

Critical Issues in Race, Ethnicity, and Film
Contemporary Issues in Media Studies (04:567:472:01)
Topics in World Cinema (01:195:377:01)

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Office hours: M: 4-6 P.M.

Screening: M 7:15-10:05 P.M. in ARH 100 (DC)
Class: T TH 1:40-3:00 P.M. in TIL 116 (LC)

Course description:

In this course we will engage critically with the ways in which film produced inside and outside of the United States has contributed to the construction of racial and ethnic identities. The first half of the semester will focus intensively on Hollywood and American independent cinema; we will study how dominant representations of a range of different groups are created and circulated on film, and how they intersect with questions of gender, class and other identity categories. The second half of the semester will expand out to a consideration of films from around the globe. We will explore how phenomena such as slavery, colonialism, warfare and immigration have affected racial and ethnic formations and relations in different geographical areas, and discuss how a variety of world film traditions have engaged with diversity and marginalization.

Goals of the course:

1. To understand the Hollywood system of film production and its dominant modes of representing race and ethnicity in the US (African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Arabs/Muslims).
2. To explore how both American independent and non-US filmmakers may implicitly or explicitly seek to “talk back” to Hollywood, and offer more complex constructions of race and ethnicity.
3. To study a number of world cinema films that negotiate different nations’ or regions’ racial/ethnic formations, focusing on them as products of specific cultures, in which filmmakers are not primarily concerned with engaging with (“talking back” or countering) Hollywood.
4. To understand racial/ethnic constructions on film in relation to gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationhood and questions of immigration

Schedule of classes and assignments

T Jan 19: At Whose Expense? In this first class we will begin discussion of the ways in which film (re)produces images of racial and ethnic identities. We will also screen and discuss the short film “Haunted Spooks” (US, 1920; Harold Lloyd).

The Social Construction of Race in the United States.

Contrary to popular belief the notion of race is neither natural nor eternal. In this module we will look at how “race” is both historically new and socially constructed, and we will discuss race in the specific context of the United States.

Th Jan 21: Race as a construction, and race in the United States

Reading: Linda Holtzman, “Racing in America—Fact or Fiction?” and “Stories of Race in Popular Culture”

Film Language and Processes of Racialization

Meaning in film is created out of complexly composed and layered sound and image tracks. In this module we will explore how camera movements, framing, lighting, cross-cutting, and other film techniques function to create meaning--and are tied up in the construction of racial and ethnic identities.

M Jan 25: Screening: Touch of Evil (US 1958; Orson Welles)

T Jan 26: Stereotyping, realism and representation in film. Begin discussion of mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound, with stills and clips from Touch of Evil.

Reading: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation,” in Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media

Th Jan 28: Finish discussion of film language and processes of racialization, with examples from Touch of Evil.

Reading: Selections from Richard Dyer, “The Light of the World” (Intro/”Light and the Photographic Media,” “Lighting for Whiteness” and “The Glow of White Women”) in White

Talking Back and the “Race Film”

In this module we will note how the earliest examples of dominant cinema in the United States were fully implicated in the creation and circulation of racist images, and we will also study how African American film critics and directors of the time period launched a vigorous, if sometimes controversial, response.

M Feb 1: Screening: Within Our Gates (US, 1920; Oscar Micheaux)

T Feb 2: Contextualization with clips from Birth of a Nation (US, 1915; D.W. Griffith); discussion of Griffith as the “Father of Hollywood,” and responses to his representations in the black press; discussion of the emergence of “race films”; begin analysis of Within Our Gates.

Reading: Anna Everett, “The Birth of a Nation and Interventionist Criticism,” in Returning the Gaze.

Th Feb 4: Finish analysis of Within Our Gates.

Reading: Jane Gaines, “Fire and Desire,” from Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Era.

Latin Masculinity and Machismo

In this section we will unpack the representation of Latinos in film with a specific focus on the bandido stereotype, its historical roots in the Mexican Revolution, and how history is warped by Hollywood.

