Coursehero. Any student who sells their materials to such sites will be reported to the university.

Per recent Florida legislation, students are permitted to record class lectures. These lectures, and any other course materials, are for individual use only and cannot be published online without the permission of the instructor. Please note that the legislation sets limits on what may be recorded and how those recordings can be used.

From the Provost's Office:

- [House Bill 233 Intellectual and Viewpoint Diversity Act](#) was recently signed into law by Governor DeSantis and will take effect on July 1,

2021. Accordingly, and because this law will take effect after the start of the *Summer B* session, USF will immediately implement the following internal protocols to provide students and instructors a consistent understanding of classroom expectations until additional guidance from the state is provided. Upon receipt of that additional guidance, the University will update these protocols as necessary. You may elect to include the following in your course syllabus:

- o Students with disabilities will continue to have appropriate accommodations for recordings as established by [SAS](#).
- o Students may record class lectures which will be considered instructor-delivered academic content. No recordings of other students, class participation, or discussion will be permitted.
- o Students do not need advance permission or to provide notice to record. But, students must monitor their recording so that it does not include participation by other students.
- o Students may not publish (post or share) the recordings except as provided by statute. In the event permission is requested to publish (post or share), the student's request and instructor's consent must be in writing.
- o Students and instructors are responsible for compliance with the statute and related potential sanctions. Misuse of the recordings may result in referrals as possible violations of the student code of conduct or considered academic disruptions.
- o Additional links for reference:
  - [House Bill 233 \(2021\): Postsecondary Education](#)
  - [USF Regulation 3.025](#), Disruption of Academic Process
  - [USF Regulation 6.0021](#), Student Code of Conduct

**Classroom Behavior:**

Please keep in mind that students come from diverse cultural, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Some of the texts we will discuss and write about engage controversial topics and opinions. Diverse student backgrounds combined with provocative texts require that you demonstrate respect for ideas that may differ from your own.