American films have always confronted and explored social, political, and cultural issues. Influenced by progressivism, the social problem films comprised a significant part of early American cinema’s output. More recently, the success of Michael Moore’s Oscar-winning documentaries has sparked renewed interest in the documentary tradition. But social issues are not the purview of non-fiction fares; fiction films often tackle, in more or less veiled ways, society’s present and past struggles. Although we sometimes go to the cinema to escape reality, we also often watch films to assess the reality in which we live and to explore ways to live a better life.

The course is divided into five units of three weeks, each exploring a different social issue that shaped—and often still does—American society. We will pay special attention to the depiction of racism and race relations throughout Hollywood history. Using both fiction and non-fiction film, our aim is twofold: to understand the various ways in which social issues are tackled in cinema and to come to a better understanding of American society.

Evaluations:

1. Attendance and class participation: 10%
2. Exploratory writing (10% each): 30%
4. Final response paper (8-10 pages): 40%

1. **Attendance** to all classes is mandatory, even if you have already seen the film.

2. Three short “exploratory writing” exercises will be required to practice different ways of writing about film and prepare you for longer writing assignments: a) a formal descriptive account, b) a film review and c) a reaction paper. All three will pertain to in-class screenings.

3. Your **Mid-term**, a short thesis-governed paper, will ask you to defend a position using arguments and examples from films screened in class. This mid-term is due in class on week 8.
4. Your **final assignment** is a response paper (8-10 pages). You will be asked to defend a position in response to a critical contemporary issue. In your answer, you have to use concepts seen in class and in your readings, as well as filmic examples of films screened in or outside of class.

Guidelines for each assignment will be distributed in class.

**Required Readings:**

- Other readings will be made available online or in class.

**CALENDAR**

**Unit 1 Introduction**

**April 8**

**Week 1: Thinking with Film**


**April 15**

**Week 2: The Social Problem Tradition**


📖 *Hypocrites* (Lois Weber, 1915, 54 min. Fiction)

Optional:

📖 *The Blot* (Lois Weber, 1921, 80 min. Fiction)

📖 *The Red Kimona* (Dorothy Davenport, 1925, 77 min. Fiction)

**Unit 2 Crime and Punishment**

**April 22**

**Week 3: The Inner City**


📖 *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994, excerpts. Doc)

📖 *Brooklyn Castle* (Katie Dellamaggiore, 2012, excerpts. Doc)

Optional:

📖 *Stevie* (Steve James, 2002, 140 min. doc)

📖 *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002, 120 min. Doc)

📖 *The Interrupters* (Steve James, 2011, 125 min. Doc)

📖 *Let the Fire Burn* (Jason Osder, 2013, 88 min. Doc)

📖 *The Homestretch* (Anne De Mare and Kristen Kelly, 2014, 90 min. Doc)

📖 *Chi-Raq* (Spike Lee, 2015. Fiction)
May 6
Week 4: The Prison System

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932, 73 min. Fiction)

Optional:
The Farm: Angola, USA (Garbus, Rideau & Stack, 1998, 88 min. Doc)
The Central Park Five (Burns & McMahon, 2012, 119 min. Doc)

May 13
Week 5: The Death Penalty

Into the Abyss (Werner Herzog, 2011, excerpts. Doc)

Formal analysis of Into the Abyss due next week

Optional:
Making a Murderer (Charles Ferguson, 2016, excerpts. Doc)
The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988, 103 min. Doc)

May 20
Week 6: Inequalities

Assignment #1: Formal analysis of Into the Abyss due in class today

No readings today. Explanations for the mid-term are given in class.
The Grapes of Wrath (John Ford, 1940, 108 min. Fiction)

Optional:
Inequality for All (Jacob Kornbluth, 2013, 89 min. Doc)

Unit 4 Poverty

May 27
Week 7: The Great Depression and Unbridled Capitalism

The Grapes of Wrath (John Ford, 1940, 108 min. Fiction)

