

'Rewriting White'

Ethnicity and Cultural Identity

From *The Birth of a Nation*
to *Legally Blonde*

Übung Cultural Studies (USA) 3CP
050663 Aufbaumodul

Lecturer: PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt

Room and time: GABF 04/614 (Süd), Tuesdays 16-18

First session: April 21, 2009

Short description: In the 1990s, the discipline of Whiteness Studies appeared in academic discourse as a by-product of race, class and gender studies. It was the main goal of the new field to examine the symbolic construction of ›whiteness‹ as a normative concept in Western culture. While traditional approaches had concentrated on the formation of 'ethnic otherness,' whiteness studies focused on the ideological construct of 'sameness.' In particular, the discipline targeted the invisible norms by which deviations from the dominant codes were measured in social and cultural practice. Seminal works included David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991) and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). This course wants to investigate the cinematic constitution of whiteness as a norm in commercially successful movies such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *King Kong* (1933), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Legally Blonde* (2001). In addition to these film analyses, we will read classic texts on the social and cultural dimensions of whiteness and watch critical documentaries like *Bamboozled* (2000). For an introduction to the course, see *Critical White Studies* (eds. Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic; Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1997).

Grading: Quality of class participation counts 1/3; expert session 1/3; final paper of five to eight pages 1/3. Poor attendance or class participation will negatively affect your grade.

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, October 30, 2009. Note: There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus:

- 21. April** **Introduction: Whiteness in Mainstream Cinema**
- 28. April** **Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1st theory session)**
Toni Morrison, "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks",
from: *Playing in the Dark* (1992) (available online)
- 05. May** **Whiteness as Superiority**
The Birth of a Nation (1915, dir. D. W. Griffith)
- 12. May** **Colonialism and the Lure of Blackness**
King Kong (1933, dir. Merian C. Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack)

- 19. May** **The “happy darkie” and the “shining blonde”**
The Littlest Rebel (1935, dir. David Butler)
- 26. May** **Whiteness and Romance**
Gone with the Wind (1939, dir. Victor Fleming)
- 02. June** **Pentecost Holiday (Pfingsten)**
Relax and enjoy!
- 09. June** **Whiteness and the Cinematic Imagination (2nd theory session)**
Richard Dyer, “White”, from *The Matter of Images* (1993)
(available online)
- 16. June** **Whiteness and Madness**
I Walked with a Zombie (1943, dir. Jacques Tourneur)
- 23. June** **Fictionalizing the ‘Dark Continent’**
King Solomon’s Mines (1950, dir. Compton Bennett)
- 30. June** **The End of Segregation: Overcoming the Boundaries**
Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967, dir. Stanley Kramer)
- 07. July** **White Trash and Masculinity**
Deliverance (1972, dir. John Boorman)
- 14. July** **The Era of Blaxploitation**
Live and Let Die (1973, dir. Guy Hamilton)
- 21. July** **Whiteness and Blondeness**
Legally Blonde (2001, dir. Robert Luketic)