Instructor: Jonathan Agena
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu
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Location: Donald Bren Hall 1420
Day & Time: Tues., 11:00-11:50
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description
This seminar introduces and analyzes how race and power function in U.S. popular culture. For ten weeks, we will examine and discuss the various ways ethnic minorities are impacted by the inequality currently afflicting the superhero genre of Hollywood film/television. In particular, this class will have a special focus on Asian American people, as studying this typically “invisible” minority group in terms of representation will offer unique and intriguing insights concerning Hollywood racism and inequality.

Students can expect to explore such critical questions as:

• When it comes to superhero films, who usually gets to be the hero of the story?
• How do entertainment entities, such as Marvel, DC, Hollywood, and even comic book fanbases, control who is represented and empowered in popular cultural representation?
• How do people argue for racial diversity in terms of casting? How and why do some people resist calls for more diversity and representation?

By the end, students will be able to tackle a wide range of issues and challenges that relate to the power and influence of U.S. popular culture, as well as the power and influence of race-based representations.

Objectives

➢ To examine the various perspectives and arguments that both critique and validate issues related to Hollywood inequality
➢ To learn about and understand the different ways in which race is interpreted, handled, and conveyed in American society
To achieve critical thinking skills that will enable one to look past the aesthetics of film and instead readily perceive movies on a structural/cultural level (race, gender, class, history, etc.)

To develop empathy in consideration of inequality, channeling facts and issues toward a constructive and collaborative mindset

Grading

- **Reading Response:** For four class meetings (Weeks 2, 4, 6, and 8), you are required, via email before the beginning of class (by Monday before 11pm), to turn in a Reading Response. This written response must do two things: 1) Proposes an answer (3-5 sentences, with evidence from your reading) to one of the central questions for that week (note: some reading responses have additional instructions); and 2) Offers at least one critical question about the reading – the best questions will be ones that don’t have quick/easy answers and will spur original debate. Some of these questions will be read in class to get our discussions started (names won’t be read in case people want anonymity).

- **Participation & Attendance:** Since we’ll only be meeting ten times this quarter, attendance is important and will be mandatory. Absences will only be excused in the event of emergencies, i.e. illnesses, car accident, death in the family, immigration-related crises, etc. For your absence to be excused, you must send me an email/text notifying me of the emergency before class begins. Be sure to be on time as attendance will be taken at the beginning of every class meeting. Unexcused absences may be grounds for assigning an NP grade in the course.

- **Creative Project:** This final project will have you implement your own creative project that embodies your opinion on the issues we’ve been studying. You can choose to do an art piece, a short story, or even a film project. You will showcase your project during Weeks 9-10 (3 min. max). A project proposal will be due April 30th before 11:00pm. **Warning:** plagiarism will not be tolerated and will mean an automatic NP grade, so be sure to do original work for this project. (Please see handout for more details).

Course Materials

All readings and articles will be posted as pdfs on the course website. You will not need to purchase anything. I highly recommend that you do the readings assigned for each week so as to be more fully engaged in class conversations. All films/videos will be screened in class.

Expectations

- **Academic Honesty:** This is a 1-unit, P/NP class and so the workload is not designed to stress or push you to your limit. That said, it will be fully expected that you do your own work and cite sources when necessary (unless otherwise stated). If you are uncertain as to whether you are plagiarizing, then please come see me. Otherwise, make it a point to pay close attention to the rules set forth by UCI: “UCI’s Academic Senate Policy on Academic Honesty.” If you’re unsure of what constitutes as plagiarism, please see UCI’s Academic Integrity page.
Safe Learning Environment: Race is a very sensitive topic, even in academic discussions. It’s very easy to offend someone and just as easy to get frustrated over having offended someone. Talking about race isn’t easy, but the important thing to remember is that that’s ok. Race studies is complicated, fraught with conflict and differing points of view. It’s ok to feel ignorant or find a statement about race disconcerting or conflicting with views you may have grown up learning. It is vital, however, that we keep our feelings in check and our minds open to possibilities that may challenge the views we’ve grown up with. This is vital because safe learning environments depend on us having a respect towards others and a willingness to put aside our personal convictions, if only to learn about the pain and adversities of others (remember: empathy). Thus, I expect all students to be respectful of other students, especially in concerning race. If you feel any measure of unfairness or discrimination is being propagated in the class, please come see me.

