

Slavery in Film

Instructor: Dexter Gabriel
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HIS 389
Spring 2012
Class Time: M 7:20-10:00PM
Class Meets: Innovation 133

Course Description: The institution of slavery had a profound impact on the Atlantic world. Yet it has not always been the easiest topic for public discussion. Outside of the classroom much of what we know, or think we know, about slavery often comes from popular media--especially film and television. Classics like *Gone with the Wind*, television miniseries like *Roots* and even lesser known independent films like *Sankofa* have done much to shape our perspective and how we "remember" the slave system, its victims and its participants. This course seeks to examine slavery in the Atlantic world through the lens of this popular medium, exploring film depictions of slavery, famous figures or related events. These films are both foreign and domestic, and range from historical dramas to the surreal. In examining these films we will take into account the time period, location and social atmosphere in which they were created. And we will see how much they actually tell us about slavery and, most important, what they might tell us about ourselves.

Learning Objectives: How historians view slavery's role in the history of the Western Hemisphere continues to evolve. At one time relegated to the periphery, it is now regarded as having a central place in the shaping of the Atlantic world. Slavery studies have expanded to include diverse themes such as labor, race, economics, law, politics, gender, migration and more. The importance of media in shaping how we remember history has also been of key insight to historians as well as media theorists. Movie and television dramas depicting aspects of history have been studied for not only their accuracy, but the way in which they reflect popular societal sentiment and acts of "remembering." What is remembered, what is forgotten and how the remembering takes place, at times reveal more about our contemporary society than the ones depicted in film. Further the medium used to convey these visual messages play a great part on how we receive them. By successfully completing this course, students will increase their knowledge of the slave system(s) that permeated the Atlantic world; the cultural and social events that surrounded these systems; the way in which varied visual media have shaped our collective memories about slavery; the political atmosphere surrounding the creation of these films; the larger contemporary discourse these films set into motion; and lastly, through a critical reading of a range of historical works, cultural critiques and primary sources, you will have a better comprehension of how historians and filmmakers both differ or find mutual agreement in their approaches to the past.

Required Books:

- David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (2006)
- Dan Laughey, *Key Themes in Media Theory* (2007)
- All other **required** readings will either be available in the "Course Documents Folder" on our Blackboard course web site, indicated (**BB**) on the syllabus, or will be held on reserve at the library. There will also be online article links.

**** Please check Blackboard frequently for announcements (changes to readings, schedule, etc.)**

Course Evaluation:

Class Participation: Class participation will be based on your attendance, your overall contribution to discussion and how prepared you are to engage with the class and subject matter. Students should expect to join in all classroom activities and any class discussions. Paying attention to the visual media AND your reading of the day's assignments are thus vital to your ability to participate with your classmates.

Online Discussions: Following the viewing of each film, students will be required to engage in an online discussion via Blackboard within 48 hours. The purpose is to gauge initial reaction to the films before engaging the reading assignments. Each participant should make at least TWO posts. These discussions should be lively but always respectful.

Reaction Papers: Reaction papers will be assigned following each film viewing.

Requirements: Students must turn in **Reaction Paper assignments by 7pm each following Monday on Blackboard via Safe Assignment**. The assignments should provide reaction and scholarly criticism that apply your readings to the visual material from the previous week. Your responses in all should total 3 **full** pages in length and should show that you have fully comprehended and reasoned through the readings and visual material. Please keep copies of all work in case of Blackboard problems.

Pop Quizzes: Quizzes will be administered at any given time throughout the course. They will usually cover previously viewed material or assigned readings and will count toward your participation.

Exams: The first two exams for the course will be administered and completed via **(BB)**. You will have a set time to complete the exam and a date by which you will have to take it. Please note once you begin an exam you cannot stop and continue at a later time. You must complete the exam in the time allotted. The Final will be an **in-class exam**. It will include everything post-midterm, along with cumulative questions that draw on the full breadth of the session. You must take your final exam at the scheduled time. **The Final will be in our regular meeting room on May 14 at 7:30PM.**

Grading:

Reaction Papers	25%
Online Discussion	20%
First Exam	15%
Second Exam	15%
Final Exam	15%
Participation	10%

Class and University Policies:

Attendance Policy: Students are expected to attend all classes (that means arriving on time and staying for the duration- hint: *Quizzes*) and to actively participate in class discussion and activities. Attendance is required and will be recorded at each session. Unexcused absences, habitual lateness, and early departures will adversely impact your grade. If you miss class due to illness, a life emergency, or other serious reason, please let the instructor know as soon as feasible and provide documentation when you return.

