

**ENGLISH 135AC**  
**RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN CINEMA**  
**FALL 2014**

Professor Bryan Wagner  
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Office: Wheeler 416  
Office Hours: Mon/Wed 4:30-5:30  
Lecture: Mon/Wed 12:00-1:00, 50 Birge

Discussion: Fri 12:00-1:00  
Section 1: Aristides Dimitriou, 123 Wheeler  
Section 2: Joshua Anderson, 156 Dwinelle  
Section 3: Alexander Jeziorek, 122 Wheeler  
Section 4: Daniel Valella, 220 Wheeler

This course is an introduction to critical thinking about race and ethnicity focused on a select group of studio and independent films manufactured in the United States. Major themes in the course include law and violence, kinship and miscegenation, captivity and rescue, passing and racial impersonation.

**FILMS**

What Happened in the Tunnel (Edwin Porter, 1903)  
Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915)  
Within Our Gates (Oscar Micheaux, 1919)  
Broken Blossoms (D. W. Griffith, 1919)  
The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland, 1927)  
Salt of the Earth (Herbert Biberman, 1954)  
The Searchers (John Ford, 1956)  
Touch of Evil (Orson Welles, 1958)  
Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, 1959)  
West Side Story (Robert Wise, 1961)  
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (Stanley Kramer, 1967)  
Night of the Living Dead (George Romero, 1968)  
The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012)

There are no group screenings in this course. All films are available to check out from the Media Resources Center in Moffitt library as well as from various commercial and non-commercial streaming outlets. For information on accessing specific films, consult the spreadsheet handed out on the first day of class.

**GRADING POLICY**

35% Weekly Writing and Discussion Participation  
50% Two Essays (5-7 pages, with formal proposals)  
15% Final Exam (analysis, comparison, and synthesis)

## WEEKLY CRITICAL WRITING

Before 11 o'clock on Tuesday nights, students are to submit a response to the discussion forum associated with their section of the course. This post should contain 2 or 3 questions about the week's film. You are allowed to post a late response two times over the semester without penalty, but if you are late more than twice, or if you fail to make up any posts, your final grade will drop.

Work hard to formulate real questions -- questions in other words to which you do not already have an answer. Before coming to discussion on Friday, be sure to read all of the questions submitted by the students in your section. All other writing assignments -- which range from brief analytical treatments, to essay proposals, to essays themselves -- are due before 11 o'clock on Thursday night, either under the discussions or assignments tab, depending on the week.

When writing your questions, please keep in mind the following criteria:

Good questions are debatable. When a question is debatable, it is possible to imagine several reasonable answers. This means we won't all agree right away about the answer to a good question. It also means that a good question cannot be answered by recalling a fact or pointing to a word. Good questions tend to generate long conversations. They cannot be answered in a few words. You know that you have an especially good question if you think we will continue to disagree about the answer even after we have made our best arguments.

Good questions are supportable. When you're asking a good question, you know that the answer will not be just a matter of opinion. Likewise, when you're answering a good question, you know that you can gather evidence that might convince others to accept your answer. A good question does not simply provide an interesting angle on a film or a work of literature. Instead, it leads to interpretation that needs to be supported with reasons and evidence.

Good questions are precise. Good questions do not focus merely on a general impression of a work. Rather, they point to specific scenes or characters and inquire about their broader significance. Sometimes, you may need to employ technical or discipline-specific language to phrase a question precisely. This is true, for instance, when asking about issues of narrative form or about the theoretical presuppositions one brings to the study of race and ethnicity.

Good questions are significant. People care a lot about the answers to good questions. When you hear a good question, you are willing to spend time to answer it. When a good question is asked, there is something at stake for the listener as well as the speaker. However, it is the speaker's responsibility to explain precisely what is at stake in asking the question.

## **ESSAYS**

Essays are 5-7 pages, double spaced, and should be submitted online under the assignments tab in your section's website. We will not be providing prompts for the essays. Instead, students are to write on questions chosen from the forum, either one of their own questions or one submitted by a classmate. When choosing your question, make sure that it meets our established criteria for a good question (debatable, supportable, precise, and significant). Students are encouraged to refine or revise their questions during the writing process.

