

Visions of the City in American Cinema

Rutgers-Newark: Fall 2016

21:512:313

Monday / Thursday 1-2:20pm

Smith Hall, 244

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Office hours: Thursdays 2:30-4, and by appointment (I'm on campus most afternoons)

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"The city," as both actual geographic entity and imagined cultural phenomenon, provides a revealing historical window into numerous aspects of American society. Using representations of the city in American film history as our point of entry into these issues, we will explore what these depictions tell us about American cultural concerns. How are mainstream understandings of race, gender, class, and sexuality articulated--or challenged--through cinematic visions of the city? What understanding of the nation's physical landscape have these images contributed to the collective American historical memory, and how has cultural representation interacted with politics and policy?

Required Texts

One book is required: Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema* (Temple University Press, 2003)

Other readings will be on Blackboard and online. You are expected to **print and bring to class** the readings for each given meeting; see laptop policy below.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and Punctuality: You are expected to attend every class, from start to finish. Attendance is mandatory. Your overall course grade will be lowered by one half letter for each unexcused absence beginning with the fourth one. More than eight absences for any reason will result in a loss of credit for the course. Only *documented* emergencies and medical occasions, or officially school-sanctioned activities, will qualify as excused absences.

Class Participation. All students are required to participate in the discussions during class. As a result, you must arrive at class having completed that day's reading assignment and prepared to talk about it. A valuable part of discussions is the posing of questions; no one is expected to grasp perfectly the significance of all the readings. Engaged questions are just as important as comments. Your participation grade will reflect both the frequency of your participation and the quality of your comments and questions. Note that participation also includes active *listening*; sleeping, texting, side conversations, and other forms of non-listening will be met with punitive measures on the participation front.

Quizzes: There will be frequent short quizzes and writing assignments on the readings assigned. Missed quizzes cannot be made up.

Journal: You are expected to keep a journal of your reflections on our films and readings. These reflections can be **informal**, and should range from a few paragraphs to a page; an entry should be written for each class meeting. You can type or write by hand, but hard copies should be kept on hand and brought to class each meeting; they will be collected irregularly, and you receive credit only for those that are turned in when collected.

Short paper: You will complete one short paper (4-5 pages), which contrasts one of our readings to one of the assigned films. This will be due in class Monday, October 17.

Midterm/Final: We will have two exams, to test your knowledge of course materials.

Midterm: Monday, October 31

Final: Thursday, December 22, 3-6pm

Grade Breakdown

Participation: 10%

Quizzes: 10%

Journal: 20%

Short Paper: 20%

Midterm: 20%

Final: 20%

Grading Guidelines

A: work of exceptional quality, showing profound and meaningful engagement with the materials in question, thoughtful and comparative analysis, superior writing—and most importantly, containing a clear, inventive, and persuasive thesis.

B: work that is above average—shows knowledge and/or contains a thesis, but does not develop it as strongly as it could.

C: adequate work that fulfills the assignment—often based on summarizing rather than thesis or analysis.

D: subpar work that falls short of fulfilling the assignment but deserves some credit.

F: work that fails to earn credit for the assignment, including plagiarism.

Late assignments will not be accepted. Extensions may be negotiated under extenuating circumstances (which do *not* include computer-related issues), with some grade deductions, *before* the due date.

No incompletes will be granted unless the matter has been discussed with me in advance.

Policy on Academic Integrity (Cheating and Plagiarism)

You are expected to be familiar with and adhere to the Academic Integrity Policy, available at <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu>. **All students are required to sign the Rutgers Honor Code Pledge.**

Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Any use of the ideas or words of another person without proper acknowledgment of credit will result in penalties up to and possibly including a course grade of F. Likewise for cheating on exams; these are behaviors for which I have no sympathy, and should they occur, they will be handled in a suitably draconian manner.

Note that the uncited usage of uncopyrighted material such as Wikipedia entries still constitutes plagiarism.

Policy on Disabilities (Statement from the Office of Disability Services)

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>. For more information please contact Kate Torres at (973)353-5375 or in the Office of Disability Services in the Paul Robeson Campus Center, in suite 219 or by contacting odsnewark@rutgers.edu.

Policy on Classroom Courtesy

Do not bring food, active cell phones, or other communications devices into the classroom. If you mistakenly do bring an active phone and it rings, silence it immediately; answering will constitute an egregious violation of this course's basic social contract. Texting in class will also result in drastic penalties to your total course grade.

In class discussions, I expect universally respectful interactions. In examining our texts, there may be differing perspectives, disagreements, and debates. This is fine; through such dialogue comes greater understanding. When challenging someone else's perspective, though, refrain from personal attacks or blistering scorn. If someone makes what you consider an offensive or disrespectful comment, note that this does not absolve you of adhering to the iron-clad rule of respect in responding to it.