Classroom Behavior:

*Cell Phones, Blackberries, PDAs, iPods, etc. should be off and put away during class. This means no texting as well. If you have an emergency, feel free to step outside for phone use. Take care not to abuse this policy.

*Laptops: Laptop computers are fine for use during class for note-taking only.

Respectful Exchange of Ideas: The subject matter covered in this course can be controversial. Discussion is encouraged—in fact required. Be mindful however to be polite, courteous and respectful to your classmates.

Communication with Instructor: Please feel free to e-mail me at the addresses above. I will attempt to check them at least twice daily. If you need to meet with me, I am available during office hours listed above.

Academic Integrity: George Mason University has very strong and clear policies regarding academic dishonesty (cheating, plagiarism, etc.). Penalties could include an F in the course, and is required to be reported to the Academic Judiciary Committee. An explanation of what constitutes plagiarism can be found here: <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>.

Student Behavior: George Mason University expects students to maintain standards of personal integrity that are in harmony with the educational goals of the institution; to observe national, state, and local laws and University regulations; and to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Judicial Affairs any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn.

Americans with Disabilities Act: If you have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Equity and Diversity Services: <http://equity.gmu.edu/dadAct.html>. They will help determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

Warning of Graphic Material: The subject matter of this course—both in imagery and description—can and will at times be graphic. Some of the films have an R rating. Understanding that each individual's level of sensitivity can be different, if some part of the course is overly distressing or disturbing please feel free to discuss such problems with the instructor.

Preliminary Course Schedule

Please check Blackboard (**BB**) regularly for updates or revisions.

M, 1/23

Media Theory

In Class Viewing- *Ethnic Notions* (documentary)

Reading:

Laughey, pp. 1-28, 30-38, 48-52.

Online Discussion of *Ethnic Notions* by Wed 1/25 (**BB**)

M, 1/30- Slavery in the Atlantic World

Due- Reaction Paper- *Ethnic Notions*

In Class Film Viewing: *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Reading:

Laughey, pp. 54-65.

Davis, pp. 27-47

Tom Gunning, "Making Sense of Film," *History Matters*, pp. 1-13 (**BB**)

Online Discussion of *Birth of a Nation* by Wed 2/1 (**BB**)

M, 2/06- Early Depictions of Slavery in Hollywood

Due- Reaction Paper- *Birth of a Nation*

In Class Viewing (Clips): *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), *Littlest Rebel* (1935), *Gone with the Wind* (1939)

Reading:

Donald Bogle, "Black Beginnings: from Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Birth of a Nation," pp. 3-14 (**BB**)

The Lost Cause- Encyclopedia of Virginia (**BB**) ***skim and scan**

David Ryland, "Breech Birth: The Receptions to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*," pp. 1-20 (**BB**)

*First Exam to be completed by 2/12 (**BB**)

M, 2/13 - The 1950s- From Uncle to Rebel- Postcolonial Slave Cinema

Clips- *Song of the South* (1946), *Slaves* (1969)

In Class Film Viewing: *Burn!* (1969)

Reading:

Laughey, pp. 122-130, 138-145

Online Discussion of *Burn!* by Wed 2/15 (**BB**)

M, 2/20- Rebel!

