

Fine Arts 375
Representing Race:
(African) American History on the Page and on the Screen

Spring 2016 / Wednesday 7:00-8:30 PM / Fairchild 1J101

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To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.
—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963)

Overview: The past few years have witnessed an outpouring of major Hollywood films that purport to represent key epochs in the history of race in the United States. From *12 Years a Slave* and *Lincoln* to *Django Unchained* and *Selma*, these films, like many that have preceded them, engage in the representational and explanatory work of forging a relationship between our nation's difficult racial past and the present and future. This course examines the aims and implications of such imaginative reconstructions, focusing in particular on how two major forms of media—films and books—engage differently in the process of representing American racial history. Among other questions, we will ask what political and cultural work representations of slavery perform when they appear in a historical moment such as ours, a moment that is characterized at once by a desire for the “postracial” and the dogged persistence of black-white inequality? What do these films—many of which focus on the nineteenth century and its afterlife—teach us about the status of 1865 as a marker of division in the timeline of American history? What are the historical and literary precedents for these filmic treatments of race? How do various narrative structures and forms interact with and even challenge our assumptions about keywords such as history, liberation, political action, and power? As we pursue these and related questions, we will consider the representational techniques deployed by the films and texts on our syllabus, putting these works into dialogue with illuminating historical contexts. In doing so, we will hone our abilities to engage in close readings of both films and literary works, and come to appreciate the complex social, political, and historical contexts out of which both forms of media emerge and in which they circulate.

Required Texts/Films

- Films (DVDs available on reserve in McDermott Library):
 - *Bamboozled*, dir. Spike Lee
 - *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. D. W. Griffith
 - *Django Unchained*, dir. Quentin Tarantino
 - *Lincoln*, dir. Steven Spielberg
 - *Malcolm X*, dir. Spike Lee
 - *Selma*, dir. Ava DuVernay
 - *12 Years a Slave*, dir. Steve McQueen
- Texts (it is essential that you purchase these specific editions):

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. Reissue ed. New York: Vintage, 1992. ISBN: 978-0679744726
 - Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. ISBN: 978-0415538145
 - Pauline E. Hopkins, *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. ISBN: 978-0195063257
 - Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. ISBN: 978-0195060843
 - Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*. New York: Penguin, 2012. ISBN: 978-0143106708
- Additional readings available on SharePoint (marked as SP on the schedule below)

Helpful Online Resources:

- Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/>
 - *Oxford English Dictionary*: www.oed.com
 - McDermott Library English Subject Guide. Available online at: <http://afac.sdp.sirsi.net/client/cadet/?rm=ENGLISH0%7C%7C%7C1%7C%7C%7C0%7C%7C%7Ctrue>
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Objectives: This class guides students through the intellectual challenges and pleasures of analyzing film and literature, and, more broadly, of considering the social and political work of representation as it functions across these media. To this end, you will:

- define, apply, and interrogate key concepts, both about film and literature (e.g. narrative, shot, camera angles, types of close-ups, blaxploitation, etc.);
- practice the skills of close reading, focusing in particular on how to read literary texts and films in relation to each other, through the lens of their specific historical and cultural contexts, and from the vantage point of their formal techniques;
- deploy the research tools available via the library, including online databases and archives; and
- cultivate the ability to formulate an original, compelling argument about racial representation in various media, and support this argument with evidence of various kinds and analysis.

Participation: This course requires your active, informed, and energetic participation in and leadership of class discussions. Taken together, the various participation assignments count for 50% of your final grade; this dimension therefore will have a significant impact on your overall course performance. In addition to attending all class meetings and bringing the appropriate materials to class, including the readings in hard copy, to earn an excellent participation grade you must also contribute in a meaningful way to the discussion in every class session. To “contribute in a meaningful way” signifies to answer a question, ask an informed question, respond to a colleague’s point, or put forth your own idea, and in so doing to move our conversation forward. Both the quantity and the quality of your contributions matter. You will receive feedback about your participation at the midpoint of the term. So that we can engage in genuine face-to-face conversations, laptops are prohibited unless a special class activity requires their use. Discussion-leading duties count toward your participation grade; see below for more about these assignments.

