

BLACKS IN FILM II

Department of Transnational Studies

Wednesdays: Baldy 101 / 5:00 pm to 7:40 pm. / Credit Hours: 3.0

PART ONE

Introduction

Folks/People/Guys:

Greetings! Welcome to this Spring 2019, AAS 254, course.

Below, I have provided you with the basic requirements of this course. Before you go through them, I want to emphasize one foundational aspect about taking this class with me: *attendance is absolutely and totally mandatory*. ← Read this sentence again! (Yes, a roll call will be taken during every class.) Moreover, coming late to class is simply not acceptable.

A few other points about this class I also want to emphasize at the outset: (a) Although I have decided not to assign you any textbooks (yay!) it does not mean that you will be exempt from homework. (b) It is always my practice in my classes to introduce you to the workings of a *research university* and how to succeed in such a university. (c) I have a dry sense of humor; so please, don't have a cow! (smile) When I tell you something that appears to be really silly—to drive home a point—it will be silly. So, please don't cry. (d) I am, unashamedly, going to encourage you to consider doing a major or a minor or even a double-major in African American Studies. Why? To deepen your

knowledge of this country (and thereby appreciate the powerful role that African Americans have played in its development)—which in turn will be good for your intellectual development on one hand, and on the other, it will help you better understand the importance of democracy *and your part in it*. (It will also make your resume more interesting when you go on to the job market.) (e) The sitting arrangement in class is the prerogative of the instructor. (f) To encourage professionalism, please do not send me e-mails that do not begin with this proper salutation (Dear Professor...) and closure (Sincerely,...), otherwise you may not get a response. (g) If you are still registered for this class after the last day for drop/add then I will take it to mean that you have *contractually* agreed to abide by all the requirements and instructions (specified either verbally in class or in writing) concerning this course.



PART TWO

Basic Course Information

Course Requirements

(may be subject to change, at instructor's discretion, but with prior consultation)

Basic Course Requirements and Grading Policy

- (a) **Textbook.** Given the wide range of topics this course will cover, there is no required text in this course. Instead, all assigned readings will be available online.
- (b) **60%** of course grade: 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.
- (c) **20%** of course grade: final exam during *exam week*. NOTE: Your exam schedule is available now via your “MyUB” page on HUB.
- (d) **20%** of course grade: a writing *project*.

Supplementary Course Requirements

(may have an impact on your final course grade)

- (a) Class attendance is absolutely mandatory (may be taken into consideration in the final computation of your course grade).¹
- (b) Participation, *reflecting completion of assigned films and readings*, is mandatory (may be taken into consideration in the final computation of your course grade); therefore, I may call on you in class. However, note that class participation does not include being a class clown and/or a class jerk. A class jerk is someone who is so insecure that he/she thinks that he/she can build self-confidence by frequently interrupting class proceedings with frivolous questions and comments aimed solely at trying to show off to other class members that he/she knows more than the teacher. Almost every semester, I get one or two of them in my classes. If you are a class jerk deal with your insecurity in some other way: may be, get psychiatric help.
- (c) Use of any kind of electronic device, including portable computers of any type, is not permitted in this class.
- (d) Keeping up with current affairs. A lot of material we will be covering in this course will have relevance for comprehending what is going on outside the classroom (on campus, locally, nationally, and internationally) and vice versa; therefore, you are required to be current with national and international news by visiting these three websites on a regular basis: www.npr.org; www.pbs.org/newshour; and www.bbc.com

¹ University policy on attendance specified in the *Undergraduate Catalog* states: “Students may be justifiably absent from classes due to religious observances, illness documented by a physician or other appropriate health care professional, conflicts with university-sanctioned activities documented by an appropriate university administrator, public emergencies, and documented personal or family emergencies. The student is responsible for notifying the instructor in writing with as much advance notice as possible. Instructors may determine a reasonable amount of coursework that should be completed in order to make up the student’s absence. Students are responsible for the prompt completion of any alternative assignments.”

Extra Credit

In light of frequent requests every semester for an extra credit assignment, from time to time, you may be assigned course-relevant material from current news sources or other sources. 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.

Policy on Incompletes

Incompletes will be assigned in the rarest of cases. Note that university policy is that incompletes are assigned at the discretion of the instructor. Moreover, incompletes can only be assigned if the student has maintained a passing grade in the course, and there is a well-defined pathway to meeting the incomplete course assignment(s).

Office Hours

See Section One of the ONLINE syllabus packet.

