



American Cultural History COURSE GUIDE

History 327

Spring 2007

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and by appointment

Scope of the Course

This course explores the development of American popular culture from the nineteenth century through the post World War II era. We will strive to understand the many layers upon which American culture has been built, exploring the cultural worlds of ordinary Americans as well as of elites. You will be studying a wide variety of artifacts of American culture including literature, paintings, popular drama, and music.

Cultural history is an interdisciplinary field of historical inquiry. This means that cultural historians borrow ideas and methods from other kinds of scholars—art historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and geographers, to name a few. This course will introduce you to the ways historians have employed some of these materials and methods. Our emphasis will be on mastery of course content through analytical application rather than rote memorization.

Keep in mind as we explore our cultural roots the opening lines of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Try to understand as you visit these foreign Americas how the inhabitants were different from as well as similar to yourself.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Identify and explain the distinctive characteristics of key periods in the history of American popular culture.
- Explain complexities of the relationship between the history of American popular culture and American democracy.
- Assess the influence of factors such as race, class, gender, region, ethnicity, technology, ideas and beliefs on the formation of American culture.
- Use a variety of visual and documentary sources as historical evidence, including paintings, literature, objects, landscapes, music, photographs, and films.
- Compare and contrast varying scholars' interpretations and explain how they differ.
- Evaluate newspapers and popular magazines as sources of popular culture history.

Required Readings

Books: (available at UNCG Bookstore)

Cullen, Jim, ed. *Popular Culture in American History*. New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.

Schlereth, Thomas J. *Victorian America, 1876-1915*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.

Evaluation

Participation	10%
Midterms	60%
Research Exercise	30%

Participation (10%)

This assessment will be based on three criteria:

1. Consistent attendance--This is not a traditional lecture course. We will be critically evaluating the content of the readings and practicing the application of analytical skills during each class period. You will not be able to make up for your absences by copying someone else's notes. For this reason, consistent attendance is essential to your learning in this course. See above for an explanation of the course attendance policy which has an impact on your overall grade in the course beyond its importance for evaluating your participation.
2. Thorough preparation for class--readings must be completed before class and assignments must be turned in on time.
3. Regular contributions to class discussions--the success of this course for your learning depends on active intellectual engagement with your peers. Discussions will take place during every class meeting in both small group exercises and as a whole class. In order to create a good climate for everyone to participate, please follow these discussion guidelines:
 - Be ready to share and explain your opinions. Feel free to disagree with others, but be specific in your own assertions and back them up with evidence.
 - Listen carefully and respond to other members of the group. Be willing to change your mind when someone demonstrates an error in your logic and use of facts.
 - Do not hesitate to ask for clarification of any point or term you do not understand.
 - Make your point succinctly, avoid repetition, and stick to the subject.

Ten percent may seem like a small amount in the overall grade, but it can make a significant difference in the final grade. Here's an example of how the participation grade is calculated: a student attended class 87% of the time, asked or answered several questions during the semester, actively participated in research workshops and group discussions, but turned in at least one graded assignment late. Though attendance and participation might suggest a B+ for this student, the late assignment means that this student cannot make higher than a B and could even be in the C-range depending on how late the assignment was. Skipping classes and turning in assignments late can have a snowball effect for the final participation grade.

Midterms (30% each; 60% total)

You will complete two take-home, open-book midterm exams. The format will be essay and short answer. Questions will focus on the content of assigned reading, lectures, films, and class discussions.

Due Dates:

7 February, Midterm 1

30 April, Midterm 2

Research Exercise (30%)

You will complete one research exercise using primary sources to explore themes and issues raised in the assigned readings. You will sign up for one of the following options:

Option 1: compare and contrast popular entertainments and consumer patterns advertised in a North Carolina town newspaper from the turn of the twentieth century to the *New York Times* from the same month and year to compare urban and regional patterns of consumption. Due 30 March.

Option 2: compare and contrast two different issues of a popular magazine from the 1920s and the 1950s to evaluate changes in mid-twentieth-century American popular culture. Due. 20 April.

For both options, you will complete your analysis using a set of questions distributed well in advance of the due dates. This is not a formal research paper, but I estimate that a successful product for each research assignment will consist of 5-7 typed, double-spaced pages.