Discussion-Leading Duties: On two occasions throughout the semester, you will engage in a significant act of intellectual leadership, inaugurating our class meeting with a 20-minute engagement with the text/film under discussion that offers specific evidence from the work, provides illuminating contexts for understanding this evidence, and offers a provocative agenda for group discussion. One of these assignments will focus on a close analysis of a film, and the other will focus on a text. You will sign up for these exercises early in the term.

- **Film Analysis:** Drawing on one or two of the terms described in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, show how your designated film deploys and/or reworks the term/technique. You are encouraged to play the portion of the film (shot, scene, sequence, etc.) you have chosen to examine, but note that whatever you share with the class will count against your total presentation time. Draw on illuminating historical contexts to help us understand the film's mode of representing "race" and "history."
- **Text Analysis:** Engage in a close examination of one of the texts on our syllabus, focusing on how the work represents "race" and "history." Consider the text in relation to the film with which we have paired it: How does this text deploy similar representational strategies? What are the representational strategies that are unique to this textual form? Does one kind of media allow for possibilities that the other does not? Draw on illuminating historical contexts to help us understand the film's mode of representing "race" and "history."

Blog Contributions: You will be required to make regular contributions to our course blog on SharePoint. In a short post (about 100 words), raise a question or identify an area of interest that you want to pursue in class. Be sure to point to specific evidence: a particular shot, line, scene, etc. in the film or a specific passage in the text, and cite the page number/refer to the moment in the film. The primary purpose of these posts is for you to ask questions about the assigned works, and in so doing to sketch out an agenda for class discussion. But the ideas and questions raised in this forum also will serve as a record of your thoughts and as working notes that will facilitate your completion of the final paper. Each student will be expected to post a contribution to the blog for every class session. Please post by **Wednesday at 4:30 PM**; tardy/incomplete posts will be penalized. All students should review the blog before class, and be prepared to address their colleagues' ideas. Those students designated as discussion leaders should try to post early in order to shape the discussion, and they should read the contributions of their classmates with special care so that they can refer to specific comments in class.

Final Essay: In a paper (7-8 pp.) due at the end of the term, you will develop an original argument about one of the films on our syllabus, putting the film into dialogue with a text of your choosing, and drawing on appropriate formal terms and illuminating historical contexts to advance your claim. To prepare for this final project, you will prepare a proposal that identifies your primary works, outlines your argument, and identifies and explains the kinds of contexts you will use and how you will deploy them. You also will meet with Prof Laski to discuss your work-in-progress.

Grading Breakdown

Before PROG

Blog Posts: 10%

Participation: 20%

After PROG

Blog Posts: 10%

Participation: 30%

Final Paper: 30% (includes preparatory assignments)

POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND OTHER IMPORTANT POINTS

Course SharePoint Site: Announcements, electronic versions of course documents, and other useful information will be available on our SharePoint site, <https://sharepoint.usafa.edu/academics/english/courses/Democracy/SitePages/Home.aspx>

Communication: E-mail is an official mode of correspondence for this class. As such, you are responsible for all communiqués I send to your USAFA e-mail address. E-mail is also the best way for you to contact me.

Extra Instruction: I am available for extra instruction should you need it. Send me an e-mail, and we will work together to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time. Please note that while I will not review complete essay drafts, I will gladly listen to your ideas and help you to think through the steps of your argument or a particularly challenging paragraph. Should you wish to have someone review a draft of your paper, please visit the Writing Center. Be sure to seek any assistance you may need well in advance of paper deadlines.