Course Description

(What this course is about)

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 entertainment carries with it a baggage of both *textual* and *sub-textual* messages that go far beyond simply its entertainment objective. Our approach in this course will be to focus on this aspect of visual mass entertainment, but in relation specifically to cinema.

Our primary concern will be to explore how the experiences of black peoples (here in United States *and* elsewhere), as analyzed in terms of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and so on, are portrayed in films across different film genres and sub-genres (e.g. comedy, drama, biopic, romance, docudrama, and so on). Cinema should be understood as the standard “Hollywood” style feature films made for theatrical distribution (or mass distribution through other channels, such as cable television, Netflix, and Hulu).

At the same time, this course will also introduce you to the mechanisms by which cinema achieves its various functions. That is, gaining a basic understanding of the production, economic, and cultural aspects of the cinematic film is also an integral part of the purpose of this course. Consequently, the course has been designed to run along three tracks simultaneously: (a) analytically viewing a number of feature films; (b) the study of background materials, including documentaries, of relevance to the issues that emerge from these films; and (c) looking at cinema generically as both a creative and commercial enterprise—in terms of production, distribution, marketing, etc.

Pedagogy

(How this course will be taught)

1. This course will be taught from the perspective of an introductory course, meaning it will aim to provide you with an overview of cinema from the perspective of its cultural, political, and sociological functions based on examples drawn from the cinematic portrayal of the experiences of black people. NOTE: 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) class lectures, (b) course readings, and (c) audio-visual material. While each of these three parts will, of course, be related, they, however, will not have identical content. For example: class lectures will not always be a repetition of material in course readings. In fact, my primary concern during class lectures/discussions will be to highlight *macro-societal* processes and events (leaving the rest of the heavy lifting to assignments). Therefore, attendance in this course is absolutely mandatory. Missing the audio-visual material, for instance, will have severe repercussions on test-performance. NOTE: Audio-visual material screened in class will *not* always be available outside class. In general, you will be assigned two films to see 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 "cinematic social realism"—specifically relating to race, gender, class, disability, etc., and by (c) the social structural location of the director—that is the films of a number of black filmmakers, such as Amma Asante, Danzel Washington, John Singleton, Lee Daniels, Raoul Peck, Reginald Hudlin, and Shola Lynch will also be represented in the film assignments.
4. 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). 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 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.
5. 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 me, and since they will constitute extensions of class-lectures, you will be well-advised to pay special attention to them.

PART THREE

Course Themes

See separate document in Section One of the ONLINE syllabus packet

PART FOUR

Learning Outcomes

See separate document in Section One of the ONLINE syllabus packet

PART FIVE

Class Proceedings Schedule (topics, readings, test dates, etc.)

See separate document in Section One of the ONLINE syllabus packet

PART SIX

General Course Administrative Policies

It is assumed by all in society that those who attend an institution of higher learning, like this one, are no longer children; they are either adults or teenagers about to become adults. Therefore, as most of you were told when you first arrived here during your orientation as first-year students, you are expected to behave professionally in this school. Professionalism includes adhering to accepted standards of classroom etiquette (which are, believe it or not, even indicated in the *Undergraduate Degree & Course Catalog*, the handbook for *everything* relating to undergraduate academic requirements at this school, and which you can look up [here](#)). Let me further emphasize that in this course, professionalism also includes not hogging class-time in the foolish hope of scoring points with fellow classmates by trying to prove to them that you know more than the teacher. (If you have such tendencies you need to seek psychiatric help.)

Let me also remind you 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 ex-



ception to these regulations.” ← Folks, read this last 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 (a) academic honesty (available [here](#)); (b) disability (available [here](#)); (c) discrimination (available [here](#)); (d) sexual harassment (available [here](#)); (e) academic freedom (see below); and (f) classroom etiquette (available [here](#)).

For other course administrative policies specific to this course, see Syllabus Appendix I and II in Section One of the ONLINE syllabus packet.

