

****Trash Cinema and the Cultural Politics of Sleaze****

Rutgers-Newark, Fall 2020
21:512:312:01 (20848), 26:510:552:01 (20846), 26:050:521:04 (20849)
Mondays 5:30 PM - 8:10 PM
Remote, synchronous meetings on Zoom

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Course Description

The history of American cinema is often framed around films of great aesthetic merit: *Citizen Kane*, *Sunset Blvd.*, *The Godfather*, *12 Years a Slave*, etc. But what happens when we examine this history from the vantage point of its bottom rungs: the lowly, the disreputable, the trashy, the ephemeral, and the sleazy? What do these films--less important as works of art, perhaps, but equally important as windows into various moments of cultural history--tell us about American society and its anxieties and desires? In this course, we will use several “trashy” films and genres to interrogate this and related questions, situating these often forgotten or dismissed films in terms of historical conflicts over race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. Along the way, we will also contemplate matters of aesthetics, analyzing why these films are considered “trash.” Among the marginalized genres we will discuss are the “white slave” films of the 1910s, exploitation films of the mid-20th century, “sexploitation,” pornography, erotic thrillers, “blaxploitation,” horror, and action films.

Required Texts

Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Duke University Press, 1999)

Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Duke University Press, 2014)

Additional readings posted on blackboard or available through Rutgers Library website (<https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/>)

Assignments

1. "Screening memos" (weekly posts and responses) (20%)
2. Participation and attendance (20%)
3. Paper #1: Assessing Scholars Assessing Trash: short analytical essay about how scholars approach lowbrow culture (4-5 pages, due Week 4, Sept 28) (10%)
4. Paper #2: Reception studies: locate reviews of a film from class or readings from the time of its theatrical release and analyze how the perspectives offered there compare and contrast with the perspectives from class readings (4-5 pages) (25%) (due Week 8, Oct. 26)
5. Paper #3: Genre review: Pick a genre we've discussed in class and explore it in more depth, using 4-5 films, scholarly sources, and some primary sources as a basis for an analysis that tests the interpretations we have read (10 pages undergrads, 15 pages grad students) (25%) (due at scheduled finals date: Monday, December 21, by 9:20pm)

Handouts with specific details about paper assignments will be passed out well in advance.

Participation/attendance policy: Because this course will be run in the seminar mode, participation is crucial. This entails arriving to class prepared, having read and contemplated the assignments, and contributing to class discussions in a substantive manner. Establishing a constructive dialogue is the goal here, not sheer quantity of verbiage. Attendance is required; more than five absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

As part of the participation component, you should bring 1-2 discussion questions to class each meeting.

There's some tension between the fact that having your video on creates a more cohesive sense of community and the fact that not everyone is always able to have their video on for various reasons. I'm going to encourage having video on to the best of your ability, but I'm also not the video police and it won't be a requirement except for special circumstances.

Screening memos: Every week, you will write a 1-2 paragraph commentary on the readings and/or films. This commentary should *not* summarize the material, but rather offer your analytical response to some specific aspect of it--a particular scene, for instance, or the author's overall tone/attitude; it might be something you find problematic, or something you find

valuable. You must post your memo to Blackboard by Monday at noon, and also write a paragraph-length response to someone else's memo. Some weeks I'll give specific instructions, otherwise it's wide open as long as you're engaged and thoughtful.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this course, students will ideally have developed:

- a historical understanding of the ways lowbrow culture reflects and often drives the anxieties, desires, and values of specific historical eras;
- a stronger knowledge of film history, particularly beyond the classical canon;
- engagement with scholarly cultural studies, and particularly how cultural analysis can be undertaken in specifically historical ways attentive to material social contexts;
- stronger writing and analytical skills for contextualizing cultural productions

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.

Note: I realize we are living in unprecedented and uncertain times, and that pandemic realities might affect you, me, or all of us collectively (and that they have already affected many in our community). I intend to approach this and every policy in a spirit of goodwill and generosity—so, the policy is the official word, but I'll work with anyone individually if and when things come up. Just get in touch and we can talk it through!

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, side conversations, and other forms of non-listening will be met with punitive measures on the participation front.

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 Classroom Courtesy

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.

Controversial Subject Matter: In this course, we will be reading, viewing, and discussing themes and imagery that some people might consider controversial or offensive. Indeed, this is part of the course's purpose: to approach these loaded matters analytically, investigating their social meanings and what they tell us about cultural history. If you do not think you are comfortable reading, viewing, and discussing graphic racial and sexual matters, you are advised to drop the course.