M Feb 8: Screening: Traffic (US, 2000; Steven Soderbergh)

T Feb 9: Screen and discuss “The Bronze Screen: One Hundred Years of the Latino Image in Hollywood”

Th Feb 11: Guest Lecture by Prof. Regina Marchi

Reading: Charles Berg, “Latino Images in Film”

Disney Does Difference

Disney escapes critical scrutiny because of its image as the producer of “wholesome family entertainment.” Behind this façade is a disturbing history of racial stereotypes within Disney animated films. In this module, we look at race and gender in Disney.

M Feb 15: Screening: Mulan (US, 1998; Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook)

T Feb 16: Screen and discuss “Mickey Mouse Monopoly”

Reading: Janet Wasko, Chapters 3 and 4 of Understanding Disney; “The 9 Most Racist Disney Characters” available online at http://www.cracked.com/article_15677_9-most-racist-disney-characters.html

Th Feb 18: Class: Discuss gender and race in Mulan.

Reading: Janet Wasko, Chapter 5 of Understanding Disney

The Oriental Other

Hollywood inherited many of the stereotypes of Arabs, Persians and Muslims from Europe. Yet, as we will see in this module, it also produced its own vocabulary in relation to various events in the Middle East.

M Feb 22: Screening: Not Without My Daughter (US, 1991; Brian Gilbert)

T Feb 23: Class: Screen and discuss “Reel Bad Arabs.”

Reading: Christian Christiansen, “Islam and the Media”; Douglas Little, “Orientalism, American Style”

Th Feb 25: Class: Discuss Not Without My Daughter. Empire speaks back: Discuss selections from Without My Daughter (led by Jill Campaiola [Journalism and Media Studies/CRE Graduate Fellow])

Reading: Melani McAlister, “Iran, Islam, and the Terrorist Threat, 1979-89”

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Alternatives to the Orientalist Framework

In this module we will look at films that challenge Orientalist frameworks and that offer more complex representations of Iranians, including works scripted and directed by Iranian women.

M Mar 1: Screening: Persepolis (France-US, 2007; Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi)

T Mar 2: Discussion of Persepolis. Guest lecture: Prof. Golberg Bashi?

Reading: Selection from Arab/Iranian feminist work (Leila Ahmed perhaps? and/or Fatima Mernissi?); Comparative Analysis on the representation of women (intro to the Iranian revolution and the women’s movement)

Th Mar 4: Finish discussion of Persepolis and comparative analysis with Not Without My Daughter. Introduction to filmmaking in Iran after the Islamic Revolution and the Law of Modesty; the Iranian film boom and women before and behind the camera. Discussion of a brief clip or two selected from among the following films: Ten; Two Women; Hidden Half; The Circle; The Day I Became a Woman.

Reading: Negar Mottahedeh, “New Iranian Cinema”

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Alternatives to the Orientalist Framework (continued)

M Mar 8: Screening: The Apple (Iran, 1998; Samira Makhmalbaf)

T Mar 9: Discussion of The Apple. No reading for today; distribution of review sheet for exam.

Th Mar 11: Mid Term Exam

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SPRING BREAK

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Screening (Out) the “Other”

Many theorists believe that “modern” racism emerged in Europe when the persecution of “internal others” (such as Jews, Muslims and Roma) was supplemented by the colonization and enslavement of “external others” as Spain and Portugal launched the imperial project. In this module we will discuss how contemporary European filmmakers are engaging with the long-silenced history of racism in Europe.

M Mar 22: Screening: Code Unknown (France-Germany-Romania, 2000; dir. Michael Haneke)

T Mar 23: Discussion of notions of “internal others” and “external others” in Europe; begin analysis of Code Unknown.

Reading: Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism” and “Is There a Neo-Racism?”

