

HISTORY 44: HISTORY OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Professor Will Mackintosh, Spring 2010

Tuesday-Thursday, 1:15-2:30 PM
Trotter 301

Office Hours: Tues 2:30 – 3:30PM, or by appointment, in Trotter 211.

Contact Info: Please email me at wmackin1@swarthmore.edu. You can expect that I will check my email once per day and respond to you within 24 hours during the week and within 48 hours over the weekend.
My mailbox is in the History Department in Trotter Hall.

Any good history begins in strangeness. The past should not be comfortable. The past should not be a familiar echo of the present, for if it is familiar why revisit it? The past should be so strange that you wonder how you and people you know and love could come from such a time.

—Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), p. 13.

Course Description:

This course will introduce students to the history of popular culture in the United States, from the colonial period to modern times. It will consider popular culture in genres as diverse as newspapers, novels, the theater, fairs, amusement parks, movies, television, and music. It will address both the content of American popular culture as well as the conditions under which it has been produced. Along the way, it will challenge its students to ask, what is “culture?” What is “popular?” What is the relationship between an individual work, its cultural context, and the conditions of production? What is the relationship between cultural creators and audiences, and how do they change over time? From the chapbooks of colonial New England to DJ Kool Herc’s hip hop innovations, this course will trace the history of popular expression in America.

The following comprise the principal objectives of this course:

- Give students a broad overview of the history of American popular culture.
- Introduce students to the theory, questions, and sources that guide scholarship in the history of popular culture.
- Help students to develop new frameworks for understanding the contemporary popular culture that surrounds them in their daily lives.
- Expose students to the art of critical reading and historical analysis of primary source documents and historical scholarship.
- Improve and refine students’ analytical writing skills.

Course Requirements:

Required Readings: The following books are available at the College Bookstore, and are also on reserve at McCabe:

- Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- James W. Cook, *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

- Jim Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. (RECOMMENDED)
- John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Erik Larson, *Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*. New York: Vintage, 2004.

All other required readings, websites, and podcasts are available on Blackboard.

Class Participation: Students are required to attend all class meetings, complete all assigned readings, bring all relevant materials to class, and be prepared to discuss the readings each week. Students are expected to contribute actively to the collective learning experience of the course.

No cell phone use is allowed in my classroom, including text messaging. If you must write or reply to a message, please leave the classroom and do not return for the rest of the class session.

Writing Assignments: Students are required to write two papers for the class. The first, shorter paper will be based on the material on the syllabus, and the second, longer paper will be a research paper. Specific assignments will be distributed before each due date. All assignments must be turned in on time; late papers will be graded down five points per day. Papers must be handed in *both* in hard copy and on Blackboard.

Mid-term Examination and Final Examination: An in-class midterm and comprehensive final examination will be given. The final exam will take place at the end of the semester on the scheduled exam date.

Policies and Procedures:

Grading Policy: Final grades will be calculated according to this formula:

- Short Paper: 15%
- Midterm: 15%
- Long Paper: 25%
- Final: 25%
- Class Participation: 20%

Attendance: The following is the History Department policy on attendance: “Students are required to attend all classes for the successful completion of the course. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade.” My policy is that each student is allowed two absences for any reason, and additional absences beyond those two will have a negative effect on the class participation grade. I do not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences; all absences beyond the two allowable will have a small but noticeable effect on the final grade. I will note attendance at the beginning of class and will not return to my attendance book for the rest of the class period, so if you come late it is your responsibility to approach me at the end of class to request being marked present. Depending on your timeliness and participation, I may decide to mark you present or absent. Students leaving class early may have their attendance status revoked.

Class Participation Grades: Classroom participation is absolutely integral to this course. You will be

graded on your willingness and ability to contribute to class discussion. In general, your class participation grade will not be judged on whether what you say is “right” or “wrong,” but on whether your comments reflect active thought about the readings, lectures, and discussions. Your grade will also reflect your attendance and level of preparedness for class discussion.

