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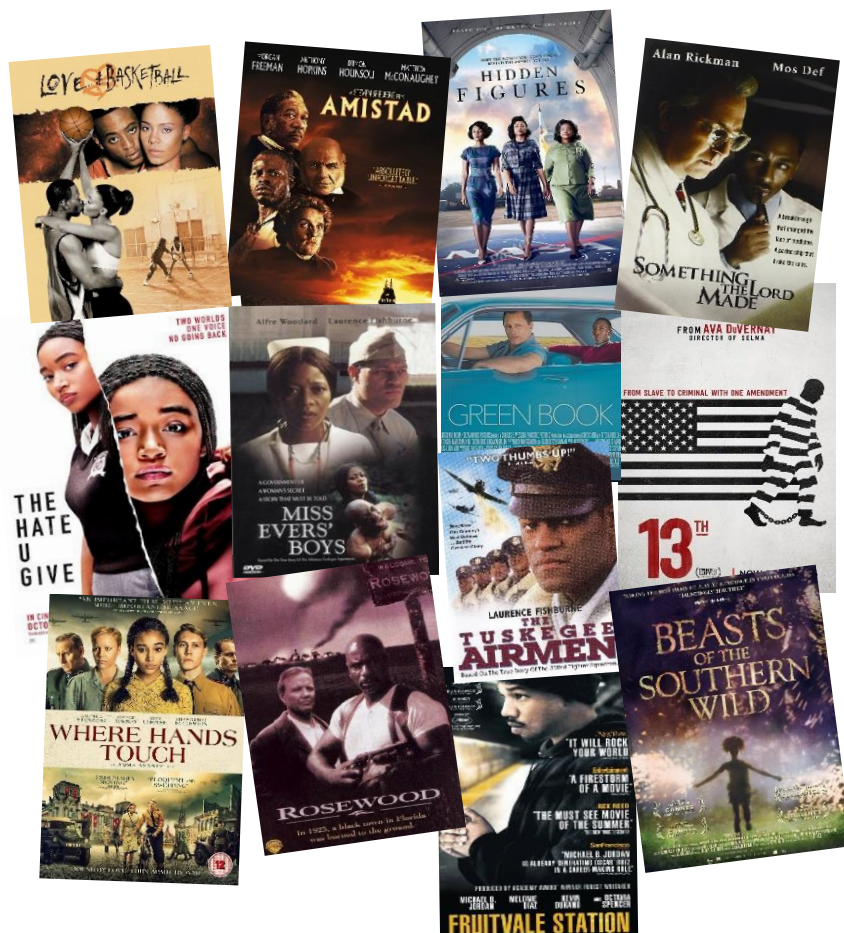
**AAS 254** / Spring 2021 / Department of Africana and American Studies  
Office Hours: By appointment via Zoom on Mondays/Thursdays

## **AAS 254**

### **RACE IN FILMS**

**(SPRING 2021—SYLLABUS FOR ONLINE COURSE)**

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# SECTION ONE

## Introduction

Folks/People/Guys,

Welcome, welcome, to this Spring 2021, AAS 254 *online* class—in the ongoing second tragic year of the COVID-19 *manmade* pandemic (and in the year of a new presidential dawn). Below, is a detailed description of this course, together with an indication of the basic requirements. Before you go through them, I want to emphasize some key points about this course:

(a) This online course will be taught **asynchronously**, and *not* synchronously. What is the difference? A *synchronous* online course is where the course is taught live at set times/days via, for example, Webex or Zoom. On the other hand, an *asynchronous* online course is the opposite, where students learn at times of their own choosing *on their own*, **but within the broader parameter of a course schedule in terms of assignment due dates and deadlines**. Therefore, as an asynchronous online course it will require from you, first, a lot of self-motivation and *self-discipline*,<sup>1</sup> second, it will be mainly test/quizzes driven; and third, a good internet connection coupled with a properly functioning computer. Note: course materials are not optimized for so-called smart phones. (Please drop this class if you cannot meet any one or more of these fundamental requirements.)

