

HUMN 200: SLAVERY ON FILM

Time: Tuesday & Thursday 12:30–1:45 p.m.

Classroom: Griffin 129

Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday 12:00–1:00, 2:15–4:15 p.m.

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COURSE OVERVIEW

The earliest blockbuster films, from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) before sound and color to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) after, prominently featured stories of the Old South, stories of slavery. Though today's Hollywood studios tread similar thematic ground with historical films like *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Harriet* (2019) and horror films like *Get Out* (2017) and *Antebellum* (2020), they're arguably telling vastly different stories about the history and afterlives of slavery in the United States. In examining a range of US films from the interwar period to the present, this course will trace the thematic development of slavery as a subject of film alongside the development of filmmaking technologies across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Likewise, it will consider the influence of earlier theatrical forms, such as blackface minstrelsy, on the creation and performance of enslaved and emancipated Black characters. Furthermore, it will investigate how conventions of narrative genres such as action, comedy, drama, horror, and romance shape the stories about slavery that film tells.

Why does slavery appear so often on film? What are the legacies of the early films, and why are contemporary filmmakers returning to slavery in this cultural moment? How do these films call their audiences to bear witness to slavery? How do they understand slavery as a cultural, political, and economic institution? What do the stories these films tell about slavery and Blackness reveal about the historical moment in which they were created? These are just some of the questions we'll explore in this course.

COURSE TEXTS TO ACQUIRE

Please view the following films before class in preparation for discussion. All are available on reserve in the library at no cost to you, and some are available to stream for free via links posted to Moodle. Additionally, most are available for rent or purchase, and some are available through paid subscription streaming services; for options, check justwatch.com. Please note that you'll probably want to purchase rather than rent films about which you plan to write.

Antebellum. Dir. Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz. Perf. Janelle Monáe, Eric Lange, Jena Malone, and Jack Huston. Lionsgate, 2020. Blu-ray disc.

The Birth of a Nation. 1915. Dir. D. W. Griffith. Perf. Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Henry Walthall, and Miriam Cooper. Kino, 2002. DVD.

Emperor. Dir. Mark Amin. Perf. James Cromwell, Kat Graham, Bruce Dern, and Ben Robson. Universal, 2020. Blu-ray disc.

Get Out. Dir. Jordan Peele. Perf. Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams, Bradley Whitford, and Caleb

Landry Jones. Universal, 2017. DVD.

Gone with the Wind. 1939. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard, and Olivia de Havilland. Warner, 2009. DVD.

Harriet. Dir. Kasi Lemmons. Perf. Jennifer Nettles, Joe Alwyn, Cynthia Erivo, and Janelle Monáe. Universal, 2019. Blu-ray disc.

The Littlest Rebel. 1935. Dir. David Butler. Perf. Shirley Temple, John Boles, Jack Holt, and Karen Morley. Fox, 2005. DVD.

Twelve Years a Slave. Dir. Steve McQueen. Perf. Chiwetel Ejiofor, Michael Fassbender, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Paul Dano. Twentieth Century Fox, 2013. DVD.

Uncle Tom's Cabin. 1927. Dir. Harry A. Pollard. Perf. James B. Lowe, Virginia Grey, George Siegmann, and Margarita Fischer. Kino, 1999. DVD.

COURSE TEXTS ON MOODLE

Bogle, Donald. "Black Beginnings: From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *The Birth of a Nation*." *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. 5th ed. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. 1–14. Print.

Hartman, Saidiya. "The Path of Strangers." Prologue. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, 2006. 3–18. Print.

hooks, bell. "Revolutionary Attitude." Introduction. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. 1992. New York: Routledge, 2015. 1–7. Print.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. Selections from "The Right to Look: Or, How to Think with and against Visuality." Introduction. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012. 1–5, 10–13, 25–26. Print.

Nichols, Bill. Selections from *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*. New York: Norton, 2010. 5–15, 23–25, 50–52, 64–66. Print.

Robinson, Cedric J. Selections from "The Inventions of the Negro." *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007. 45–62. Print.

Saylor, Colton. Selections from "Breaking Down the Door: Horror and Black Radical Fiction." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 13.2 (2019): 91–103, 117. Project Muse. Web.

Sharpe, Christina. "Making Monstrous Intimacies: Surviving Slavery, Bearing Freedom." *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 1–13. Print.

COURSE COMPONENTS

Participation: Attendance and participation are acts of solidarity with your classmates. Because discussion is a collective enterprise, your active participation is vital to everyone’s intellectual growth. Please strive to: 1) be on time to and actively present in class (whether in person or virtual); 2) prepare for and meaningfully contribute to communal inquiries and discussions; and 3) show mutual respect for your classmates. When you submit each of our four major assignments, you’ll self-evaluate your participation in the course thus far, and I’ll respond with feedback.

Close Readings: Because academic writing is the main method by which scholars share research and advance knowledge, you’ll complete two writing assignments over the course of the term. These roughly 1,000-word essays are designed to develop your skills of close reading, synthesizing, and responding to critical texts. I’ll distribute a prompt for each assignment in class at least two weeks in advance of the due date.

Examinations: There will be both a midterm and a final examination. The midterm examination will cover texts and concepts from the first half of the course, and the final examination will be cumulative. Because they are composed primarily of essay questions, you’re welcome to use hard copy course texts and notes during the examinations. We’ll discuss what to expect and how to prepare for the examinations in more detail as they approach.

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Participation	15%
Close Reading #1	20%
Close Reading #2	20%
Midterm Examination	20%
Final Examination	25%

GRADE SCALE

A: 100%–90%
B: 89%–80%
C: 79%–70%
D: 69%–60%
F: 59%–0%

While individual assignments may receive half letter grades (pluses or minuses), final grades are calculated according to the above scale.

