University of Puget Sound
African American Studies Seminar in Writing and Rhetoric
AFAM 110--Imaging Blackness: Black Film and Black Identity

Fall 2005       Dexter Gordon
Class Time: T T  12:30-1:50PM  JO 203       Jones 401A, Phone 3372
Office Hours: TT 2:00-3:00 PM                    dgordon@ups.eu

Course Description
Since blacks arrived in the Americas, their visual representation has been a contested public issue, with representations of one-dimensional images of blackness enjoying wide popularity, especially among whites. Blacks responded by challenging demeaning white representations as the first step in a process of advancing a more complex black identity. A primary forum through which this challenge has been mounted is black film. Through film, as a public forum, blacks construct their unique visions of themselves as they counter the images projected by others.

Film is an important aspect of public argument because different film communities project contested visions of their chosen subject before large varied audiences. Such depictions readily become morphed into the polyvocal articulations of popular culture. D. W. Griffiths’ Birth of a Nation is the quintessential skewed filmic depiction of black life. Thus film and its imaging of black life has played a significant role as part of US popular culture. Blacks countered Griffith’s images. Black film has been part of this counter-argument. This course studies black film and its role, as part of the public argument and ongoing contentions over black identity formation, in the African Diaspora, but especially in the United States.

The study of film is a key aspect of visual rhetoric, a growing area of academic interest linking film studies and rhetorical theory. Our focus is on the study of popular, visual images as public argument. As such, this course examines the political economy, engages in textual/visual analysis, and examines audience reception of black film to explore how these films function as public argument advocating particular views of black identity and contesting counter arguments as part of a larger agenda of promoting the advancement of black life.

With black film as its primary text, this seminar is designed to investigate and analyze American public discourse on the subject of black images. The contestation over black identity, including arguments over aesthetics, public policy, and the black body, remains at the heart of efforts to constitute national identities and national citizenship across the African Diaspora, especially the Americas and the Caribbean. We will examine how this contestation plays out in black film. Not only is the contestation of black identity an understudied issue, the focus on the role of black film is even sparser. We will focus on the process of visual rhetorical advocacy as it has been manifested since circa 1915 in film. Visual rhetorical advocacy is defined as the use of images as argument in order to shape a society’s perceptions and attitudes and thus to influence public policy.

We will spend the semester “reading” and discussing a number of key written texts and key visual texts that are central to the framing and reframing of blackness. We will examine
how the images function as argument. While we focus decidedly on black film, our broader context is the mainstream white film industry, thus we will begin our course by establishing the black image in white lenses. To do this we will examine such US standards such as D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of A Nation* and Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind*.

**Course Objectives**

This course is grounded in the intellectual traditions of African American Studies, rhetorical studies, and film studies. African American Studies encourages investigation and appreciation of the history and culture of African Americans. Each of these is part of the humanities tradition with its grounding in advocacy and argument as a way of advancing multiple perspectives. Having completed this course, students will develop:

1. The ability to identify different perspectives in a controversial issue.
2. Skills in both oral and written presentation.
3. An awareness of an important, if under-examined, controversy.
4. Media literacy as it relates to the reading of images in black film.

Finally, and more specifically, this seminar is designed (a) to enhance students’ understanding of black creative processes and products and the range of strategic options and resources they employ, (b) to nurture students’ ability to analyze and evaluate public discourse and the process of popular visual rhetorical advocacy, and (c) to give students some practical experience in the process of rhetorical advocacy, including the use of images. Students will develop and refine their intellectual habits and language capabilities as they engage in various assignments requiring oral, written, and visual presentations. Speaking and writing will be emphasized throughout the semester. In addition to specific assignments, in-class exercises will provide students multiple opportunities for writing, oral debate, and general oral presentation.

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**


Rhines, Jesse, Algeron. *Black Film/White Money*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and
Additional readings are in the form of essays that are available on blackboard. These essays will define and explore many of the key concepts and analytic terms with which we will work over the course of the semester. Finally, included is material that will help you prepare your oral presentations and your written projects.