Due- Reaction Paper- *Burn!*

In class viewing: *The Last Supper* (1976)

Reading:

Thomas Reinhardt, “200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution,” pp. 246-261 (**BB**)

Davis, pp. 157-174

Online Discussion of *The Last Supper* by Wed. 2/23 (**BB**)

M, 2/27- Revolutionary Cuba Remembers Slavery

Due- Reaction Paper- *The Last Supper*

Reading:

Home Viewing: Henry Louis Gates – Cuba: The Next Revolution (PBS)

Dennis Went, “Slavery and Cinema in Cuba: The Case of Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper*,” pp. 128-133 (**BB**)

In Class Viewing: *Mandingo* (1976)

Online Discussion of *Mandingo* by Wed. 2/29 (**BB**)

M, 3/5- Blaxploitation and Gender

Due- Reaction Paper- *Mandingo*

In Class Viewing – *Roots* (1977)

Reading:

Roger Ebert, review, *Mandingo*- 1975 (**BB**)

Robert Keser, “The Eye We Cannot Shut: Richard Fleischer’s *Mandingo*” (**BB**)

Deborah Gray White, *Aren't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, pp. 28-46 (**BB**)

Laughey, pp. 100-105, 113-120.

*Second Exam be completed by 3/11 (**BB**)

Spring Break 3/12-3/16

M, 3/19 Slavery Goes Mainstream- Roots

Due- Reaction Paper- *Roots*

In Class Viewing – *Roots* (1977)

Reading:

Lisa A. Lindsay, “Why did Africans Sell Slaves?” in *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 54-65 (**BB**)

Davis, pp. 88-102

Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*- **Excerpts** (**BB**)

Online Discussion of *Roots* by Wed. 3/21 (**BB**)

M, 3/26- Slavery Goes Mainstream II- Roots

Due- Reaction Paper- *Roots*

In Class Viewing – *Quilombo* (1986)

Reading:

“Why Roots Hit Home” *TIME* 1977 (**BB**)

Davis, pp. 124-140 (Ch. 6)

Online Discussion of *Quilombo* by Wed. 3/28 (**BB**)

M, 4/2- Slave Rebels of Cinema Novo

Due- Reaction Paper- *Quilombo*

Reading

João José Reis, “The Rebellious Tradition: Slave Revolts Prior to 1835,” pp. 40-69 (**BB**) *skim and scan

Robert Nelson Anderson, “The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil,” pp. 545-566 (**BB**)

In class Viewing – *Brother from another Planet* (1989)

Online Discussion of *Brother from another Planet* by Wed 4/4.

M, 4/9- Slavery as Allegory: The Postmodern Narrative

Due- Reaction Paper- *Brother from another Planet*

Reading

Ed Guerrero, “The Slavery Motif in Recent Popular Cinema” (**BB**)

“Boston Combusts: The Fugitive Slave Case of Anthony Burns” (**BB**)

Laughey, 147-148, 154-157

In class Viewing – *Sankofa* (1993)

Online Discussion of *Sankofa* by Wed 4/11.

M, 4/16- Slavery in the New Black Film Renaissance

Due- Reaction Paper- *Sankofa*

In Class Viewing- *Glory* (1989)

Reading:

Pamela Woolford, “Filming Slavery,” pp. 90-104 (**BB**)

The Tragic Mulatto Myth- (**BB**) *skim and scan

Online Discussion of *Glory* by Wed 4/18.

M, 4/23- Glory: The Civil War Revisited

Due- Reaction Paper- *Glory*

In Class Viewing- *Amistad* (1997) – Partial*

Reading:

Davis, Ch. 15 (297-322)

Thomas Cripps, “Frederick Douglass: The Absent Presence in *Glory*,” 154-163.

Online Discussion of *Amistad* by Wed 4/25.

M, 4/30- Speculative Slavery

Due- Reaction Paper- *Amistad*

In Class Viewing- “*Space Traders*” (1994), *CSA: The Confederate States of America* (2004)

Reading:

Davis, Ch. 1 (12-26)

Frederick Dalzell, “Dreamworking *Amistad*: Representing Slavery, Revolt, and Freedom in America, 1839 and 1997,” 127-133.

Jesse Lemisch, “Black Agency in the *Amistad* Uprising: Or, You’ve Taken Our Cinque and Gone,” 57-70.

Online Discussion of *Space Traders* and *The Confederate States of America* by Wed. 5/2.

M, 5/14- Final Exam

Exam Time: 7:30 pm – 10:15 pm