**Dr. Todd Boyd**

**CTCS 510: Reagan’s America (Crack Nation)**

Wednesdays (Fall 2014) Seminar 1:00-3:50 /SCA 216 Screening 4:00-6:50/SCA 112

Dr. Boyd’s office hours: Wednesdays & Thursdays 12:00-12:45  
Office hour meetings are by appointment. To make an appointment for Dr. Boyd’s office hours call (213.740.3334) or visit the Critical Studies main office (SCA 320).

**Course Description:**

This course will study cinema, media, and popular culture during the “Reagan Era,” with a specific focus on the politics of the crack cocaine epidemic that began in the mid 1980s. Using the landmark N.W.A. album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) as a cultural touchstone, the course will investigate the relationship between the image of Ronald Reagan’s presidency (“Reaganomics”), the influx of cocaine into American cities, and the ensuing “crack culture” that emerged and came to define this era.

This course will highlight a number of cultural themes, historical issues, political controversies, and other societal trends, including; the Iran/Contra scandal, the prison industrial complex, gang culture, hip hop culture, hip hop cinema, gangsta rap, the 1988 presidential election, the LA riots, the Rampart scandal, and the murders of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, among other topics. These topics will be pursued in the interest of addressing larger questions, such as; what role have drugs historically played in American society? To what extent do drugs reveal broader issues relative to race and class? What is the connection between politics, private enterprise, and issues of “law & order”? How have all of these issues been reflected in popular culture?

**Books:**

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

Boyd, Todd. *Am I Black Enough for You*?: *Popular Culture From the ‘Hood and Beyond*

Boyd, Todd. *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop*  
  
Bunch, Will. *Tear Down this Myth: The Right-Wing Distortion of the Reagan Legacy*  
  
Cockburn, Alexander. *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press*

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*

Grim, Ryan. *This is Your Country on Drugs: The Secret History of Getting High in America*  
  
Jones, Jill. *Hep Cats, Narcs and Pipe Dreams: A History of America’s Romance With Illegal Drugs*  
  
Rogin, Michael. *Ronald Reagan the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*

Schou, Nick. *Kill the Messenger: How the CIA’s Crack Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Journalist Gary Webb*  
Shakur, Sanyika. Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member

# Sullivan, Randall. *LAbyrinth: A Detective Investigates the Murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., the Implication of Death Row Records' Suge Knight, and the Origins of the Los Angeles Police Scandal*

Webb, Gary. *Dark Alliance: The CIA, The Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*  
  
  
**Course Schedule:**

August 27

Screening: ***Cocaine Cowboys****,* Billy Corben (2007)

September 3  
Screening: ***Blow****,* Ted Demme (2001)

Reading: ***Ronald Reagan the Movie***

September 10

Screening: ***Scarface****,* Brian De Palma (1983)

Reading: ***Tear Down this Myth***

September 17  
Screening: ***Goodfellas****,* Martin Scorsese (1990)

Reading: ***Hep Cats, Narcs and Pipe Dreams***

September 24   
Screening: ***Boogie Nights****,* Paul Thomas Anderson (1997)

Reading: ***Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press***

October 1   
Screening: ***Planet Rock***, Richard Lowe/Martin Torgoff (2011)

***Bloods & Crips: Made in America***, Stacey Peralta (2008)

Reading: ***Am I Black Enough for You?***

***Monster***

October 8

Screening: ***The Central Park Five***, Ken Burns/Sarah Burns/David McMahon (2012) Reading: ***The New Jim Crow***

October 15  
Reading: ***Dark Alliance***

[there will be no seminar meeting or screening this week]

October 22   
Screening: *Boyz N the Hood,* John Singleton (1991)

Reading: ***Dark Alliance****, cont.*

***The New H.N.I.C.***

October 29  
Screening: ***Menace II Society****,* The Hughes Brothers (1993)

***Uprising: Hip Hop and the LA Riots****,* Mark Ford (2012)

Reading: ***City of Quartz***

November 5  
Screening: ***Biggie and Tupac****,* Nick Broomfield (2002)

***Beef****,* Peter Spirer (2003)

Reading: ***Labyrinth***

November 12  
Screening: ***Jungle Fever****,* Spike Lee (1991)

Reading: ***This is Your Country on Drugs***

November 19  
*Screening:* ***The Two Escobars****,* Jeff Zimbalist

Reading: ***Kill The Messenger***

November 26   
  
No class (Thanksgiving)  
  
December 5  
Final Class Presentations

**Course Requirements:**

Film Presentation: you are required to make a presentation on one of the films screened in class. For the film presentation discuss the screening in question as it pertains to the issues that define the course. In general this presentation should discuss the film and its relationship to the larger themes of the class. Avoid plot summary and instead focus on pointing out the major issues that the film raises in terms of representation within the “Reagan/Crack” era as defined by the course. Further exemplify your points by using scenes from the film that help to illustrate these points. Discuss the reception of the film, pointing out both the celebrations as well as the criticism that others may have leveled against the text. Explain any controversies about the screening and comment on how the film has come to be regarded over time. Discuss the filmmaker and explain how the screening in questions fits into the filmmaker’s overall body of work. Make connections to comparable films where appropriate. The presentation should also prompt class discussion on the issues at hand.