Academic Honesty: It is your responsibility to understand Swarthmore’s policy on academic integrity and to avoid plagiaristic practices in your own work. Several resources are available online for understanding Swarthmore’s definitions and procedures, and to help you identify and avoid plagiarism. These include:

- The *Student Handbook*’s section on “Academic and Personal Integrity:”
http://www.swarthmore.edu/Documents/sliffe/student_handbook.pdf
- The Writing Center’s guidelines for “Paraphrasing & Citation:”
<http://www.swarthmore.edu/x10246.xml>
- Professor Purrington’s “Plagiarism Resources:”
<http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/plagiarism>

If you have further questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please bring them to me and I will help you avoid it. I will enforce College policies regarding plagiarism to their fullest extent, and you can expect to get caught.

This syllabus is subject to change.

Reading and Discussion Schedule:

Week 1

Tuesday, January 19: INTRODUCTION

Thursday, January 21: READING IN EARLY AMERICA

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 1-23

“Indictment and Trial of Sir Richard Rum, at a Court, Held at
Punch-Hall, in the Colony of Bacchus” (1724)

“History of Jack the Giant Killer” (1800?)

Week 2

Tuesday, January 26: POPULAR LITERATURE IN EARLY AMERICA

Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” (1819)

Cooper, *Deerslayer* (1841), 179-210

Thursday, January 28: NO CLASS

Week 3

Tuesday, February 2: EARLY AMERICAN THEATER

Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 32-80

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 30-50

Willis, “After-Lesson of the Astor-Place Riot” (1849)

Thursday, February 4: MINSTRELSY

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 57-77

Week 4

Tuesday, February 9: PENNY PRESS

Cohen, *Murder of Helen Jewett*, 3-37

Thursday, February 11: THE WORLD OF PT BARNUM

Cook, *The Colossal PT Barnum Reader*, 1-8, 85-102, 103-104, 109-111, 122-127, 181-182, 185-188, 194-196, 211-219; view images 155-180

Week 5

Tuesday, February 16: THE FLANEUR IN THE 5 POINTS

Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (1850)

Bowery Boys, "Five Points," Parts 1 & 2 (podcasts)

Thursday, February 18: CHEAP PRINT

Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 17-46, 65-84

"Frank Reade, Jr.'s Electric Air Canoe" (1892)

Week 6

Tuesday, February 23: OFFICIAL CULTURE IN INDUSTRIAL AMERICA

Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 4-58

Weiss, *American Myth of Success*, 48-63

Alger, "Tom Parker's Strange Visitor" (1892)

Thursday, February 25: WORLD'S FAIRS

Larson, *Devil in the White City*

Week 7

Tuesday, March 2: VAUDEVILLE & BURLESQUE

Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 95-138

Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 157-240

Bowery Boys, "Tin Pan Alley" (podcast)

Short Paper Due

Thursday, March 4: MIDTERM

SPRING BREAK

Week 8

Tuesday, March 16: CONEY ISLAND

Kasson, *Amusing the Million*

Movie (in class): "Coney Island: A Documentary Film" (1991)

Thursday, March 18: BIRTH OF FILM

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 129-162

Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 139-172

Week 9

Tuesday, March 23: FILM, RACE, AND NATION

Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice"
Movie: either "Birth of a Nation" (1915) or "The Jazz Singer" (1927)
(you will be assigned which movie to view in class)

Thursday, March 25: RADIO

Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 173-234
York, "The X Factor" (podcast)

Week 10

Tuesday, March 30: ADVERTISING AND MASS MEDIA

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 163-202
Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 29-57

Thursday, April 1: THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception"
Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society"

Week 11

Tuesday, April 6: HOLLYWOOD

May, *The Big Tomorrow*, 175-213

Thursday, April 8: ROCK-N-ROLL

Douglas, *Listening In*, 219-283
Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed*, 67-97

Week 12

Tuesday, April 13: TELEVISION

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 234-267
Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 235-251

Thursday, April 15: HOME ENTERTAINMENT

Butsch, *Making of American Audiences*, 252-266
Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 99-135

Week 13

Tuesday, April 20: FAMILY VACATIONS AND THE BORSCHT BELT

Rugh, *Are We There Yet?*, 15-40, 68-91
Movie (in class): "The Rise and Fall of the Borscht Belt" (1986)

Thursday, April 22: HIP HOP

Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 270-293

Week 14

Tuesday, April 27: COOL

Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 207-235
Long Paper Due

Thursday, April 29: REVIEW FOR FINAL EXAM