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notes on syllabus for FLM 283: “The ‘Inner City’ in American Film”

I taught “The ‘Inner City’ in American Film” as a film elective, open to all students at the college regardless of major. It was conceived of as a hybrid Film Studies and American Studies course. My idea was to narrow the topic of film and the city by focusing on representations of the low-income city, which I termed the “inner city,” consciously using the quotation marks to denote that this course was largely about cinematic imaginings of low income urban neighborhoods rather than their sociological realities. I planned the course chronologically from the silent era until the 1990s, with a focus on African American narratives but with some attention to Chicano, Irish, and Italian-American narratives. I hoped students would find both similarities and differences in the films’ themes (such as the aestheticization of poverty and the gangster as the dark side of the American dream), and in the general portrayal of ethnic/ racial groups that have traditionally been “othered.” The readings were a mix of scholarship about the specific films, some urban history, and some geography theory that shed light on the way the screen spaces were constructed (ie., pairing Edward Relph’s phenomenological theory of inside-ness and outside-ness with Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*). Finally, my consideration of which films to show was also determined by the desire to show how “mainstream” (Hollywood, white, middle-class, etc.) culture has imagined the inner city, mixed with films by directors of color working both in and outside of Hollywood.

Film 283 • The “Inner City” in American Film • Spring 2010

Tues./Thurs. 9:30 - 10:45 am Ettinger 201

Screenings Wed. 8:00-10:00 pm Ettinger 201

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(or by appointment) in Center for the Arts 269

This course examines the historical representations of the inner city in American film, focusing on the ways in which successive immigrant and racial minority groups have been portrayed on screen and their relationships to the urban space they inhabit. The primary focus of the course is the representation of African Americans, but we will also consider Chicano/a culture, and compare the portrayal of both of these groups to that of European immigrants in the city. Films will include works by both directors of color and white directors in a range of styles. We will explore issues such as the entertainment value of poverty and the qualities of the gangster genre. The comparative approach sheds light on how these tropes are altered by race.

The chronological exploration of our topic allows us to observe some trends in American film history; to intersect with film genre study (gangster, film noir, and social problem films); and to get acquainted with prominent American directors (D. W. Griffith, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee). Thus the class serves as both an in-depth case study of cinematic geography and an introduction to film studies methodology.

Course Requirements:

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|----------------------------|-----|
| Attendance & Participation | 15% |
| Response Papers | 20% |
| Oral Presentation | 10% |
| Research Paper Proposal | 5% |
| Research Paper | 25% |
| Final Exam | 25% |

Attendance As a class that goes beyond “just the facts”—one that encourages you to think critically, interpret films as artistic works, and make connections between films and their social contexts—a crucial part of the class is discussion. I will also sometimes lecture on points that are not in the readings, and we will together consider which aspects of the readings are more important than others. All of these activities mean that your attendance is critical to your success in class. You are allowed 3 absences without penalty (no explanations needed); after that your attendance and participation grade will fall to a B, then a C, etc. Two tardies= one unexcused absence. *Falsifying attendance records in any way (either by signing someone else into a class or screening, or by attending only to sign in and then leaving) shall be considered a violation of the Academic Behavior Code and reported to the Dean immediately.*

Participation means regular contributions to class discussions and listening with attention when others are speaking. It may also include periodic in-class writings or exercises. We have a small class and to take advantage of that, every student should show up having done the readings and be prepared to participate in class. This means having noted specific ideas from the films and readings you think

are worth discussing, including questions or passages that you find puzzling. It also means listening to what your classmates say and responding to them, not just to me.

2-3 page Response Papers will provide you with an opportunity to explore a single concept related to a film or reading and get feedback on your writing during the semester before writing your final paper.

Oral Presentation will involve presenting the research you are conducting for your final paper to the class. This research will be on some topic relating to urban films; a list of potential topics will be provided.

Research Paper: A 7-8 page research paper that combines your own film analysis with other scholars' research and criticism to make an interpretive argument. Your approach may be primarily aesthetic, sociological, geographic, or theoretical.

(More details on papers and presentations to be provided in assignment sheets.)

Final Exam: The final exam will draw on material from the readings, class discussions, and film viewings. It will be a take-home essay exam with a 24-hour turn-around time.

Required Texts:

Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema*

Articles on Blackboard under "Course Documents"

Film Screenings: The films shown should also be considered like a textbook; your attendance is required at the weekly film screenings. This is because film is a medium created for a large screen to be watched with a group of people. Watching on your own is not a substitute, although repeat viewings will be necessary for essay writing and studying. Some guidelines for behavior at our screenings:

- 1) Do not talk during the film.
- 2) Do not send or read text messages during the film.
- 3) Do not get up during the film unless absolutely necessary.
- 4) You should take notes during or immediately after the film about content and style. These notes will help you review for discussions and tests.
- 5) You should arrive on time for the screenings so as not to disturb others, and stay until the end of the credits.

Course Policies:

Late Papers

Papers are due at the **beginning** of class on the day they are due. Late papers will be marked down one-third letter grade per weekday late.

Email Correspondence

I will make reasonable attempts to respond to your questions by email, but I'm not online constantly. Allow for a 24-hour response time; don't send me an email in the middle of the night and expect a response before class the next day.