Failure to abide by these rules may result in a lowered course grade, or removal from the classroom.

Laptop policy: Research shows that open laptops detract from learning environments, both for their users and those around them. This will be a **laptops-closed** classroom. You must print the reading materials, though if you have a flat reading device, that is also acceptable.

I am aware that some students have special needs, and I will absolutely work with you if that pertains; please speak with me immediately, and we can make arrangements. If you see another student with an open laptop, please understand that it is for a good reason, and does not confer permission for others to do the same.

Policy on Office Hours

My office hours are for you. Stop by with any questions you have about assignments, readings, classroom discussions, other pertinent topics, or just drop by to say hello. The only thing I discourage is visiting to cover material from a missed class period; for that,

consult fellow classmates. All else is warmly welcomed. If your schedule conflicts with my office hours, we can set up an appointment at a mutually agreeable time.

Content notice

Some of the material in this course will deal with charged issues of race and sexuality, and some material will include coarse language, scenes of violence, and depictions of sexuality. I will try to alert you to anything that might be potentially upsetting in advance, but know that throughout, the course features adult content. If you are concerned about specific triggers, please speak with me early, and I will work with you.

Tentative syllabus of readings

(September 8/Thurs) Introduction

*Mini-assignment: your vision of the city

*assignment: watch *Manhatta* (1921) and *Sightseeing in Newark* (1927) online

(Sept 12/Mon):

Envisioning the city: discussion of class images and short films

“White Slavery”: Gender and Nationalism in the 1910s

In-class: *The Traffic in Souls* (1913)

(Sept 15/Thurs) Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early America*, chapter 5

(Sept 19/Mon) Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema*, pp.116-146

The Segregated City

Dark Manhattan (1937)—on reserve

(Sept 22/Thurs) Massood, *Black City Cinema*, ch.2

(Sept 26/Mon) Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (selection)

Langston Hughes, “Harlem: A Dream Deferred”

Cities of Noir

In-class: scenes from *The Naked City* (1948), *Pickup on South Street* (1953), *The Big Heat* (1953)

(Sept 29/Thurs AND Oct 3/Mon—complete readings by Oct.3):

Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, selection

Weegee, selected photographs

(<http://museum.icp.org/museum/collections/special/weegee/>)

Blaxploitation and the Urban Ghetto

Watch on your own: one 1970s blaxploitation film BEFORE class Monday

(Oct 6/10—complete readings/film by Oct.10):

Massood, *Black City Cinema*, ch.3

Richard Simon, "The Stigmatization of 'Blaxploitation,'" *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*

Michael Washington and Marvin Berlowitz, "Blaxploitation Films and High School Youth," *Jump Cut* 1975

SHORT PAPER DUE IN CLASS MONDAY, OCTOBER 17

The "Post-racial" Ghetto

Do the Right Thing (1989)

(Oct 13/17—complete readings and film by 17):

Massood, *Black City Cinema*, ch. 4

"Raw Reactions to Film on Racial Tension," *New York Times*, July 3, 1989

"*Do the Right Thing*: Issues and Images," *NYT*, July 9, 1989

DIY and Independent Filmmaking

NOTE: WED. OCTOBER 19, 6-8pm *Troublemakers* screening on campus in Dana Library is STRONGLY suggested

(Oct 20):

Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field, "The Other Side of the Tracks: Nontheatrical Film History, Pre-Rebellion Watts, and *Felicia*," *Cinema Journal* 55.2 (2016)

WATCH ONLINE:

With No One to Help Us

The Jungle

"New Black Cinema," con't.

Boyz N the Hood (1991) OR *Menace II Society* (1993)

(Oct 24/27—complete readings and film by 27)

Massood, ch.5 and ch.6

Newspaper coverage of *Boyz N the Hood*

MONDAY OCTOBER 31: MIDTERM

After midterm, rest of class to be determined by group discussion. One topic will be:

Beyond the Black/White Binary: Chinatown

Chan is Missing (1982)

Jan Lin, "Encountering Chinatown: Tourism, Voyeurism, and the Cinema," *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*

Peter Feng, "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: *Chan is Missing*," *Screening Asian Americans*

Other possibilities:

The Exiles (1961): Native Americans and urban erasure

Cruising (1980): NYC gay underworld immediately before AIDS crisis

Falling Down (1993): white flight/white fear

Se7en (1995): the "evil" city

Wassup Rockers (2006): Latino punk rock and Black/Latino/white tensions

Tyler Perry selection: sub/urban Black middle-class cinema

Shortbus (2006): the queer city

Man Push Cart (2005): Pakistani immigrant experience in NYC

Pariah (2012): lesbian youth in the modern-day NYC

SCHEDULED FINAL EXAM PERIOD: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22, 3-6pm