Psychology, Film, and Identity: Perspectives from African Cinema  
PSYC 335/AFST 335  
Spring 2015  
Dr. Suzanne Barnard

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Office Hours: TuThu 1:00 – 2:00

In this course, we will explore African and African Diasporic writings and films that address questions of identity in contemporary post-colonial, de-colonial, and global contexts. Our approach to understanding identity construction in these contexts will be fundamentally interdisciplinary. We will read texts on identity and film across the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, African studies, post-colonial and de-colonial theory, anthropology, cultural studies, literature, and film theory. We will also screen and engage films on their own aesthetic terms - that is, as art forms that offer media-specific possibilities for producing identities.

Most films screened in the course will be by filmmakers from sub-Saharan Africa or its Diaspora, and will represent a diversity of approaches to thinking and constructing identities. We will screen two films ‘about’ Africa by North American and European filmmakers, in order to understand how cinematic representations of ‘African-ness’ can reinforce ethnocentric and racist notions of European and North American cultural and moral superiority, and to experience and reflect on the social and psychological anxieties betrayed by such representations of African lives. Ultimately, our reflexive integration of these various cinematic ‘takes’ on African identities will offer us new tools for actively constructing intellectually profound, ethically-nuanced, and culturally-complex identities as world citizens.

Finally, we will engage with films and texts not only as ‘consumers’ but also as ‘producers.’ The course project will require your moving beyond the role of ‘spectator’ into a creative role; this movement will culminate in the production of a short, scholarly video focused on a course film of your choosing. The video will integrate concepts and themes relevant to identity (drawn from our readings and films) with aesthetic forms, styles, and material practices of film/video production (also elaborated in our readings and films). You may choose to work individually or collaboratively with a small group of your peers to produce this video.

Course Goals and Objectives

Goal 1] This course will introduce you to theoretical arguments, concepts, and themes relevant to understanding identity construction and processes of identification.

Objectives
- We will read and discuss interdisciplinary writings on identity, culture, and film by African and African Diasporic, North American, and EU scholars.
- We will screen and discuss films, produced and directed primarily by African and African Diasporic filmmakers, that address themes of personal, sociopolitical, and cultural identity.

- We will spend significant class time making bridges between theoretical concepts of identity and cinematic methods of identity construction in films we screen. We will also use our comprehension of the aesthetic, creative aspects of the films as art/visual media to transform our text-based conceptual understandings.

Assessment
Your knowledge of theoretical arguments, concepts and themes, as well as cinematic methods and codes related to identity and processes of identification will be assessed through the frequency and quality of your in-class participation, the timeliness and quality of your participation assignment responses, your performance on relevant midterm and final exam questions, and in the design quality and content of your scholarly video.

Outcomes
- You will have a complex, profoundly interdisciplinary understanding of processes of identity construction, negotiation, and transformation. Your understanding will be multi-faceted – cognitive, experiential, expository, ethical and aesthetic.

- You will be adept at dynamic, verbal expression of your own understanding of these identification processes in the context of group discussion, and able to relate theoretical concepts of identity to examples from everyday life and popular visual culture (cinema).

- You will have beginning skills in translating basic theoretical concepts concerning identity formation into a structure of images, sound, and text in the form of your scholarly video.

Goal 2) This course will situate contemporary ‘Western’ psychological, philosophical, and anthropological approaches to identity in relation to approaches emerging from African and African Diasporic perspectives.

Objectives
- We will read texts and screen films specifically relevant to both ‘problems’ and ‘possibilities’ of identity confronted by Africans and persons of the African Diaspora. These texts and films will be divided into three sections:
  A. We will explore the challenges of identity construction faced by African émigrés in negotiating relations with their ‘culture(s) of origin’ and their new ‘home’ societies. We will read texts and screen films relevant to the identity challenges faced by post-war African émigrés of the 1950s and ‘60s, up to and including those of recent African émigrés, political refugees, and repatriated African citizens.
B. We will address identity construction within postcolonial African contexts. Specifically, we will read texts and films that address various ways that post-colonial African citizens have responded to tensions between pre-colonial African traditions and Western influence, actively reconfiguring psychological, social, spiritual, cultural, and national identities.

C. We will explore theories and modes of identity construction in decolonial theories. We will do so in relation to texts and films that address indigenous African cultural, social, spiritual, and political formations that offer alternative perspectives and critique.

- We will examine dominant conceptualizations of identity, "self," and culture within American psychology, and will develop an understanding their relationship to identity and culture as understood in Western philosophy and anthropology. In particular, we will question certain binaries - e.g., of "self and other," "interiority and exteriority," "mind and body," "individual and community," and "work and leisure" - central to maintaining a privileged status for American ideals of self and personhood.