**African American Studies and Community: Course Philosophy**

A class in African American Studies has some distinctive features. As with other classes, students enroll for their own reasons, pursue their own objectives, and engage the course material with varying degrees of commitment and enthusiasm. But unlike some other classes, the subject matter of **AFAM 110** might evoke strong emotions among students. Discussions about “race” for example, have always been challenging for American audiences. Some may care more than others, some will be more knowledgeable than others, and some may be more committed to their opinions than others. Still, members of this scholarly community will speak to each other, listen thoughtfully to each other, and engage each other critically in discussions on matters about history, social practices, and policies.

**A Climate of Mutual Respect:** Importantly, this class will foster free expression, critical investigation, and the open discussion of ideas. This means that all of us must help create and sustain an atmosphere of tolerance, civility, and respect for the viewpoints of others. Similarly, we must all learn how to probe, oppose and disagree without resorting to tactics of intimidation, harassment, or personal attack. No one is entitled to harass, belittle, or discriminate against another on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national origin, or sexual preference. Still we will not be silenced by the difficulty of fruitfully discussing difficult or sensitive issues.

**Plagiarism:** Failing to acknowledge the words or ideas of others will not be tolerated and may result in a failing grade. Examples of plagiarism include using the work of other students, or retelling the contents of a news article or academic article without providing attribution. If you have any doubts about how to acknowledge the work of others, please pose questions in class or during an office visit. Refer to the official statement of University policy on this most serious matter of academic misconduct (see 2005-06 Academic Handbook).

**Course Requirements**

1. **Reading and Class Participation:** Complete all readings for the assigned dates and participate in class discussions and activities. Students who fail to meet this minimum requirement can expect to have their final course grade lowered anywhere from one-third to a whole grade. Emergencies (e.g., illness, other unforeseen, disruptive developments) may affect your workflow; if an emergency arises, please let me know and I will attempt to accommodate your circumstances.

2. **A Mid-term and a Final Exam.** Each exam will feature short essays that demand analysis, comparison, synthesis, and application from readings and from films and material discussed in class.

   a. **Point Counterpoint**—You are paired with another student for the first written assignment. Together you will watch a film to which you will respond. You are required to read and make use of two or more critical responses to the film (reviews or just responses where reviews may not be available).

      i. Each student is then required to write a five-page paper referencing the film and at least two written sources. One student (Y), will argue in support of the dominant perspective, the perspective of the filmmaker, and the other student (X), will advocate an oppositional perspective, the counter view. The oppositional perspective will be informed by the critical reviews and the student’s own reading of the film.

      ii. Each student must then transform this essay into a 5-7-minute speech to be presented in class as point and counterpoint.

   b. **Group Viewings**—You are divided into two groups. Each group is required to view three pairs of films as follows; (1ˢᵗ) 1940 or earlier, (2ⁿᵈ) 1941-1980, and (3ʳᵈ) 1981-2005. One film in each of these pairs must be done by a white filmmaker and one by a black filmmaker; at least one must be by a woman. This assignment is meant to allow you to view films as a part of a group and to respond formally as part of a group as well as responding individually. Each group must submit written responses comparing the films in each pairing as follows:

      i. **Group Response:** Develop a group-authored ten-page response paper comparing the first pair of films.

      ii. **Individual Response:** Each student must develop a single authored five-page paper comparing the second pair of films.

      iii. **Class Response:** Both groups must work together to develop a public forum, such as an electronic discussion board, where you debate the arguments and counter arguments of the films in the last pairing. Each student must contribute at least one substantial paragraph to the forum.

      iv. **Multimedia Presentation:** Each group must develop a multimedia presentation that will make use of images and involve each group member.

         1. **Group One’s** presentation will respond to the question:
            What are some of the key historical stereotypes in mainstream white films depicting blacks and what has been their role in the making of the black image?

         2. **Group Two’s** presentation will respond to the question:
            What are some of the key contemporary stereotypes in film and what is their role in the contestation of the black image?

         3. **Self-analysis:** After completing the presentation each student must submit a 2-page paper that engages in self-analysis. The paper must present a critical account of the
group’s process and presentation and of the student’s role in both.