(b) The principal purpose of this course is threefold: *one*, to use films/documentaries—**together with supporting materials, such as lecture notes, readings, and videos**, as a means for exploring the cinematic portrayal of race/ethnicity (here in United States *and* elsewhere in the world) as avenues of toxic social divisions, both in terms of **institutions** *and* **interpersonal** relations; *two*, to

### IMPORTANT

**Please go through this syllabus super-carefully, because a syllabus is a contract.**

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<sup>1</sup>A good example of self-discipline is always keeping up with class announcements and homework assignments. (In fact, regularly viewing and digesting class announcements on a timely basis is mandatory.) If you lack self-discipline, this course may not be the right one for you.

examine how films function as vehicles for mass *socialization*, for good or ill (and often independently of the intentions of the filmmaker) while simultaneously serving as a modern visual-based means of human entertainment; and *three* to *briefly* get a sense of the technology, artistry, and entrepreneurship that makes cinema possible (or simply put how films are made, as well as the nature of the film industry). **NOTE:** As hint above, *you will also be assigned some films from outside United States*. (Yes, you guessed right; race/ethnicity is also an issue in other parts of the world as well.)

- (c) Because this is also a Gen Ed course, you will be introduced to the workings of a *research* university (in contrast to a teaching university), *and* how to succeed in such a university. Therefore, this topic will also be part of this course.<sup>2</sup>
- (d) Because I am dealing with a lot of students, responses to e-mails will take place mainly on Mondays and Thursdays. *Do not send me e-mails about concerns that are already covered by this syllabus or announcements and the FAQs on the class home page*. (The FAQs page should be considered an extension of this syllabus.) Please note: I access my e-mails only through a desktop computer and not through any mobile device.  
(Question: Why am I telling you this?)
- (e) To foster *professionalism* (which includes courteousness) in an environment where many have come to believe the very false notion that rudeness equals personal strength, your e-mails must begin with this salutation *Dear Instructor...* and this closure *Sincerely...* plus your name as it appears in school records, *otherwise you may not get a response*.
- (f) All materials (including films) that are assigned for homework must be versions available via links on the class home page. Do not use any other versions.
- (g) When an instructor devotes time to produce material specifically for a class, then that material takes precedence over anything else that is assigned. Man, you have to be super-intelligent not to know this!
- (h) The course workload, in terms of homework assignments, will require—*on average*—about 8–9 hours per week.<sup>3</sup> All homework must be completed as per course schedule; in other words, you are not allowed to let your homework pile up until the day of the test.

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<sup>2</sup> A research university is different from a teaching university. Compared to a teaching university, the responsibility for learning falls heavily on your own shoulders because faculty are expected to spend only 40% of their time teaching; they are required to devote the rest of their time to *research* and service.

<sup>3</sup> Based, roughly, on this formula: 40 hour work-week, divided by 15 (credit hours), multiplied by 3 (credit hours).

NOTE: If you are taking more than 15 credit hours, rearrange your class schedule by dropping one of your other classes.

- (i) Regardless of which race you think you belong to, please do NOT racialize the **epistemology** on which this course rests. What does this mean in practice? The view that since this course deals with knowledge by and/or about people of color it is not important enough to require **diligence**. <-- What does this word mean?



- (j) If you are still registered in this course after the last day for drop/add, then it will be understood that you have **contractually** agreed to abide by all the requirements and instructions

concerning this course. ← Read this sentence again! In rare circumstances, course requirements may be subject to change, but with prior notice (and usually it will be to make requirements easier and not harder).

## SECTION TWO

### Basic Course Information

#### 1. Course Requirements (may be subject to change, at instructor's discretion, *but with prior notice*)

#### *Course Requirements and Grading Policy*



- (a) The four required textbooks, indicated below, are now *optional*—that is, you do **not** have to purchase them. Instead, you will be assigned online readings; plus films, of course. (This may present copyright issues that I will have to deal with.)
- (b) Instead of textbooks, you are **required** to purchase a USB flash drive (if you do not have one already) for your computer. Cost of this drive is usually less than ten dollars, and definitely much less

than that of textbooks. The purpose of this USB drive is so that you can download and save required online homework, which will include, besides readings, AV materials (films, documentaries, videos, etc.). Note: Films assigned for this class will be available for



download. *Streaming is totally discouraged.* To do well on the tests/quizzes, you will be expected to view a film *twice*, leaving at least two days in between, with absolutely no distractions of any kind (texting, gossiping, etc.)