Reading/Viewing Assignments: Reading and viewing assignments outlined below on the course calendar will be discussed in class on the day on which they are listed. Readings not contained in the required texts for the course are available on our SharePoint site under the Additional Readings tab; these texts are marked “SP” below. DVD versions of all films are available on reserve at the McDermott Library Circulation Desk. Please read or watch the assigned piece(s) by this date, note key passages/moments, and come prepared to engage in a lively discussion about the text(s). Electronic versions of our readings are not permitted; you must bring a paper copy of whatever work(s) we are discussing with you to class.

Writing Assignments: Unless specified otherwise, all written work is to be submitted in hard copy form at the beginning of the class session in which it is due. Late assignments will be penalized. Because of the late due date for the final essay, extensions will not be granted except under extraordinary circumstances. Only typed papers will be accepted; please double space your essays, set your margins to one inch, and use a standard font (e.g. Times New Roman) at the 12 pt. size. Number your pages in the upper right-hand corner, only print on one side of each page, and staple your essay before turning it in. Be sure to give your paper a provocative title that speaks to the essay’s argument (e.g. not “Essay 1”). Finally, follow MLA guidelines.

Documentation and Academic Integrity: Crucial guidelines and resources regarding documentation standards for your written work and the Dean’s policy on academic integrity are posted on our SharePoint site under “Documentation Resources.” Be sure to review these items. You are required to abide by these regulations; failure to do so will hurt your grade and may cause you to commit plagiarism inadvertently.

COURSE SCHEDULE

I. Race and Representation: Key Terms and a Case Study

<u>Class</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Assignment</u>
1	Wed 13 Jan	Introductions <i>Watermelon Eating Contest</i> (1896), dir. James H. White (Thomas Edison film) <i>Watermelon Contest</i> (1900), dir. James H. White (Thomas Edison film)
<i>Martin Luther King Jr. Day</i>		
2	Wed 20 Jan	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915), dir. D. W. Griffith
3	Wed 27 Jan	W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of The Dawn of Freedom" and "Of the Meaning of Progress," from <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (1903) (SP); "The Propaganda of History," from <i>Black Reconstruction</i> (1935) (SP)
<i>SAPR Day</i>		

II. Replaying the Nineteenth Century: Celluloid Slavery

4	Wed 3 Feb	<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (2013), dir. Steve McQueen
5	Wed 10 Feb	Solomon Northup, <i>Twelve Years a Slave</i> (1853)
<i>Presidents' Day</i>		
6	Wed 17 Feb	<i>Django Unchained</i> , dir. Quentin Tarantino (2012)
7	Wed 24 Feb	Pauline E. Hopkins, <i>Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest</i> (1902)
<i>NCLS</i>		

III. Civil Rights Memory; or, The Names of History

8	Wed 2 Mar	<i>Lincoln</i> (2012), dir. Steven Spielberg
9	Wed 9 Mar	Elizabeth Keckley, <i>Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House</i> (1868)

Wed 16 Mar: Midterm Reflection Blog Post due by 4:30 PM

Spring Break

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| 10 | Wed 30 Mar | <i>Malcolm X</i> , dir. Spike Lee (1992) |
| 11 | Wed 6 Apr | <i>Selma</i> (2014), dir. Ava DuVernay |
| 12 | Wed 13 Apr | James Baldwin, <i>The Fire Next Time</i> (1963) |

IV. Towards A New Millennium? Representing Race in the Twenty-First Century

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| 13 | Wed 20 Apr | <i>Bamboozled</i> (2001), dir. Spike Lee |
| 14 | Wed 27 Apr | Ralph Ellison, "Blues People" (1964) and Address at the Whiting Foundation (1992) (SP) |

V. Re-presentations

Sun 1 May: Final Paper Proposals posted to SharePoint by **4:30 PM**

Mon 2 May-Fri 6 May: individual meetings with Prof Laski to discuss your final papers; **post a response** to a colleague's proposal on SharePoint

Wed 11 May: Final Papers Due/Celebratory Session