Course Schedule

8 January Introductions

10 January What is Popular Culture?

Read: Cullen, Preface: About This Book -- Introduction: The Worldwide Web of Popular Culture

12 January Popular Reading in Early America

Read Cullen 1. In the Beginning. Chapbooks: Reconstructing the Popular Reading of Early America / Victor Neuberg. Consider the Source: Excerpts from Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

15 January MLK Holiday

17 January Rioting Over Shakespeare!

Read Cullen 2. The World of the Stage. William Shakespeare in America / Lawrence Levine. Consider the Source: Excerpt from Representative Men by Ralph Waldo Emerson

- 19 January** Race and Class in the Nineteenth-Century City
Read Cullen 3. The Racy Appeal of the Minstrel. The Blackface Lore Cycle / W. T. Lhamon, Jr. Consider the Source: Excerpts from Nineteenth-Century Minstrel Shows
- 22 January** film: Stephen Foster
 VH10003 c.1 Stephen Foster
- 24 January** Visual Culture Workshop: Genre Paintings as Historical Evidence
- 26 January** film: Wilderness and the West
 VH5690 c.1 **WILDERNESS AND THE WEST**
- 29 January** Commercializing the West
Read Cullen, 4. Literature for the Million. The Figure of the Dime Novel in American Culture / Michael Denning. Consider the Source: Excerpt from Last of the Great Scouts by Helen Cody Wetmore
- 31 January** Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show
- 2 February** Centennial Exposition, 1876
Read: Schlereth, *Prologue*
- 5 February** Review for Midterm.
- 7 February** **Midterm 1 due.** No class.
- 9 February** Meanings of the Dance Hall
Read Cullen, 5. The Romance of the Dance Hall. Dance Madness / Kathy Peiss. Consider the Source: Excerpt from Elisabeth Marbury's introduction to Modern Dancing by Vernon Castle and Irene Castle
- 12 February** Migration Patterns and Transportation Technology: Modernizing Time and Space
Read: Schlereth, *Moving*
- 14 February** film: Coney Island
 VH7832 c.1 **Coney Island** /directed by Ric Burns
- 16 February** The Company Town and the Skyscraper; Redesigning Modern Work Spaces
Read: Schlereth, *Working*
- 19 February** film: America and Lewis Hine
 VH10690 c.1 **AMERICA AND LEWIS HINE**
- 21 February** Visual Culture Workshop: Floorplans as Historical Evidence
Read: Schlereth, *Housing*
- 23 February** Visual Culture Workshop: Advertisements as Historical Evidence
Read: Schlereth, *Consuming*
- 26 February** American Popular Culture in an Age of Imperialism
Read: Schlereth, *World's Columbian Exposition, 1893*

28 February Film as a New Popular Culture

Read: Schlereth, Communicating

Cullen, 6. Moving Images. American Motion Pictures and the New Popular Culture, 1893-1918 / Daniel J. Czitrom. Consider the Source: Excerpts from The Spirit of Youth by Jane Addams –

2 March film: Modern Times

VH695 c.1 **Modern Times**

5 7 9 March Spring Break

12 March Highbrow, Middlebrow, Lowbrow: Cultural Hierarchies at the Turn of the Century

Read: Schlereth, Playing and Striving

14 March Research Workshop 1: Comparative Newspaper Analysis

16 March From Victorian to Modern

Read: Schlereth, Living and Dying, Panama-Pacific Exposition, 1915

19 March Radio as Popular Culture

Read: Cullen 7. Waves of Selling. Arguments over Broadcast Advertising / Susan Smulyan. Consider the Source: Excerpt from "Sponsoritis"

21 March Visual Culture Workshop: Images of the Great Depression

23 March film: Streamlines and Breadlines—1930s art

VH5693 c.1 **STREAMLINES AND BREADLINES**

26 March Research Workshop 2: Popular Magazines of the Twentieth Century

28 March No Class.

30 March No class. Research Exercise 1 due.

2 April Newspaper Research Reports

4 April Newspaper Research Reports

6 April Holiday

9 April Twentieth-Century Celebrity

Read: Cullen, 8. The Firmament of Stardom. Fool's Paradise: Frank Sinatra and the American Dream / Jim Cullen. Consider the Source: "Why the Americans are so Restless in the Midst of their Prosperity," excerpt from Vol. II of Democracy in America by Alexis de Tocqueville

11 April film: Wild Women Don't Have the Blues

VH5365 c.1 Wild Women Don't Have the Blues

13 April Post World War II American Culture

16 April Visual Culture Workshop: As Seen on TV: Life in Mass Suburbia

18 April Meanings of the Sitcom

Read: Cullen 9. The Age of Television. The Making of the Sitcom / David Marc. Consider the Source:
Excerpts from After All by Mary Tyler Moore

20 April Research Exercise 2 due. No Class.

23 April Popular Magazine Research Reports

25 April Popular Magazine Research Reports

27 April Review for Midterm

30 April Midterm 2 due. No class.