- (c) **80%** of course grade will be based on written and/or multiple-choice quizzes; tests; extra credit quizzes; etc. Missed tests/quizzes cannot be made up, unless, with rare exception, you have an excuse backed up by written documentation. ←Read this sentence again. **20%** of course grade will come from a test-based term paper *project*. (More about this requirement later.) Your final course grade, therefore, will be computed by using this formula:  $C*0.8 + D*0.2$
- (d) There is no final exam in this course.
- (e) Letter grade equivalents of percentage points: A=97-100 A-=93-96 B+=90-92 B=85-89 B-=80-84 C+=73-79 C=66-72 C-=60-65 D+=55-59 D=51-54 F=0-50

## Extra Credit

In light of frequent requests every semester for an extra credit assignment, from time to time, you **may** be assigned additional course-relevant material. Quizzes on this material will count toward extra credit earning you bonus points. However, note that since this is a favor, an individual may forfeit such bonus points for unprofessional behavior. ← Read this sentence again.

### **IMPORTANT**

**If you are still registered in this class after the last day for drop/add then it will be taken to mean that you have *contractually* agreed to abide by all the requirements and instructions concerning this course. ← Read this sentence again!**

## Policy on Incompletes

Incompletes will NOT be assigned in this course. Note that university policy is that incompletes are assigned at the discretion of the instructor. ← *Read this sentence again.*

## 2. Course Description (What this course is about)

This course is one of the most important classes you will ever take in this school. Yes, I know; I know; probably all teachers say that about their classes. Be that as it may, among the most ubiquitous forms of mass entertainment today is the “moving” visual image in its various forms (cinema, television, video, and so on), most especially in Western countries, such as the United States. From the perspective of this course, what is of special significance is that this type of mass visual entertainment (where the quest for **verisimilitude** is foundational) carries with it a baggage of both *textual* and *sub-textual* messages that go far beyond simply its entertainment objectives. Visual mass entertainment is not simply about entertaining the viewer, nor is it just a commercial activity; it is also a powerful agency of mass *socialization*. Working from these two basic premises, our purpose is to explore the history/current experiences of black people, by

means of its cinematic portrayal. Simultaneously, the course will also introduce you to the audio-visual mechanisms involved in how filmmakers use films (consciously or unconsciously) as vehicles for *mass socialization* even as they serve, at the same time, as a modern visual-based means of human entertainment.

### 3. Pedagogy (How this course will be taught)

1. Given that for most of you, because of your major, this course will probably be the only one of its kind you will ever take in this school, you will be expected to do some work in this class, even though it's a Gen Ed class.  
Really? Yes. ☺ Therefore, if you are on probation and/or you are working more than 20 hours at a job, and you are carrying more than 15 credit hours, you are strongly, strongly urged to rearrange your course schedule by dropping one of your other class(es).
2. This course will be taught from an *inter-disciplinary* perspective. That is, it will introduce you to whatever insights, concepts, and theories relevant to the study of a given topic, regardless of their disciplinary location.
3. From a **structural** point of view, the course has three parts to it: (a) films and other audio-visual material; (b) course readings; and (c) lecture notes (analytical comments, questions, definitions, and so on). Be super-careful about paying close attention to item (c)—meaning study the material with diligence.
4. In general, but not always, you will be assigned about two films/documentaries to view per week. (For obvious reasons they will be paired and assigned on the basis of length, rather than genres.) My choice of film assignments will be determined by incorporation of (a) genre variety—e.g., drama, comedy, thriller, mystery, biography, history, etc. and (b) diversity of topics in terms of “cinematic social realism”—specifically relating to the history/experiences of black and brown people—and by (c) the

#### **IMPORTANT**

If you are still registered in this class after the last day for drop/add then it will be taken to mean that you have *contractually* agreed to abide by all the requirements and instructions concerning this course. ← Read this sentence again!

race/ethnicity/gender of the film director. You will also be assigned some films from outside United States. (Yes, you guessed right. Yes, race/ethnicity is also an issue in other parts of the world as well.)