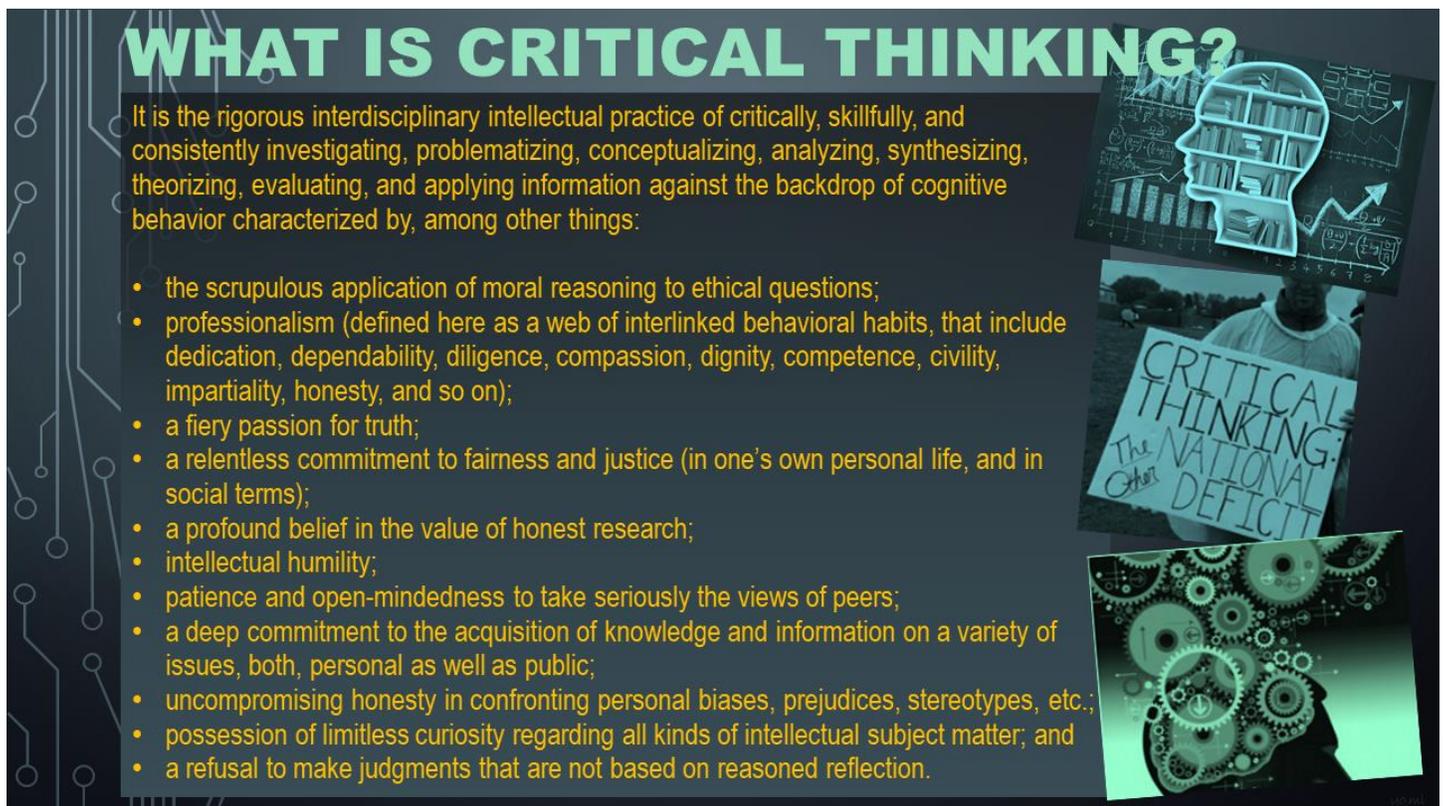
PART SEVEN

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



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.

The infographic includes three images: a head silhouette filled with books, a person holding a sign that says 'CRITICAL THINKING: The NATIONAL DEFICIT', and a cluster of interlocking gears.

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](#).)

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).

PART EIGHT

Complaints

If you feel you have a *legitimate* complaint(s) about this course, then you are welcome to talk to me during my office hours. If, thereafter, you are still dissatisfied, then you can ask to speak to the Director of Undergraduate Studies of my department (*Department of Transnational Studies*), Dr. Keith Griffler, by visiting the departmental office. For information about the department, check out its website by looking it up at the university's website.

PART NINE

Instructor Biography

I have been living in this country *longer than most of you*. I have been engaged in researching, writing, teaching, and activism on issues of authentic and procedural democracy—including human rights, civil rights, political and economic justice—for many years *from the perspective of **Africana Studies***; therefore, I want you to consider yourself privileged to be taking a course with me. Why? Because I will bring to class not only my expertise and *passion* as an instructor but analytical perspectives that can only come from the kind of geographically diverse educational and lived experiences I have had. Specifically, I have degrees from universities in Africa, England, Canada, and here in the United States—four different countries, three different continents. ← Don't you think this is cool? At least whoever is paying your tuition can rest assured that a qualified person is teaching this course. Yes? 😊

The Holstee Manifesto (advice to live by)