**GROUP ONE**
1. William Faurot (Y)
2. Katie Feldman (X)
3. Bryant Johanson (Y)
4. James Pinkney (X)
5. Kyle Rusca (Y)

**GROUP TWO**
1. Isaac Saarman (X)
2. Anna Sandau (Y)
3. Bethany Scinta (X)
4. Antwan Williams (Y)
5. Nicky Wright (X)

4. **A Final Project: Nov 29 & Dec 1**
   a. **Write a research-paper** (10-12, typed, double spaced pages) on one of the following: “Black Film and the Redemption of the Black Image,” “Black Film and the Problem of the Black Image,” “Black Film and the Tension Between Politics and Aesthetics,” “White Film, Black Image, and the Tension Between Art and Ideology.” This essay must examine and cite at least eight sources, four of which must be from popular publications and four from scholarly ones. Scholarly sources include books published by academic presses (primarily presses associated with a specific university or a group of universities), essays or chapters in edited books published by a university press, and essays published in an academic journal. Popular sources include magazines, newspapers, popular internet sources etc.
   b. **Oral Presentation:** Convert the research paper into a 8-10 minute oral presentation.

**Assignments Schedule**
Written assignments must be double-spaced, and must use a standard 11 or 12 point type.

1. Point Counterpoint Five-page Paper.  
   Due Th 9/20
2. Point Counterpoint Oral Presentations.  
   Due Th 9/22, 9/27
   Due 10/4
4. Mid-term exam.  
   Due 10/13
5. 5-page Individual Response Paper.  
   Due 10/20
6. Discussion of Public Forum  
   Due 11/1
7. Draft of Final Project  
   Due 11/8
8. Group Multimedia Presentations  
   Due 11/15
9. Self-analysis Paper  
   Due 11/17
10. 10-12 page Research Essay  
    Due 11/29
11. 8-10 Minutes Research Presentation  
    Due 11/29 & 12/1
12. Final Exam  
    Due 12/15
Grades

Grading Formula:

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point Counterpoint Short Paper</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Point Counterpoint Oral Presentation</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ten-page Group Response Paper</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five-page Individual Response Paper</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Forum</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Multimedia Presentation</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Multimedia Self-Analysis</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project: Research Paper &amp; Presentation</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Citizenship</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Points</strong></td>
<td><strong>500</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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Grading Policy

All assignments will be graded according to the following scale:

A = 94-100%  B = 83-86%  C = 73-76%  D = 63-66%
A- = 90-93%  B- = 80-82%  C- = 70-72%  D- = 60-62%
B+ = 87-89%  C+ = 77-79%  D+ = 67-69%  F = 0-59%

Grading Standards:

A  **Superior** performance; meets assignment requirements, and demonstrates exceptional execution of those requirements; reflects outstanding insight and depth; grammatically and stylistically excellent; would be considered a model example of assignment completion.

B  **Good**, solid performance; meets assignment requirements, and demonstrates competent execution of those requirements; reflects insight and depth; grammatically and stylistically strong; may have one or more problem areas.

C  **Average** performance; meets assignment requirements, minimally; grammatically and stylistically adequate; may have two or more problem areas; paper has more than two errors per page.

D  **Below average** performance; does not meet minimal assignment requirements; has several problem areas; has several errors throughout the paper.

F  **Inferior** performance; does not meet assignment requirements; not deserving of credit.

Evaluation of Work:

Professors must evaluate work based on the end result of your performance (written and oral). Evaluations cannot be based on the time you spent on the assignment (although, often there is a direct relationship between preparation and good performance), or on how challenging you found the assignment to be, or on your good intentions.

If you have questions about your grade, by all means make an appointment to discuss the grade with me. Before our discussion, make sure you:

(a) Read and reflect on explanations offered for the evaluation;
(b) Review the assignment description detailing expectations for the assignment;
(c) Present your questions/appeal in writing.
Ineffective rhetorical strategies for discussing grades include the following:
1. Comparing your grade to that of another student.
2. Insisting that sheer effort should be worth an improved grade.
3. Generalizing that you “expected to do better” or “have never received such a low grade” without offering specific reasons why your work merits a better grade.
4. Explaining that you were preparing for a more important assignment in another course.
5. Explaining that this grade will keep you out of a graduate program or will negatively influence your scholarship money.
6. Or, explaining that you did not think a 100-level course would be so challenging.

**Tentative Course Schedule**

**Wk1**
Tu 8/30  Introduction to course.

Th 9/1  Why study argument? Why study film?
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Beginning-32).