5. Please note that the course will also briefly introduce you, as the course progresses, to what may be called “the ways of a *research* university” (research, publication, service, tenure, governance, and so on). While some of this information may appear not to be related to the content of this course—it is part of what is called the *hidden curriculum* (the teaching of *executive function skills*, which is also the unstated requirement of

### VERISIMILITUDE AND THE SOCIALIZATION OF MARGINALITY (with the U.S. as an example)

Human desire for pleasure in the form of performance entertainment (genetically determined? Probably). ↓

Leads to a permanent and insatiable quest for verisimilitude. ↓

Leads to the invention of cinema/television (and mass visual entertainment). ↓

Requires expensive technology aimed at high production values (and distribution). ↓

Requires large financial outlays—especially because films are almost always a gamble (in terms of viewership). ↓

Requires marketing to as large an audience as possible to recoup the financial investment. ↓

Requires themes and depictions that are in consonance with the outlook of the majority of the audience—Euro-Americans, males, etc. ↓

In the areas of race/gender/class relations these themes and depictions will play to preexisting racist/ sexist/ class stereotypes, as well as act to reinforce them. In other words, there is a dialectical relationship between say, racism and sexism in film, and racism and sexism in society at large. ↓

In addition, leads to textual erasure of people of color, women, etc. from scenes and storylines altogether—as if they don't exist in society at all. ↓

Final outcome: socialization of marginality of people of color, women, the working class, etc. (because films have become a powerful medium of socialization in general).

Gen Ed classes). I consider it my responsibility as a teacher to encourage you to learn these important skills, as well as introduce you to information that can help you succeed in achieving your educational goals. About the difference between a *research* university and a teaching university: compared to a teaching university, the responsibility for learning falls heavily on your own shoulders because faculty are contractually required to spend only about 40% of their time teaching; they must devote the rest of their time to research and service. If you haven't already figured it



out, this is the reason why, unlike say a community college, this is not a “hold-my-hand-and--pamper-me” type of educational institution.

6. Given that most of you are doing majors/minors in business, STEM, health sciences and other similar fields, and therefore, you, most likely, will never take another course that deals with similar subject matter as this one, my effort will be directed toward teaching you, both, *concepts* (as tools of analysis), as well as *factual* information. You should also note that some of the assigned readings will be written by the instructor, and since they will constitute extensions of class-lectures, you will be well advised to pay special attention to them.

## SECTION THREE

### Learning Outcomes

(What you are expected to learn in this course)

See separate document, available via the class home page.

## SECTION FOUR

### Textbooks (Optional)

As indicated above, the required textbooks are now optional—you do **not** have to purchase them. However, for those of you who may desire to go more deeply into some of the topics that will be covered in the course, then these are the original textbooks:

- (a) *The Film Encyclopedia: The Complete Guide to Film and the Film Industry*, 7th Edition (by Ephraim Katz and Ronald Dean Nolen) ISBN-13: 978-0062026156. \$22.95
- (b) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Updated and Expanded 5th Edition (By Donald Bogle) ISBN-13: 978-0826429537 \$35.95
- (c) *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, Second Edition (By Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin) ISBN-13: 978-1405170550 \$39.90

- (d) *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films* by Salvador Jimenez Murguía ISBN-13: 978-1442269057 \$95.26

## SECTION FIVE

### Course Proceedings Schedule

The course proceedings schedule that specifies course assignments, test dates, etc. is available as an interactive document; and you can access it via the class home page.