COURSE VALUES

Basic Needs: I’m committed to ensuring that you have access to the living conditions that you need to succeed in this course. If you face challenges securing food or housing, please contact the Dean of Students and me, if you feel comfortable doing so, for support. That way, I can provide you with any resources I have access to.

Cancellations: Please check your email and/or our class Teams chat regularly in case of class cancellations or modifications. If class is canceled or being held in an alternate virtual format, I’ll

send information via email and Teams chat.

Disabilities: I'm committed to ensuring that you have access to the learning conditions that you need to succeed in this course. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please contact me as well as the Office of Disability Services as soon as you're able. More information can be found at <https://disability.louisiana.edu>.

Electronics: If electronic devices are fundamental to your learning process, please feel free to use them in class. That being said, please be mindful of your ability to distract yourself and others when using electronics for other purposes during class time.

Format: Our course is designated *hyflex*, meaning that we may meet in-person, virtually, or any combination of the two. I'll be holding office hours in my office and teaching from our classroom (unless otherwise indicated via email and/or Teams chat). Please feel free to join me in my office and the classroom in person or via Zoom, whichever is more conducive to your learning and comfort on any given day. You can access our Zoom classroom through Moodle and email me for a link to Zoom office hours.

Late Assignments: I encourage you to submit assignments on time. That being said, life happens. If you're having trouble submitting an assignment on time, please contact me as soon as you're able so that we can make alternate arrangements.

Plagiarism: Because academic writing creates new knowledge, plagiarism is considered a serious ethical violation. For this reason, plagiarism results in, at a minimum, a failing grade for the assignment, and, at a maximum, dismissal from the university. The university's official definition of plagiarism is: "a specific type of cheating. It occurs when a student claims originality for the ideas or words of another person, when the student presents as a new and original idea or product anything which in fact is derived from an existing work, or when the student makes use of any work or production already created by someone else without giving credit to the source. In short, plagiarism is the use of unacknowledged materials in the preparation of assignments." If you have any questions or concerns about plagiarism, please contact me as soon as you're able.

Safety: Your physical, mental, and emotional safety are of the utmost importance to me. In this COVID crisis, please put yours and your loved ones' safety first. If you're in need of alternate arrangements for any aspect of this course, please contact me as soon as you're able. In addition, for everyone's health and wellbeing, please strive to adhere to social distancing standards when you're joining us in the physical classroom, including maintaining six feet of distance from your classmates and wearing a face covering at all times. If you're feeling even a hint of illness, please join us via Zoom.

COURSE SCHEDULE

DATE	READINGS	DEADLINES
Thursday 1/14	Syllabus and Nichols, Selections from <i>Engaging Cinema</i> (Moodle)	
	<i>Beginnings and Black Characterization</i>	
Tuesday 1/19	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915) (0:00 to 1:31)	

Thursday 1/21	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (1915) (1:31 to 3:13)	
Tuesday 1/26	Bogle, “Black Beginnings” (Moodle)	
Thursday 1/28	<i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i> (1927) (0:00 to 1:03)	
Tuesday 2/2	<i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i> (1927) (1:03 to 1:52)	
Thursday 2/4	Robinson, Selections from “The Inventions of the Negro” (Moodle)	
	<i>The Lose Cause and the Afterlives of Slavery</i>	
Tuesday 2/9	<i>The Littlest Rebel</i> (1935) (0:00 to 0:50)	Close Reading #1
Thursday 2/11	<i>The Littlest Rebel</i> (1935) (0:50 to 1:43)	
Thursday 2/18	Hartman, “The Path of Strangers” (Moodle)	
Tuesday 2/23	<i>Gone with the Wind</i> (1939) (0:00 to 1:41)	
Thursday 2/25	<i>Gone with the Wind</i> (1939) (1:41 to 3:40)	
	<i>Slave Narratives and Visual Violence</i>	
Tuesday 3/2	Sharpe, “Making Monstrous Intimacies” (Moodle)	
Thursday 3/4	<i>Twelve Years a Slave</i> (2013) (0:00 to 1:06)	
Tuesday 3/9	<i>Twelve Years a Slave</i> (2013) (1:06 to 2:14)	
Thursday 3/11		Midterm Examination
	<i>Fugitivity and Revolution</i>	
Tuesday 3/16	hooks, “Revolutionary Attitude” (Moodle)	
Thursday 3/18	<i>Harriet</i> (2019) (0:00 to 1:02)	
Tuesday 3/23	<i>Harriet</i> (2019) (1:02 to 2:05)	
Thursday 3/25	Mirzoeff, Selections from “The Right to Look” (Moodle)	
Tuesday 3/30	<i>Emperor</i> (2020) (0:00 to 0:49)	
Thursday 4/1	<i>Emperor</i> (2020) (0:49 to 1:39)	
	<i>The Return of Black Horror</i>	
Thursday 4/8	Saylor, Selections from “Breaking Down the Door” (Moodle)	Close Reading #2
Tuesday 4/13	<i>Get Out</i> (2017) (0:00 to 0:54)	
Thursday 4/15	<i>Get Out</i> (2017) (0:54 to 1:44)	
Tuesday 4/20	Parham, “When Black Horror Consumes Us” (Moodle)	
Thursday 4/22	<i>Antebellum</i> (2020) (0:00 to 0:51)	
Tuesday 4/27	<i>Antebellum</i> (2020) (0:51 to 1:45)	
Thursday 4/29		
Finals Week (exact date and time to be determined)		Final Examination