Participants:
Sylvie Coulibaly (Assistant Professor of History)
Ennis Edmonds (Associate Professor of Religious Studies)
Piko Ewoodzie (Yarborough Fellow, Sociology)
Bruce Hardy (Associate Professor of Anthropology)
Theodore Mason, Jr. (Professor of English)
Hewlet G. McFarlane (Associate Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience)
Glenn McNair (Associate Professor of History)
Kimmarie Murphy (Associate Professor of Anthropology)
Peter Rutkoff (Professor of American Studies)
Reginald Sanders (Professor of Music)
Jené Schoenfeld (Assistant Professor of English)
Ric Sheffield (Professor of Sociology)
Zahida Sherman (Multicultural Recruiter, Admissions)
David Suggs (Professor of Anthropology)
Jon Tazewell (Professor of Drama)
Stephen Volz (Associate Professor of History)

Summary
The goal of the May 2014 seminar was to explore screen media: films, documentaries, music videos and advertisements in Africa and in the Diaspora, focusing on Language, Cultural Engagement and Visual Literacy. In a recent study, the Kaiser Foundation found that 83% of the Millennial generation use screen media daily, that more than 75% uses a social network and that at least half use Youtube regularly. We know that our students are increa
dsingly technology savvy, that throughout the day, they spend a considerable amount of time connected to the world via social networks, chat rooms, blogs, podcasts, etc. and that for them screen media is a source of learning, of entertainment and of socializing. Instead of decrying a phenomenon that some have called a sign of “moral and intellectual decay” (Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, Ava Collins, eds., Film Theory Goes to the Movies, 1993, p. 1), we want to embrace it instead. While most of us already use film and other forms of screen media within our curriculum, this spring our goal was to understand screen media better in order to integrate it in our pedagogy in a more effective way, considering not just how the content of film/media illuminates cultural issues, but also how film/media grammar presents those issues in a purposive manner. Given his particular expertise in this area, Professor Tazewell was
able to “bookend” the meetings with two presentations—the first designed primarily to orient us to some pedagogical issues in formal media literacy and another designed to explore what we can take from the week as a whole. Since a number of us regularly use film and media in our classrooms, between Prof. Tazewell’s two seminars, other faculty demonstrated both what they teach via film and media and how they do so. The participants engaged in dialogue with the presenters, asking critical questions and exploring both how we can improve what we already do, as well as how we might incorporate film and media where we have not done so before. The goal was for us to share teaching strategies and generate a collection of best practices for our approach to teaching even as we continue to expose one another to the important content of our given specialties. In short, this year’s seminar became something of a teaching laboratory and as participants we were able to take the lessons away from of our gathering to augment ongoing pedagogical discussions on campus.

Discussion Summaries for Seminar Days

**Day 1: Jonathan Tazewell (Drama Department) “D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Oscar Micheaux’s *Within our Gates* (1920)”**

- It is easy for students to express an interest in film, yet film critique and interpretation requires students to obtain a certain level of sophistication and an understanding about film production, in other words, it is necessary for them to become visually literate.

- One aspect of visual literacy involves learning about the techniques utilized by film makers to convey meaning to their audience. A filmmaker’s use of techniques such as, the monomyth, diegesis, Kulshov effect, point of view sequencing, cross cutting, and vignetting can convey substantive meaning to an audience.

- Using D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* and Oscar Micheaux’s *Within our Gates*, Professor Tazewell explored the cultural implications of how African Americans were presented in early American film. Prof. Tazewell also explored how Micheaux’s film, by following a narrative and scene structure similar to that of Griffith’s, can be understood as an intentional African American response to *Birth of a Nation*. 
Day 2: Peter Rutkoff (American Studies) “Harlem Renaissance II”

• Prof. Rutkoff discussed the pedagogical technique referred to as Visual Learning Strategies (VLS), an attempt to demystify the study of artistic images. The group was presented with a series of images from African American visual artists who benefitted from WPA programs (such as Archibald Motley, Jacob Lawrence, and other), and we were encouraged to offer comments and interpretations.

• One thing that was clear was the importance of the WPA in the production and dissemination of African American art, and its role in desegregating the artists in the U.S.

• It is possible to provide people/students with the entire context and history of the artists and images, but there is some real benefit to allowing viewers to make their own first impressions so as to foster their skills at interpretation and discussion.

• This approach provides a pedagogical challenge however. On the one hand it is important to develop student’s skills at interpretation, but at what point can/should you as the instructor interject/offer the context and facts that reflect the actual production of the images? One possible strategy is to carefully phrase questions that subtly guide the discussion without shunting their developing interpretive skills.