**Wk2**
Tu 9/6  *White Identity Construction in Film: White Beauty*
Finalize course project assignments
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Chap 3, 33-44).

Th 9/8  *White Identity Construction in Film: White Beauty*
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Chap 3, 44-51).

**Wk3**
Tu 9/13  *White Liberal Agenda*
Library orientation.
**Will meet in Library (Collins 118)**
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Chap 4, 52-66).

Th 9/15  White Tolerance
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Chap 6, 84-99).

**Wk4**
Tu 9/20  White Women & Black Women
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Chap 7, 100-114).
**Point Counterpoint 5-page Essay due**

Th 9/22  Whiteness as “Other”
**Read:** *Screen Saviors* (Chap 8, 115-132).
**First Oral Presentations**
**Point:** William Faurot  **Counterpoint:** Isaac Saarman
**Point:** Anna Sandau  **Counterpoint:** Katie Feldman
**Point:** Bryant Johanson  **Counterpoint:** Bethany Scinta
Wk5 Tu 9/27 Deconstructing Whiteness
Read: Screen Saviors (Chap 9, 132-153).
Second Oral Presentations
Point: Antwan Williams    Counterpoint: James Pinkney
Point: Kyle Rusca    Counterpoint: Nicky Wright
Th 9/29 Taming & Reframing Blackness
Read: Screen Saviors (Chap 10-11, 154-194).
Wk6 Tu 10/4 Returning the Gaze: Black Audiences Respond
Read: Ana Everett Returning the Gaze (Intro).
10-page Group Response Paper Due
Th 10/6 Returning the Gaze: Black Critics & Early Cinema
Read: Ana Everett Returning the Gaze (12-35).
Wk7 Tu 10/11 Returning the Gaze: Black Critics & Early Cinema
Read: Ana Everett Returning the Gaze (36-58).
Th 10/13 Mid-term exam.
10/17 FALL BREAK
Wk 8 Tu 10/18 The Recalcitrant Gaze: Black Film Criticism Since the 1940s
Read: Ana Everett Returning the Gaze (272-290).
Th 10/20 The Recalcitrant Gaze: Black Film Criticism Since the 1940s
Read: Ana Everett Returning the Gaze (290-315).
5-page Individual Response Paper Due
Wk9 Tu 10/25 Reframing Blackness
Read: Framing Blackness (Intro).
Th 10/27 Reframing Blackness
Read: Framing Blackness (Chap 1, 9-27).
Wk10 Tu 11/1 Reframing Blackness
Read: Framing Blackness (Chap 1, 27-40).
Discussion of Public Forum
Th 11/3 Confronting the Early Black Screen Image
Read: Framing Blackness (Chap 2, 41-68).
Wk11 Tu 11/8 Blaxploitation: Exploiting Socioeconomic Forces.
Read: Framing Blackness (Chap 3, 69-112).
Draft of Final Project Due
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Th 11/10</td>
<td>Recuperation, Representation, &amp; Resistance</td>
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<td><strong>Read</strong>: <em>Framing Blackness</em> (Chap 4, 113-134).</td>
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<td>Wk12</td>
<td>Tu 11/15 Group Presentations -Black Stereotypes.</td>
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<td><strong>Group Multimedia Presentations Due</strong></td>
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<td>Th 11/17</td>
<td>Recuperation, Representation, &amp; Resistance</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Read</strong>: <em>Framing Blackness</em> (Chap 4, 134-156).</td>
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<td><strong>Self-analysis Paper Due</strong></td>
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<td>Wk13</td>
<td>Tu 11/22 New Black Images, New Black Challenges</td>
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<td><strong>Read</strong>: <em>Framing Blackness</em> (Chap 5, 158-214)</td>
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<td>11/24-27</td>
<td><strong>THANKSGIVING BREAK</strong></td>
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<td>Wk14</td>
<td>T 11/29 Student final project presentations/discussion</td>
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<td><strong>Final Research Essay due</strong></td>
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<td>Th 12/1</td>
<td>Student final project presentations/discussion</td>
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<td>Wk15</td>
<td>T 12/6 Exam Review &amp; Course Evaluations</td>
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<td>12/8-11</td>
<td><strong>READING PERIOD</strong></td>
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<td>FINAL EXAM</td>
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