The Academic Behavior Code

You are responsible for knowing the details of the Academic Behavior Code as described in your Student Handbook. Any violations will be reported to the Dean of the College for Academic Life and the appropriate course of action will be taken, ranging from failing the assignment to failing the course. Abiding by the Code in this class includes not giving or receiving help on quizzes or the exam, nor plagiarizing written work. Plagiarism includes submitting someone else's work as your own, submitting your own work completed for another class without my permission, or copying exact phrases or specific ideas from another source without citing them. *Please ask me if you are unsure whether you need to cite a source.*

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities requesting classroom or course accommodations must complete a multi-faceted application/approval process through the Office of Disability Services prior to the development and implementation of an Accommodation Plan. Each Plan is individually and collaboratively developed with the directors or other staff of the following Departments, as appropriate: Academic Resource Center, Counseling Services, Student Health Services, and the Office of Disability Services. If you have not already done so, please contact the appropriate Department to begin a dialogue regarding your academic needs and recommended accommodations, auxiliary aids, and services.

~ SEMESTER SCHEDULE ~

This schedule is subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class, and students are responsible for keeping up with such changes.

→ Readings must be completed by the day under which they are listed.

Week 1

Tues 1/19 Class Introduction

Wed 1/20 Screening: *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (D.W. Griffith, 1912, 17 m.) and *Scar of Shame* (Frank Peregrini, 1927, 76 m.)

Thurs 1/21 Silent Streets

- excerpt from Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*

Week 2

1/26 African Americans in the City and Country, in Hollywood and in Race Movies

- *Black City Cinema*, introduction, Ch 1, & pp. 45-56 of Ch 2

1/27 Screening: *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932, 93 m.) & clips of *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931)

1/28 The 1930s Gangster Film: Urban History and Allegory

- excerpt from Jon C. Teaford, *The Twentieth-century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality*

Week 3

2/2 The 1930s Gangster Film: Genre

- excerpt from Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*

2/3 Screening: *Dark Manhattan* (Harry L. Fraser, 1937, 70 m.) and *Souls of Sin* (Powell Lindsay, 1949, 64 m.)

2/4 Black Gangster Films

- Mark A. Reid, “The Black Gangster Film” from *Film Genre Reader*
- Jonathan Munby, “The Underworld Films of Oscar Micheaux and Ralph Cooper: Toward a Genealogy of the Black Screen Gangster” from *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*

Week 4

2/9 Moral Geographies

- Colin McArthur, “Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City” from *The Cinematic City*
- *Black City Cinema*, pp. 57-77

2/10 Public Lecture by Paula Massood: “Numbers Runners and New Negroes: Harlem in Sound-Era Race Film”

→ Note: different time & place: 7 pm Miller Forum, Moyer Hall

2/11 Special Guest: Paula Massood

→ come with questions/topics for discussion

Week 5

2/16 The City of Film Noir

- excerpt from Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*

*** Response Paper # 1 Due***

2/17 Screening: *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955, 100 m.)

2/18 Social Problems & Sensationalism in the 1950s

- Will Straw, “Urban Confidential: The Lurid City of the 1950s” from *The Cinematic City*

Week 6

2/23 Representing Places

- Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn, “Re-Presenting the Place Pastiche” from *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*

- Jeff Hopkins, “A Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)representation” from *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*

2/24 Screening: *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973, 112 m.)

2/25 Immigrant Enclaves

- excerpt from Robert Casillo, *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese*

Week 7

3/2 White Ethnic Nostalgia

- excerpt from Robert Zecker, *Metropolis: The American City in Popular Culture*

3/3 Screening: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971, 97 m.)

3/4 Heroes of the Ghetto: Blaxploitation of the 1970s

- *Black City Cinema*, chapter 3

Week 8

SPRING BREAK

Week 9

3/16 The 1970s Ghetto Landscape

- Excerpt from Jon C Teaford, *The Twentieth-century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality*
- excerpt from Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*

3/17 Screening: *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971, 100 m.)

3/18 no class

Week 10

3/23 Commercial Blaxploitation and Fantasies of Mobility

- Peter Stanfield, “Walking the Streets: Black Gangsters and the ‘Abandoned City’ in the 1970s Blaxploitation Cycle” from *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*

*** Response Paper # 2 Due***

3/24 Screening: *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1977, 83 m.)

3/25 Filming Ordinary Life in the Ghetto

- Paula Massood, “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: Killer of Sheep, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse”

Week 11

3/30 The Ghetto As Seen From Inside and Out

- excerpt from Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities*
- excerpt from Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*

Final Project Proposal Due

3/31 Screening: *Zoot Suit* (Luis Valdez, 1981, 103 m.)

4/1 Chicano Los Angeles

- Excerpts from Mauricio Mazon, *The Zoot Suit Riots*

Week 12

4/6 Performing History

- Mark Pizzato, “Brechtian and Aztec Violence in Valdez’s *Zoot Suit*”

4/7 Screening: *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989, 120 m.)

4/8 Performing Brooklyn

- *Black City Cinema*, chapter 4

Week 13

4/13 Spike Lee Re-maps Urban Space

- David B. Clarke, “Introduction” from *The Cinematic City*
- excerpt from Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

4/14 Screening: *Boyz in the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991, 112 m.)

4/15 Coming of Age in the Hood

- *Black City Cinema*, chapter 5

Week 14

4/20 Los Angeles History Part II

- Josh Sides, “Straight Into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb” from *American Quarterly*

4/21 Screening: *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991, 101 m.)

4/22 The Hood as Entertainment

- excerpt from Steve Macek, *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City*

Week 15

4/27 student presentations

4/28 **Screening:** *Mi Vida Loca* (Allison Anders, 1993, 92 m.)

4/29 Girls in the Hood

- Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Homegirls, Cholas, and Pachucas In Cinema: Taking Over The Public Sphere"

Week 16

5/4 student presentations

5/6 student presentations

Paper #2 due Wed. May 12 by 5 pm in my mailbox