Your essays will be anticipated by written proposals to be submitted under the assignments tab on the website. The proposal is due two weeks before the essay to allow time for your instructors and classmates to engage with your ideas.

The essay proposal should include the following parts:

1. A good question, and a list of potential answers to that question. Be sure your question satisfies our common criteria for a good question (debatable, supportable, precise, and significant), and also be sure to explain your potential answers in sufficient detail, using examples to make your ideas as concrete as possible. If you can only imagine one answer to your question, you should ask yourself whether it merits an essay-length investigation.
2. A draft of your introductory paragraph, which should follow the pattern for academic introductions we will discuss in class. First, your paragraph should explain the question your essay aims to answer and indicate why this question is worth asking. Second, it should summarize a common-sense answer to your question, an answer most people are willing to accept at face value. Third, it should identify a problem with that answer, perhaps a contradiction in its reasoning or an overlooked detail from the film. Fourth, it should provide a new-and-improved answer to your question that accounts for the contradiction or overlooked evidence that you have just described. This new-and-improved answer is the thesis statement or main claim of your essay.
3. A catalog of evidence, including at least five examples that you might use to support your argument. These may be quotations, individual shots or scenes, or your own descriptions of other details from the film. Your catalog may also include relevant contextual information, whether critical or historical.

## **FINAL EXAM**

The final exam will be integrative and comparative, asking you to reflect on one or two large questions concerning the representation of race and ethnicity in the films under consideration in this course. This is a take-home exam.

**ENGLISH 135AC - RACE & ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN CINEMA - SCHEDULE - FALL 2014**

W 9/3 Course Introduction  
F 9/5 WATCH: What Happened in the Tunnel (Edwin Porter, 1903)  
M 9/8 WATCH: Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915)  
W 9/10 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Birth of a Nation  
F 9/12 WRITE: Response to a Question Submitted by a Classmate  
M 9/15 WATCH: Within Our Gates (Oscar Micheaux, 1919)  
W 9/17 NO CLASS  
F 9/19 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Within Our Gates  
M 9/22 WATCH: Broken Blossoms (D. W. Griffith, 1919)  
W 9/24 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Broken Blossoms  
F 9/26 WRITE: First Essay Proposal (submit under assignments tab)  
M 9/29 WATCH: The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland, 1927)  
W 10/1 WRITE: Discussion Questions on The Jazz Singer  
F 10/3 WRITE: Response to a Question Submitted by a Classmate  
M 10/6 WATCH: Salt of the Earth (Herbert Biberman, 1954)  
W 10/8 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Salt of the Earth  
F 10/10 WRITE: First Essay (submit under assignments tab)  
M 10/13 WATCH: The Searchers (John Ford, 1956)  
W 10/15 WRITE: Discussion Questions on The Searchers  
F 10/17 WRITE: Close Analysis of a Shot or Scene in The Searchers  
M 10/20 WATCH: Touch of Evil (Orson Welles, 1958)  
W 10/22 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Touch of Evil  
F 10/24 WRITE: Close Analysis of a Shot or Scene in Touch of Evil  
M 10/27 WATCH: Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, 1959)  
W 10/29 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Imitation of Life  
F 10/31 WRITE: Recommendation for a Film to Watch in the Course  
M 11/3 WATCH: West Side Story (Robert Wise, 1961)  
W 11/5 WRITE: Discussion Questions on West Side Story  
F 11/7 WRITE: Proposal for Second Essay (submit under assignments tab)  
M 11/10 WATCH: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (Stanley Kramer, 1967)  
W 11/12 NO CLASS  
F 11/14 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Guess Who's Coming to Dinner  
M 11/17 WATCH: Night of the Living Dead (George Romero, 1968)  
W 11/19 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Night of the Living Dead  
F 11/21 WRITE: Second Essay (submit under assignments tab)  
M 11/24 WATCH: Student-Chosen Film  
W 11/26 WRITE: Discussion Questions on Student-Chosen Film  
M 12/1 WATCH: The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012)  
W 12/3 WRITE: Discussion Questions on The Act of Killing  
F 12/5 Course Conclusion  
M 12/15 Due Date for Take-Home Exam (submit under assignments tab)