- We will understand how American and European cinema and popular visual culture refracts and reproduces dominant Western forms of self and identity through representations of Africa and 'African-ness' as 'other' to the presumptively 'well-civilized democracies' of 'developed' North American and European cultures and economies, and their 'self-actualized' citizens. We will discuss this specifically in the relation to the popular films 'about' Africa that we will screen in class (Tabu/Taboo and Rebelle/War Witch).

Assessment

Your knowledge of the complex historical and contemporary relationships between 'Western' approaches to identity and approaches emerging from African and African Diasporic perspectives, as well as your understanding of mainstream Western cinema's role in reproducing hegemonic identities, will be assessed through the frequency and quality of your in-class participation, the timeliness and quality of your responses to guide questions, the thoughtfulness and relevance of your journal reflections, your performance on relevant midterm and final exam questions, and content of your scholarly video.

Outcomes

- You will have a complex understanding of historical and transcultural contexts within which both contemporary Western notions and alternative African and African Diasporic notions of identity have emerged.

- You will have a nuanced comprehension of ways in which North American and European films reproduce hegemonic Western models of identity through cinematic constructions of Africa and African identities as 'other.'
You will have a deeper cognitive and experiential understanding of your own identity as it is situated in relation to both contemporary Western models and alternative models emerging from African and African Diasporic perspectives.

**Goal 3** The course will offer a re-visioning of Western and, more specifically, American, notions of identity as they are hegemonically constructed and maintained. Specifically, we will work to construct new models of identity in relation to those we encounter in our study of self and identity in African migrational, post-colonial, and transnational contexts.

**Objectives**
- You will reflect on taken-for-granted aspects of your own identity in relation to dominant Western models.
- You will articulate ways in which African and African Diasporic models offer possibilities for reconstructing identities that move beyond certain binaries and hierarchies foundational to Western psychology, philosophy, and anthropology.

**Assessment**
Your understanding of alternatives to dominant models of Western, and specifically American, identity will be assessed through the thoughtfulness of relevant journal reflections, your performance on relevant midterm and final exam questions, and in the inclusion of related content in your scholarly video.

**Outcomes**
- You will have an increasingly profound grasp of the links between models of identity and structures of power, and will be practiced in modes of deconstructing and/or disrupting these linkages within psychological, social, and cultural spheres.
- You will have intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic tools for (re)fashioning identities that are reflexively dynamic, hybrid and multidimensional, non-reactionary, and responsive to the increasing global interconnectedness of cultures and persons.

**Goal 4** The course will engage you in the process of juxtaposing textual and cinematic modes of understanding, and we will develop skill sets for interpreting, experiencing and producing both text-based and visual media.

**Objectives**
- You will understand how ideas can be formulated and expressed in both text-based and visual media.
- You will begin to articulate how each form (text and film) offers unique possibilities for understanding ideas relevant to identity construction and processes of identification.
- You will have a beginning understanding of how text-based and filmic styles and modes of audience engagement are culturally-situated.

- You will understand how cinematic techniques are used to suture spectators into structures of identification and desire.

- You will practice translating theoretical concepts into the visual/aural medium of the "scholarly video."

- You will hone your skills of public speaking and communication in the presentation of your video and your discussion of its process of production.

**Assessment**

Your understanding of the different conceptual and communicative possibilities offered by text-based and film media will be assessed through the frequency and quality of your in-class discussion of texts and film clips. Your understanding of how each form of media structures specific modes of identity construction and spectator identification (and how their modes of audience engagement are culturally-situated) will be assessed through the relevance and quality of your journal reflections, your performance on midterm and final exam questions, and the structure and content of your video. Your "theory-to-visual media" translational fluency will be assessed through the 'engaging-ness,' cinematic inventiveness, and relevance of your video structure and content, as well as the clarity of your discussion of your production process (in the class presentation).

**Outcomes**

- You will develop increasingly sophisticated reading and writing literacies, critical skills of visual analysis, group collaboration skills, and skill of public presentation and communication.

**Class Structure**

The class will be conducted as an intensive undergraduate seminar, with an integrated lecture/discussion format.

**Course Requirements**

Active class participation will constitute a significant part of the final course grade. You will complete two exams, a midterm and a non-cumulative final. Finally, you will produce a short (3 – 7 minute), scholarly video in which you will put concepts from the readings into dialogue with cinematic and representational elements in the films. This project will be completed individually or in small groups, and you will present your video to the class at the end of the course.

Your grade will be determined by the following:

1) **midterm exam**, (25%)

2) **final exam** (non-cumulative) (25%)
The **midterm and final exams** are meant to test your understanding of the basic concepts presented in the readings, lectures, and discussions; the exams will consist of multiple choice, fill-ins, and short essay questions. The exams will be given on the dates listed in the syllabus. There will be **NO MAKE-UP EXAMS** unless you have a very serious extenuating circumstance.