## SECTION SIX

### General Course Administrative Policies

- (a) You are reminded that the University's "Student Responsibility Statement" (available [here](#)) specifies as follows: "By accepting responsibility for their education, students enhance the development of their academic, social and career goals. As a condition of enrollment, students are responsible for reviewing, understanding, and abiding by the university's regulations, procedures, requirements and deadlines as described in official publications, including the university's undergraduate catalog, UB websites, and official university email communications. In addition, all students are required to positively affirm their knowledge of UB's Student Conduct Rules, University Standards and Administrative Regulations (available [here](#)) prior to their inaugural semester at UB. Asserting a lack of knowledge of university regulations will not be accepted as a basis for an exception to these regulations." ← Folks, read this last

#### NOTE

To foster *professionalism* (which includes *courteousness*) in an environment where many have come to believe the very false notion that rudeness equals personal strength, your e-mails must begin with this salutation *Dear Instructor...* and this closure *Sincerely...* plus your name as it appears in school records, ***otherwise you may not get a response.***

sentence again. (Note: the student code of conduct, and administrative rules and regulations, just mentioned are available [here](#), and [here](#).) In other words: this course strictly abides by university policies on

- (i) academic honesty (available [here](#));
- (ii) disability (available [here](#));
- (iii) discrimination (available [here](#));
- (iv) sexual harassment (available [here](#));
- (v) academic freedom (see below); and
- (vi) classroom etiquette (available [here](#)).

**(b) Special Note on Disability:** Reasonable accommodations for equal access to this course because of disability should be requested through Accessibility Resources in Capen 60. However, providing me with a note from the disability office is not enough. You must also indicate how I can best accommodate your needs.

(c) As already noted, to foster *professionalism* (which includes courteousness) in an environment where many have come to believe the very false notion that rudeness equals personal strength, your e-mails must begin with this salutation *Dear Instructor...* and this closure *Sincerely...* plus your name as it appears in school records, *otherwise you may not get a response*.

## **SECTION SEVEN**

### **Academic Freedom**

People, because of the kinds of topics we will be covering in this course (relating to race, gender, class, democracy, the rule of law, etc., etc.) which may sometimes provoke controversy among some of you, it is really important that you understand the university's policy on academic freedom *as it relates to faculty*. This policy reads in part:

The University supports the principle of academic freedom as a concept intrinsic to the achievement of its institutional goals. This principle implies a trust in the integrity and responsibility of the members of the academic community. Samuel P. Capen, former

Chancellor of the University of Buffalo, who is remembered for the tradition of academic freedom he implemented during his leadership of the University, said in 1935:

“Acceptance by an institution of the principles of academic freedom implies that teachers in that institution are free to investigate any subject, no matter how much it may be hedged about by taboos; that they are free to make known the results of their investigation and their reflection by word of mouth or in writing, before their classes or elsewhere; that they are free as citizens to take part in any public controversy outside the institution; that no repressive measures, direct or indirect, will be applied to them no matter how unpopular they may become through opposing powerful interests or jostling established prejudices, and no matter how mistaken they may appear to be in the eyes of members and friends of the institution; that their continuance in office will be in all instances governed by the prevailing rules of tenure and that their academic advancement will be dependent on their scientific competence and will be in no way affected by the popularity or unpopularity of their opinions or utterances....”

(The full policy is available via the student code of conduct, available [here](#).)



# WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

It is the rigorous interdisciplinary intellectual practice of critically, skillfully, and consistently investigating, problematizing, conceptualizing, analyzing, synthesizing, theorizing, evaluating, and applying information against the backdrop of cognitive behavior characterized by, among other things:

- the scrupulous application of moral reasoning to ethical questions;
- professionalism (defined here as a web of interlinked behavioral habits, that include dedication, dependability, diligence, compassion, dignity, competence, civility, impartiality, honesty, and so on);
- a fiery passion for truth;
- a relentless commitment to fairness and justice (in one's own personal life, and in social terms);
- a profound belief in the value of honest research;
- intellectual humility;
- patience and open-mindedness to take seriously the views of peers;
- a deep commitment to the acquisition of knowledge and information on a variety of issues, both, personal as well as public;
- uncompromising honesty in confronting personal biases, prejudices, stereotypes, etc.;
- possession of limitless curiosity regarding all kinds of intellectual subject matter; and
- a refusal to make judgments that are not based on reasoned reflection.