Book presentation: you are required to make a presentation on one of the books assigned for the class. For this presentation discuss the reading in question as it pertains to the issues that define this course. This presentation should discuss the book from a critical standpoint and apply the ideas to the themes and issues of the class. Summarize the most important aspects of the reading in a concise and succinct manner, pointing out the major arguments of the text. Exemplify your points about the text through use of quotes from the text. Discuss the reception of the text, pointing out both the celebrations and the criticism that others may have leveled against the text. Explain any controversies about the text and comment on the legacy of the text where appropriate. Identify the author and explain how the reading factors into the author’s overall body of work. Make connections to comparable books/articles relative to the same topic. The presentation should prompt class discussion on the topic and its related issues.

In general the presentation should be both informative and interesting to listen to. Avoid “reading” to the class and instead present the ideas in a manner that engages and enlightens the audience in the interest of prompting further thought.

There will be an opportunity to select the film and book that will be the focus of the presentations. This process will be discussed in class. Depending on the size of the class there may be some cases where multiple people are signed up for one presentation. In these cases it will be necessary for the assigned individuals to decide how to divide up the information of the presentation so as to avoid redundancy. The presentation should be between 10 to 12 minutes in length.

The TA for the course can assist you with the projection equipment in SCA 216 during your presentation.

**Critical Essay**

The final assignment is a 5000-6000 word critical essay that analyzes and critically engages the larger issues that have defined this course. The critical essay is to be emailed to Dr. Boyd (tboyd@cinema.usc.edu) no later than 7:00pm December 12, 2014.

In general the essay should address the idea of “Reagan’s America” and explore the meanings behind the phrase “Crack Nation.” Select one of the films screened in class or chose a film, television program, album, or music video from the supplemental list below. It is acceptable to discuss multiple texts in your essay, but there should be one film, television program, album, or music video that is clearly the focus of the essay. How does the object selected represent “Reagan’s America (Crack Nation)”?

In selecting the film, television program, album, music video, it IS NOT acceptable to focus on the same film used for the in-class presentation. After selecting an object of study the requirement is to build an essay around this film, television program, album, or music video that discusses how this object of study reflects the issues that define “Reagan’s America (Crack Nation).” Focus on the themes, the style, and the overall representation of the object in question, using examples drawn from production history, various scenes, moments of dialogue, lyrics, performance, etc. to exemplify your points. Discuss the object in question relative to other objects of the era that could be considered to offer comparable representational strategies. Explain how the object was received critically. Address how the object in question relates to the political and historical issues of the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, discuss how future generations have responded to the object of study. It is also necessary to make extensive use of appropriate course readings in the construction of your essay.

*Straight Outta Compton*, NWA (1988)

*It Takes a Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back*, Public Enemy (1988)

*Yo! MTV Raps* (MTV, 1988-1995)

*Amerikkka’s Most Wanted*, Ice Cube (1990)

*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC, 1990-1996)

*Mind Playing Tricks on Me* music video, The Geto Boyz (1991)

*New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991)

*The Chronic*, Dr. Dre (1992)

*American Me* (Edward James Olmos, 1992)

*Deep Cover* (Bill Duke, 1992)  
*Black Pearl*, Yo Yo(1992)

*360 Degrees of Power*, Sistah Souljah (1992)

*Illmatic,* Nas (1993)

*Enter The Wu Tang: 36 Chambers,* Wu Tang Clan (1993)

*My Life*, Mary J Blige (1994)

*Ready to Die*, Notorious B.I.G. (1994)

*Hardcore*, Lil’ Kim (1996)

*Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996)

*Reasonable Doubt*, Jay-Z (1996)

*Baduizm*, Erykah Badu (1997)

*Jackie Brown*, Quentin Tarantino (1997)

*The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)* music video, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot (1997)

*Aquemini*, Outkast (1998)

*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Lauryn Hill (1998)  
*Training Day* (Antonie Fuqua, 2001)

*Boogie Man: The Lee Atwater Story* (2008)  
*The Nine Live of Marion Barry* (Dana Flor, 2009)

*Without Bias* (Kirk Fraser, 2009)  
  
**Attendance and Participation**: In order to ensure the best possible seminar experience attendance and participation in this course is required. In other words attendance is both assumed and expected. Please be aware that missing class and/or failing to participate will be considered as factors when calculating your final grade for this course.