****Tentative Syllabus of Readings****

Note: * signifies readings required only for grad students, though undergrads are encouraged to read or even skim these readings too

Readings not from books should be located on the Rutgers library databases, unless marked as being posted to Blackboard.

Week 1: Introduction (TUESDAY SEPT 8)

Pauline Kael, "Trash, Art, and the Movies," *Going Steady: Film Writings 1968-1989*
(**read before our first meeting**: available here, or on library as pdf:
<https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2020/01/23/pauline-kael-trash-art-movies/>)

Week 2: Tastemaking: Drawing Aesthetic Boundaries (SEPT 14)

Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36.4 (1995) (on Blackboard)

David Church, *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (selection on Blackboard)

David Church, "From exhibition to genre: the case of grind-house films," *Cinema Journal* 50.4 (2011): 1-25.

Week 3: "White Slavery": Gender and Nationalism in Silent Cinema (SEPT 21)

watch: *The Traffic in Souls* (1913)

Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early America*, chapter 5 (on Blackboard)

Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema*, pp.116-146 (on Blackboard)

Week 4: Exploitation Films: Origins, Style, Production (SEPT 28)

screening: *Maniac* (1934)

Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3
* for grad students, also Chapter 4

Week 5: Sex, Drugs, and Exploitation in Mid-20th-Century America (OCT 5)

screenings: *Street Corner* (1948), *Reefer Madness* (1936)

Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!, Ch. 5, 6, 9

* for grad students, also Chapters 7 and 8

Week 6: Sexploitation Auteur: Doris Wishman and the Gender Politics of 1960s Grindhouse Fare (OCT 12)

screening: *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (1965)

Michael Bowen, "Embodiment and Realization: The Many Film-Bodies of Doris Wishman," *Wide Angle* 19.3 (1997)

Tania Modleski, "Women's Cinema as Counterphobic Cinema: Doris Wishman as the Last Auteur," *Sleaze Artists* (Blackboard)

Elena Gorfinkel, "The Body's Failed Labor: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53.1 (2012): 79-98.

Week 7: Blaxploitation: Race and the City in the 1970s (OCT 19)

screening: choice of *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, *Black Caesar*, *Slaughter*, *Foxy Brown*, *Trick Baby*

Paula Massood, "Cotton in the City: The Black Ghetto, Blaxploitation, and Beyond," *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Blackboard)

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

Joe Wlodarz, "Beyond the Black macho: Queer blaxploitation," *Velvet Light Trap* 53.1 (2004): 10-25.

* Harry Benshoff, "Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?" *Cinema Journal* 39.2 (2000): 31-50

Week 8: Pornography and Sexual Politics (OCT 26)

screening: *Deep Throat* (1972)

Selection of *Deep Throat* reviews

Andrea Dworkin, selection from *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Blackboard)

Catharine MacKinnon, "Pornography: On Morality and Politics," *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Blackboard)

John D'Emilio, "Women Against Pornography: Feminist Frontier or Social Purity Crusade?" *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (Blackboard)

* Lucas Hilderbrand, "The uncut version: The Mattachine Society's pornographic epilogue," *Sexualities* 19.4 (2016): 449-464

Week 9: Porn Bodies (NOV 2)

Juana María Rodríguez, "Pornographic encounters and interpretative interventions: Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 25.3 (2015): 315-335.

Erin Lee Mock, "The Porn Star and the Polygraph: Linda Lovelace and the Truth of the Female Body," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 34.6 (2017): 560-582.

Emily Shelton, "A star is porn: Corpulence, comedy, and the homosocial cult of adult film star Ron Jeremy," *Camera Obscura* 17.3 (2002): 115-146.

* Whitney Strub, "Sex Wishes and Virgin Dreams: Zebedy Colt's Reactionary Queer Heterosmut and the Elusive Porn Archive," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23.3 (2017): 359-390.

Week 10: The Black Body in Ecstasy (NOV 9)

Optional screening: *Lialeh* (1974)

Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, whole book (undergrads can skip—or better, skim--Chapter 1)

Week 11: Filth: John Waters (NOV 16)

screening: *Pink Flamingos* (1973)

J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (selection, Blackboard)

Matthew Tinkcom, "'Beyond the Critics' Reach': John Waters and the Trash Aesthetic," *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2002)

Mary Rizzo, "From Blight to Filth: John Waters in the Age of Urban Renewal," *Come and Be Shocked: Baltimore beyond John Waters and The Wire* (Johns Hopkins Press, 2020, Blackboard)

*Anna Breckon, "The erotic politics of disgust: Pink Flamingos as queer political cinema," *Screen* 54.4 (2013): 514-533.