Optional:
Man’s Castle (Frank Borzage, 1933, 75 min. Fiction)
Sullivan’s Travels (Preston Sturges, 1941, 90 min, Fiction)

June 3
Week 8: Neo-Liberalism and the Working Poor

Mid-Term Assignment due in class today

Harlan County U.S.A. (Barbara Kopple, 1976, excerpts. Doc)
Matewan (John Sayles, 1987, excerpts. Doc)
Roger & Me (Michael Moore, 1989, excerpts. Doc)

Optional:
Norma Rae (Martin Ritt, 1979, 114 min. Fiction)
North County (Niki Caro, 2005, 126 min. Fiction)
Akeelah & The Bee (Doug Atchison, 2006, 112 min. Doc)
Sicko (Michael Moore, 2007, 123 min. Doc)
June 10
Week 9: The Environment
臊 The Pursuit of Happyness (Gabriele Muccino, 2006, 117 min. Fiction)
臊 Homeless: The Motel Kids of Orange County (A. Pelosi, 2010, 60 min. Doc)
Optional:
臊 An Inconvenient Truth (Davis Guggenheim, 2006, 96 min. Doc)

Unit 5 Racial Segregation and Prejudice

June 17
Week 10: Racial Segregation and Prejudice
臊 Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? (Stanley Kramer, 1967, 108 min. Fiction)
Optional:
臊 The Defiant Ones (Stanley Kramer, 1958, 96 min. Fiction)
臊 A Raisin in the Sun (Daniel Petrie, 1961, 128 min. Fiction)
臊 To Kill a Mockingbird (Robert Mulligan, 1962, 129 min. Fiction)

June 24
Week 11: Racial Segregation and Prejudice—The Retrospective
臊 Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? (Stanley Kramer, 1967, 108 min. Fiction)
Film review of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? due next week.
Optional:
臊 Mississippi Burning (Alan Parker, 1988, 128 min. Fiction)
臊 The Color Purple (Steven Spielberg, 1985, 154 min. Fiction)
臊 Malcolm X (Spike Lee, 1992, 202 min. Fiction)
臊 4 Little Girls (Spike Lee, 1997, 102 min. Doc)
臊 Remember the Titans (Boaz Yakin, 2000, 120 min. Fiction)
臊 12 Years a Slave (Steve McQueen, 2013, 134 min. Fiction)
臊 Selma (Ava DuVernay, 2014, 128 min. Fiction)

Unit 6 Racism and Race Relations after the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965)

July 1
Week 12: Race Relations in the 1990s I
Assignment #2: Film Review of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? due today
臊 Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989, 120 min. Fiction)
Optional:
July 8
Week 13: Race Relations in the 1990s II
  - Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989, 120 min. Fiction)

Reaction Paper on Do the Right Thing due next week
Optional:
  - American History X (Tony Kaye, 1998, 119 min. Fiction)
  - Menace II Society (The Hugues Brothers, 1993, 97 min. Fiction)
  - Straight Outta Compton (F. Gary Gray, 2015, 147 min. Fiction)

July 15
Week 14: A Post-Racial Society?
Assignment #3: Reaction Paper on Do the Right Thing due today
  - Dear White People (Justin Simien, 2014, 108 min. Fiction)
Optional:
  - Bamboozled (Spike Lee, 2000, 135 min. Fiction)
  - What’s Cooking? (Gurinder Chadha, 2000, 109 min. Fiction)
  - Crash (Paul Haggis, 2004, 112 min. Fiction)
  - Top Five (Chris Rock, 2014, 102 min. Fiction)
  - Fruitvale Station (Ryan Coogler, 2013, 85 min. Fiction)
  - Little White Lie (Lacey Schwartz & James Adolphus, 2014, 65 min. Doc)

July 22
Week 15: Conclusion
  - Dear White People (Justin Simien, 2014, 108 min. Fiction)

Final Paper due during Finals Week. Good Luck!