3) **scholarly video (25%)** The scholarly video will involve your development of arguments, themes and concepts from our readings on identities (course packet) in relation to processes of identity construction presented in the films we screen. You must also incorporate reflection on how your understanding of your identity has been transformed by your work and experience in the course.

4) **class participation (discussion, assignments – guide questions and journal reflections, attendance) (25%)**

Your **class participation grade** will be assessed by how often you contribute meaningfully and respectfully to in-class discussion, your demonstration of having read the assignment prior to its discussion in class, performance on participation assignments, and your attendance. Consistent attendance is necessary both for individual success and for a successful course overall. **Thus, after one “free” absence, each successive unexcused absence will result in the deduction of 3 percentage points from your final grade. Appropriate documentation must be provided in order for me to consider excusing an absence.** In addition, I expect you to **turn off your cell phone and other electronic devices** before class starts and to **put them away**. Your participation grade will suffer enormously if you are using your cell phone or other electronic device during class, with the **exception of using a laptop to take class notes** over the material.

**Guidelines for maximizing your participation grade:**

1) **Consistent attendance** is extremely important. (Please see details of attendance requirements on previous pages of syllabus.)

2) Being **on time to class** is also important

3) **Reading assigned materials prior to class** and coming to class prepared with **questions and/or informed commentary on the readings, examples from popular culture, current events, etc. that relate to readings**

4) **Striking a balance** between speaking and actively listening/allowing others to speak

5) **Working collaboratively** in small group assignments

6) Interacting with others in the classroom in a **respectful manner** is expected; disrespect toward others will not be tolerated.

7) **Class disruptions** (e.g., chit-chat during class, using phone or other mobile device, sleeping) **will negatively affect your participation grade**; you may be asked to leave class if you are disruptive
Academic dishonesty, including cheating on exams and plagiarism, will not be tolerated, and will be dealt with in accordance with the disciplinary sanctions outlined in the Duquesne University Code of Student’s Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct.

The grading scale is as follows:

- 93-100% A
- 90-92% A-
- 87-89% B+
- 83-86% B
- 80-82% B-
- 77-79% C+
- 70-76% C
- 63-69% D
- 62% and below F

Midterm: Tuesday, February 24, in class

Final: Wednesday, May 6, 11:00 – 1:00

Note: If you're working with a physical and/or learning disability, please let me know at the beginning of the semester and together we'll design the proper accommodations. If you need accommodations, please contact the Office of Freshman Development and Special Student Services in 309 Union (412.396.6657) asap.

Course Schedule, Readings, Screenings

Week One


Week Two


Week Three


Week Four


Week Five

Video Lecture:


Week Six


Week Seven

MIDTERM, in class

Films: Assorted scholarly videos by Keathley and students (Vimeo).

**Week Eight**

**SPRING BREAK**

**Week Nine**


**Film:** Little, Brian (2012). *The African Cypher*. (South Africa). 89 mins. Fly on the Wall.

**Week Ten**


**Week Eleven**


**Week Twelve**


**Film:** N’Hada, Sana Na (2013). *Cadjigue*. (Guinea-Bissau). 113 mins.

**Week Thirteen**

**Films:** Gaye, Dyanna (2009). *Un Transport en COMMUN* ("St. Louis Blues"). 48 mins.

**Week Fourteen:** Presentations

**Week Fifteen:** Presentations
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Required readings:


Suggested readings:


331 – 337.

Films:


N’Hada, Sana Na (2013). *Cadjiue*. (Guinea-Bissau). 113 mins. Filmed with residents of the Bissagos archipelago, this drama is framed within tensions between indigenous spiritual traditions and modern, “Western” subcultures of gangs and drugs.

Nkosi, Thenjiwe Niki (2010). *Border Farm*. (South Africa). 30 mins. A docudrama about a group of Zimbabwean “border jumpers” who make their way across the Limpopo river to seek work on farms in the far north of South Africa. Part of a larger project conceived by the director/project co-coordinator Nkosi to create a space for the group to speak and create art about their experiences of border jumping.

Ousmane, Sembéne (1966). *La Noire de...* (“Black Girl”). (Senegal). 65 mins. Typically considered the first Sub-Saharan African film by an African filmmaker to receive international acclaim. Addresses the effects of colonialism and racism, as well as the construction of postcolonial identity, in the life of a young Senegalese woman who moves to France to work for a wealthy French couple.

Russell, Ben (2010). *Let Each One Go Where He May*. (USA/Surinam)* (American director, filmed in collaboration with brothers of Saramaccaner Maroon heritage in Surinam, S. A.) 130 mins. A film that deconstructs mythologies of migrational journeying and return. Russell stages the film as a journey undertaken by two Saramaccaner Maroon brothers from Surinam retracing the path of their ancestors’ escape from Dutch slavemasters. As the journey “unravels,” we are presented with new understandings of what it might mean to ‘return home’ and/or to reclaim a past heritage.