Day 3: Sylvie Coulibaly (History Department) “Crossovers in African American and West African Cinema: Gender, Class, Race and Culture in Blaxploitation and Nollywood Films.”

• This session considered West African film as a medium to teach cultural analysis in a historical context from the early West African film makers to the current Nigerian popular cinematographic production (known colloquially as “Nollywood”).

• In looking at the evolution of Nollywood, we explored its origins in the cross cultural appeal of Bollywood. Bollywood’s representations of the struggles of the common person, the role of women, traditional values, class hierarchies, and resistance to imperialism all resonate with the many cultures of West Africa.
• The group spent a fair amount of time contemplating the nature of “authenticity” – a theme that has cut through all the discussions thus far- and we agreed that this is a concept that needs to be nuanced in such a way as to reflect the constantly changing nature of culture.

• In considering film as a medium of expression we and the students need to be aware of the multiple, and often complicated factors influencing the medium. One of the important issues to understand is how power plays a major role in determining the production, outcome, consumption, and interpretation of visual media.

• Another important aspect of the discussion involved the notion that film, maybe more than any other medium, foregrounds itself in a system of commodity exchange.

Day 4: Hewlett McFarlane (Dept. Psychology and Neuroscience) “The Neuroscience of Race”

• This session focused on a presentation of the research to date on the way the brain processes race.

• The presentation gave basic background of the brain, basic anatomy and function, focusing on the regions of interest to the processing of race in the brain. The regions of interest were the prefrontal cortex (PFC), the Amygdala (AM), the Fusiform Face Area (FFA), the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC).

• This session discussed how the brain responds to race and racial categories. We examined whether these responses are innate or learned and the implications of both positions. For instance, if the “simple” perception of faces that are different triggers anxiety in the human subject, what are the implications for social policy, particularly if the experience of difference seems preemptively coded as difficult?

• Recognizing that racial categories influence social position in societies, we viewed the 2008 film Skin film to examine the influence of social position on behavior, and understand how people behave when they are explicitly categorized as belonging to different and uneven social categories. We tried to incorporate the information we gain from the neuroscience research into the observable behaviors seen in the film.
Day 5: Jonathan Tazewell  “What Can We Do To Better Insure the Visual Literacy of our Students? New Directions”

• Professor Tazewell led a discussion on how to think through and develop action plans for integrating visual arts into our curriculum. The primary goal was to determine why we are looking at visual literacy and why we think it is useful for our various courses.

• We began with a discussion of what we mean by “visual literacy.” Visual literacy entails helping student learn to read the visual world and to understand how visual artifacts are contextually embedded in the world around us.

• Too often students view visual images and try to focus on what they, as individuals, find interesting about them. What we want to convey to students is that film and visual images represent selected images, images imbued with authorial intent, and it is necessary for students to understand the reasons behind this.

• We spent time discussing what we want our students to be able to do with film and images and the ways in which we can get them to understand how to move away from being passive consumers to active observers.

• As a group we engaged with several exercises and examples that would be useful in teaching visual proficiency. Once students learn a visual vocabulary, they can practice viewing visual material, analyzing visual material, identifying the details and nuances of visual material and then applying content within context to the subject matter presented in the visual material.

Seminar Outcomes

We are very appreciative of CIP for supporting our exploration of visual imagery. After this week we are all more keenly aware of the fact that there really is a film pedagogy and this it is very important for both the instructor and the student to have some base level of knowledge about film construction and consumption. Obviously the depth and extent we choose to explore film pedagogy will be determined by the goals of particular courses and outcomes we wish our students to achieve from the study of visual images. The following is a list of some of the learning objectives for visual literacy from our week-long workshop:
Learning Objectives for Visual Analysis

- Students should learn how effectively to deploy a certain vocabulary and technique associated with the visual medium being utilized in a course.

- Students should understand how that visual medium is being used to convey meaning and interpretation.

- Students will become aware of how visual media acts on the brain, all the time, at unconscious levels that will manifest itself in people’s actions and interpretations. Students are unconsciously processing material all the time and need to become more conscious of this process.

- Students will learn the importance of context, the role that society, culture, race, gender, economics, politics, class, and history play both in terms of the production of visual media and the consumption of that media.

Readings

Films
*The Birth of a Nation* (1915)
*Within our Gates* (1920)
*Mandabi* (1968)
*Skin* (2008)

Submitted by
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