Th Mar 25: Guest lecture by Professor Fatima Naqvi (Germanic, Russian, and East European Languages and Literatures/Cinema Studies) on Code Unknown (with reference to Caché as well)

Reading: Fatima Naqvi “Mediated Invisibility: Michael Haneke,” from The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimization

Diasporic Filmmaking

Many of the world’s filmmakers work in, and/or reflect upon, conditions of diaspora. In this module we will study the specific case of Latin American Jewish directors, whose films feature characters who must come to terms with collective traumas of expulsion and genocide, even as they navigate the complexity of ethnic and racial formations in post-colonial/neo-colonial societies.

M Mar 29: Screening: Lost Embrace (Argentina, 2004; Daniel Burman)

T Mar 30: Discuss the history of Jews in Latin America/Argentina, as well as the legacy of Argentina’s nineteenth-century “whitening” campaigns. Begin analysis of Lost Embrace.

Reading: Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, “Introduction” to Rethinking Jewish Latin-Americans

Th Ap 1: Finish analysis of Lost Embrace.

Reading: Pablo Suárez, “The Burman Identity”

Understanding Whiteness

The visibility and invisibility of race is a product of the power relations in any society. Here we examine how American independent filmmakers may interrogate constructions of whiteness in the United States in relation to class, nation, citizenship, and immigration.

M Ap 5: Screening: Frozen River (US, 2008; Courtney Hunt)

T Ap 6 : Discussion of Frozen River

Reading: bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination”; Brent Heavner, “Liminality and Normative Whiteness: A Critical Reading of Poor White Trash”

Th Ap 8: something on immigration, border controls etc.

Reading:

The Invisibility and Hypervisibility of Race and Ethnicity in Brazil

In this section we will study how recent Brazilian films have capitalized on and/or critiqued the tension between the social invisibility of Brazil's marginalized communities, and the hypervisibility of criminalized minorities in the media.

M Ap 12: Screening: Bus 174 (Brazil, 2002; José Padilha and Felipe Lacerda)

T Ap 13: Discuss the legacy of slavery and socio-economic stratification in Latin America in general and Brazil in particular (with Fatimah Williams Castro [Department of History/CRE Graduate Fellow]). Begin discussion of Bus 174.

Reading: Denise Ferreira da Silva, "The Facts of Blackness: Brazil is Not (Quite) the United States ... and Racial Politics in Brazil?"

Th Ap 15: Finish discussion of Bus 174.

Reading: Marta Peixoto, "Rio's Favelas in Recent Fiction and Film: Commonplaces of Urban Segregation"; Amy Villarejo, "Bus 174 and the Living Present"

An(other) Dominant Cinema: The Case of Bollywood

Coming to the fore after Indian independence and partition, Bollywood--the world's largest film industry--has produced dominant constructions of race and ethnicity in India. Here we will explore how contemporary Indian filmmakers working to infuse an "arthouse" sensibility into Bollywood productions have sought to negotiate the nation's diversity.

M Ap 19: Screening: Dil Se (India, 1998; dir. Mani Ratnam)

T Ap 20: Discuss separatist struggles and issues of race and ethnicity in India; introduction to the Bollywood industry. Begin analysis of Dil Se.

Reading: Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Modernity and Ethnicity in India: A History for the Present"

Th Ap 22: Finish analysis of Dil Se.

Reading: Ananya Kabir, "Allegories of Alienation and Politics of Bargaining: Minority Subjectivities in Mani Ratnam's Dil Se"

Trading on Stereotypes in Transnational Cinemas

In this final module we will discuss how contemporary transnational (in this case, pan-Asian) films have functioned to globalize--and perhaps "make light of"?--the traffic in ethnic, racial and other stereotypes.

M Ap 26: Screening: Last Life in the Universe (Thailand-Japan, 2003; dir Pen-ek Ratanaruang)

T Ap 27: Guest lecturer on race/ethnicity/stereotypes in a pan-Asian context???

Reading: Francis Daehoon Lee, “Race and Hegemony in Asia: Reframing Race, Racism and Diasporic Identity in Asia”

Th Ap 29: Finish discussion of Last Life in the Universe.

Reading: Brian Ruh, “Last Life in the Universe: Nationality, Technology, Authorship”