Week 12: American Fear: Horror Films (NOV 23)

screening: *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974)

Matt Becker, "A Point of Little Hope: Hippie Horror Films and the Politics of Ambivalence," *Velvet Light Trap* 57 (2006)

Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations* 20 (1987)

Week 13: New Right Politics: Action and Urban Nightmares (NOV 30)

screenings: scenes from *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and *Judgment Night* (1993)

Susan Jeffords, "Hard Bodies: The Reagan Heroes," *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (Blackboard)

Steve Macek, "The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia," *Urban Nightmare: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City* (Blackboard)

Week 14 (DEC 7): to be decided!

Accommodation and Support Statement

Rutgers University Newark (RU-N) is committed to the creation of an inclusive and safe learning environment for all students and the University as a whole. RU-N has identified the following resources to further the mission of access and support:

For Individuals with Disabilities: The Office of Disability Services (ODS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter barriers due to disability. Once a student has completed the ODS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and reasonable accommodations are determined to be necessary and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be provided. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at ods.rutgers.edu. Contact ODS at (973)353-5375 or via email at ods@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals who are Pregnant: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance is available to assist with any concerns or potential accommodations related to pregnancy. Students may contact the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance at (973) 353-1906 or via email at TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Absence Verification: The Office of the Dean of Students can provide assistance for absences related to religious observance, emergency or unavoidable conflict (e.g., illness, personal or family emergency, etc.). Students should refer to [University Policy 10.2.7](#) for information about expectations and responsibilities. The Office of the Dean of Students can be contacted by calling (973) 353-5063 or emailing deanofstudents@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals with temporary conditions/injuries: The Office of the Dean of Students can assist students who are experiencing a temporary condition or injury (e.g., broken or sprained limbs, concussions, or recovery from surgery). Students experiencing a temporary condition or injury should submit a request using the following link: <https://temporaryconditions.rutgers.edu>.

For English as a Second Language (ESL): The Program in American Language Studies (PALS) can support students experiencing difficulty in courses due to English as a Second Language (ESL) and can be reached by emailing PALS@newark.rutgers.edu to discuss potential supports.

For Gender or Sex-Based Discrimination or Harassment: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance can assist students who are experiencing any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, or stalking. Students can report an incident to the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance by calling (973) 353-1906 or emailing TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu. Incidents may also be reported by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNReportingForm. For more information, students should refer to the University's Student Policy Prohibiting Sexual Harassment, Sexual Violence, Relationship Violence, Stalking and Related Misconduct located at <http://compliance.rutgers.edu/title-ix/about-title-ix/title-ix-policies/>.

For support related to interpersonal violence: The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance can provide any student with confidential support. The office is a **confidential**

resource and does *not* have an obligation to report information to the University's Title IX Coordinator. Students can contact the office by calling (973) 353-1918 or emailing run.vpva@rutgers.edu. There is also a confidential text-based line available to students; students can text (973) 339-0734 for support.

For Crisis and Concerns: The Campus Awareness Response and Education (CARE) Team works with students in crisis to develop a support plan to address personal situations that might impact their academic performance. Students, faculty and staff may contact the CARE Team by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNCARE or emailing careteam@rutgers.edu.

For Stress, Worry, or Concerns about Well-being: The Counseling Center has confidential therapists available to support students. Students should reach out to the Counseling Center to schedule an appointment: counseling@newark.rutgers.edu or (973) 353-5805. If you are not quite ready to make an appointment with a therapist but are interested in self-help, check out *TAO at Rutgers-Newark* for an easy, web-based approach to self-care and support: <https://tinyurl.com/RUN-TAO>.

For emergencies, call 911 or contact Rutgers University Police Department (RUPD) by calling (973) 353-5111.

Lectures and materials utilized in this course, including but not limited to videocasts, podcasts, visual presentations, assessments, and assignments, are protected by United States copyright laws as well as Rutgers University policy. As the instructor of this course, I possess sole copyright ownership. You are permitted to take notes for personal use or to provide to a classmate also currently enrolled in this course. Under no other circumstances is distribution of recorded or written materials associated with this course permitted to any internet site or similar information-sharing platform without my express written consent. Doing so is a violation of the university's [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

Similarly, these copyright protections extend to original papers you produce for this course. In the event that I seek to share your work further, I will first obtain your written consent to do so. Finally, as the instructor for this course, I have the responsibility to protect students' right to privacy. Classroom recordings of students will therefore be treated as educational records under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the U.S. federal law that governs access to educational information and records. Instructors and students must provide notification if any part of online sessions are to be recorded, and such recordings cannot be circulated outside the course.