U-Teach Unit Limits: UCI students may take at most two UTeach seminars in their entire time as an undergrad. The registrar won't prevent you from enrolling in a third, but the third one (and any others) will show up on your transcript as an "unauthorized repeat."

Special Needs: Any student who feels he or she may need an accommodation due to a disability should contact the UCI Disability Services Center at (949) 824-7494 right away to explore the possible range of accommodations. I encourage any student having difficulty, whether or not due to a disability, to consult with me individually.

Use of Personal Technology: Because we’ll be meeting for such a short time, it is important that we are fully engaged with each other. You will not need to take notes in this class (though doing so might help with your Creative Project), and thus you will not need a laptop or cellphone. Personal technology should be turned off, silenced, and stuffed securely in your bag. If I see any active use of personal technology during our class discussions, I will ask that you put it away or get points deducted from your participation and attendance grade.

Communication and Office Hours: Please feel free to email me if you have any questions, concerns, comments, suggestions. I am happy to meet outside of class. Just make an appointment with me through email.

Course Schedule

Weeks 1-3: Understanding Hollywood Inequality

Central Questions: 1) When people say that there’s a lack of Asian American representation in Hollywood, what do they exactly mean? Why do they think there is a lack? 2) What issues might make it difficult for some people to accept that there’s a lack of representation?

**Week 2: Racial Inequality in Hollywood** (screen in class: “Chris Rock’s Opening Monologue to 2016 Oscars”)

*Reading Response #1 due*

- Read: Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism, Introduction
- **For this week, please do your Reading Response on one article (of your choice) and address one of the central questions listed above.**

**Week 3: Examining and Defining Whitewashing** (screen in class: “John Oliver – ‘Whitewashing: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver’”)

- Read: Steve Rose, “‘The Idea that It’s Good Business is a Myth’ – Why Hollywood Whitewashing has Become Toxic”

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**Weeks 4-7: Arguments Against Having More Representation**

Central Questions: 1) What counterarguments can we formulate to some of the arguments posed by whitewashing defendants? 2) Can some or all of these arguments by whitewashing defendants be in any way justified? 3) How might being represented as a superhero in a blockbuster film create solutions/problems with regards to these arguments/counterarguments?

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**Week 4: Iron Fist – Can Whiteness Be Essential?** (screen in class: Netflix’s Iron Fist Season 1 ep. 1 – “Snow Gives Way”)

*Reading Response #2 due*

- Read: Thomas, Roy, *Marvel Premiere #17 & #18*
- **For this week, do your Reading Response on one article (of your choice) and on the Marvel Premiere reading.**
Week 5: Issues in Anti-Stereotype Resistance (screen in class: either Doctor Strange, Iron Man 3, The Last Airbender, Ghost in the Shell (2017) – class will choose which one they want to watch)

*Creative Project Proposal due

Week 6: Issues in Anti-Stereotype Resistance contd. (screen in class: continue watching chosen film)

*Reading Response #3 due

- Read: Sun, Rebecca, et al., “Why Did 'Doctor Strange' and 'Ghost in the Shell' Whitewash Their Asian Characters?”
- Read: Aucoin, Don, “‘Airbender’ Reopens Race Debate”
- **For this week, do your Reading Response on one article of your choice and on the film that we’re watching – based on what you’ve already watched, how do you think the film and the article relate to one of this week’s central questions?

Week 7: Arguments from and to Hollywood, Marvel, and DC

- Read: Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism, Ch. 2
- Read: Lee, Stan, Origins of Marvel Comics, Ch. 1

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Weeks 8-10: Rethinking Superheroes and Hollywood Inequality

Central Questions: 1) How might situating film as being, first and foremost, a “business, not a social experiment” be inaccurate and consequential? 2) Why might it be simple/difficult for an Asian American to create an Asian American superhero that can outdo Batman or Spider-Man in terms of prominence and memorability? 3) If it is practically taboo to situate race as a structural violence, how might one challenge Hollywood in terms of its inequality, without bringing up race in the conversation?

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Week 8: The Power of Film and Pop Culture (screen in class: Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. Season 1 ep. 1 – “Pilot”)

*Reading Response #4 due

- Read: Kraska, Jake, “The Psychology of Comic Books: Why We Worship Superheroes”
- Read: Yang, Jeff, Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology, pp. 7-23, 25-28, 55, 100-112
- **For this week, do your Reading Response on one of the stories (your choice) contained within Secret Identities.

Week 9: Black Panther – The Solution for the Future?
• *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, Ch. 6

Week 10: Creative Project Show-and-Tell