

## History 327: American Cultural History in the Twentieth Century, Spring 2010

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### Course Description:

Popular culture is produced and consumed within specific historical contexts. In this course, we will explore how both artists and audiences have used popular culture as way of making sense of the world around them. Popular culture provides a means for understanding, challenging, and escaping the issues and concerns of historical periods. Throughout the semester, we will examine how Americans interacted with films, television programs, popular fiction, and music during the twentieth century.

Some of the key questions we will consider in the course include:

Why have Americans developed or responded to certain kinds of popular culture in various periods? How does popular culture reflect and influence American society? How have artists and audiences used popular culture as political tools? In what ways has popular culture operated as "social control"? In what settings did it serve as resistance? How has popular culture influenced and reflected conceptions of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality? How have groups and individuals used popular culture to construct identities and communities? How and why have "panics" over popular culture emerged? How does local culture get appropriated by mass culture?

This course syllabus is only a general plan for the course; deviations may be necessary. The syllabus, lecture outlines, and assignments will also be available on WebCT.

### Reading:

The majority of the course reading is available on webct in pdf files that you can read online or print out hard copies. In addition, we will be reading the paperback book, *The Martian Chronicles*. It is available at the RIC bookstore or at the Library Reserve Desk.

### Grading Breakdown:

- 13% Discussion (includes class attendance and participation)
- 12% four two-page Reading Response Papers, due in class the day of the assigned reading.
- 25% Film Analysis, due **Friday, May 7**; brief proposal due **April 6**
- 25% Midterm Exam, **March 23**
- 25% Final Exam, **Finals Week**

**Note: Students must complete all elements of the course in order to pass the course.**

### Assignments:

- **Discussion (Attendance and participation):** Class participation forms a key part of each student's grade. Students should read for each day's sessions and come to class prepared to ask and answer questions on the day's topic. Class participation will be evaluated based on the student's contributions to the weekly class discussions. Students are expected to attend lectures regularly, make every effort to be on time, and remain for the entire period. The lectures will not necessarily duplicate material in the assigned reading. More than 1 unexcused absences will cause your discussion grade will suffer. Disruptive behavior shall not be tolerated.

- **Exams:** there will be two exams: a midterm exam on and a final exam during exam week. They will cover material from lectures, assigned readings, and class discussions.
- **Reading Papers:** Four times throughout the semester, you will write a two-page response paper on the assigned reading for the day. Everyone is required to write one of these papers for *The Martian Chronicles* on **March 9**; for the other 3 papers you can pick the classes for which you want to write on the assigned reading. The response paper is due the day of class discussion. See the reading questions below.
- **Film Analysis:** you will write a 10-12 page paper analyzing the historical context of a film of your choosing from the twentieth century. The paper is due on **Friday, May 7**. You will also submit a brief proposal on your chosen film on **April 6**. Further details and guidelines on this paper will be handed out in class.

### **Reading Questions:**

These are questions to help guide your reading of the secondary sources. You will also use these questions in your four response papers. In your papers, feel free to address all of these questions or pick a couple that seem most relevant to the reading.

Based on these articles, what role did popular culture play in this period? In what ways was popular culture changing? What important new ideas, forms, experiences, or concerns of popular culture developed? Why? What was going on in American society during this period that helped influence popular culture? What kind of impact did these new cultural forms have on American society?

Do these authors portray popular culture as a common experience among Americans or do they claim that issues such as race, class, gender, region and age created different ideas and experiences of popular culture?

Do these authors view popular culture as coming from "above" (from the government, from corporations, etc) or from "below" (from the people)?

How would you compare the two assigned readings with each other? Are there common themes about popular culture and American society between these different articles? Are there ways in which the authors disagree or arrive at different conclusions? What explains these differences?

### **Course Schedule: Topics and Readings:**

#### **January 26 Introduction: Definitions and Themes**

##### Readings:

Michael Petracca and Madeline Sorapure, *Common Culture: Reading and Writing about American Popular Culture*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 1-6.

George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3-20.

**February 2                    Mass Culture and Modern America at the Turn of the Century**

Readings:

Jim Cullen, ed. "The Romance of the Dance Hall" and "Moving Images" in *Popular Culture in American History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 95-162.

**February 9                    The Jazz Age**

Readings:

Lawrence Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," *Journal of American Folklore* 102: 403 (Jan.-Mar. 1989): 6-22.

Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 86-103.

**February 16                    Great Depression**

Readings:

Alan Brinkley, *Culture and Politics in the Great Depression* (Waco, TX: Markham Press Fund, 1999), 5-39.

Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 59-103.

**February 23                    World War II**

Readings:

Robert MacDougall, "Red, Brown and Yellow Perils: Images of the American Enemy in the 1940s and 1950s," *Journal of Popular Culture* 32:4 (Spring 1999): 59-75.

William S. Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 19-39.

**March 2                        Cold War Censorship**

Readings:

Stephen J. Whitfield, "Reeling: The Politics of Film," in *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 127-151.

John Springhall, "'Horror Comic' Panic: Campaigning Against Comic Books in the 1940s and 1950s," in *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 121-146.

**March 9                        Cold War Anxiety**

**Reading Response on *The Martian Chronicles* due**

Readings:

Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979, originally published 1950).

Margot A. Henriksen, "Vertigo: The Unhinged Moral Universe of Cold War America," in *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 39-80.

**March 16                    No Class, Spring Break**

**March 23                    Midterm Exam**

**March 30 Youth Culture and Social Change**Readings:

- Wini Breines, "The Other Fifties: Beats, Bad Girls, and Rock and Roll," in *Young White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 127-166.
- Michael T. Bertrand, "Rock 'n' Roll, Race, and the Issue of Change," in *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 93-124.

**April 6 Social Movements in 1960s****Proposal for Film Analysis Paper due in Class**Readings:

- Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Let the Church Sing 'Freedom,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 7 (1987): 105-118.
- Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106-139.

**April 13 Counterculture**Readings:

- Allen Matusow, "Rise and Fall of a Counterculture," in *A History of Our Time*, eds. William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 380-394.
- Aniko Bodroghkozy, "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and the Youth Rebellion," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 201-219.

**April 20 Malaise and Decline in the 1970s**Readings:

- James B. Gilbert, "Popular Culture," *American Quarterly* 35:1/2 (Spring-Summer 1983): 141-154.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Discovery of the Working Class," in *Fear of Falling* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 97-143.

**April 27 Resistance and Rebirth in the 1980s**Readings:

- Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in *Race Rebels* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 183-227.
- Susan Jeffords, "Hard Bodies: The Reagan Heroes," in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 24-63.

**May 4 Popular Culture and September 11th**Readings:

- Lynn Spigel, "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11," *American Quarterly* 56:2 (June 2004), 235-270.
- Kevin Mattson, "American Culture since 9/11," *Dissent* (Winter 2003): 58-61.

**Friday, May 7 Film Analysis Paper due, 5 pm****Finals Week Final Exam**