American Popular Culture

HIST 43.18 & AMER 68

Prof. Napoli

Spring 2006

T,TH 3:30PM-4:45PM
Section: TR3
Room 518 A

Course Information

I. What This Course Is About

American popular culture has only recently become the subject of serious scholarly inquiry. For most of the century it has been considered either entirely ephemeral, or a mass narcotic. Newer studies, however, have amply demonstrated that popular culture, when properly considered, has the ability to offer deep insights into the fundamental problems of the American experience. Issues of race, class, and gender are at the heart of much of this new work.

This course will take advantage of a substantial portion of those works as we explore the history of American popular culture from about the middle of the 19th century to the present. While issues of representation are central to the study of popular culture, this course will do more than consider texts. We will be especially concerned with the problems of production, distribution, and reception. Our effort will be to understand how these genres emerged, why they did so at particular junctures in American history and why they took the forms they did. As such, the historical context of the popular culture form will be as important as the form itself.

II. Goals:

This course will provide an overview of:

- the basic theoretical approaches to the study of American popular culture and its history
- the history of the production, distribution, and reception of American popular culture
- the connection between American social history and American popular culture

In addition, this course will also help train students to:

- think critically
- write clear, concise analytical statements and papers
III. Objectives:

As a result of this course, students will be able to:

- Compare and contrast the basic theoretical approaches to the history of American popular culture
- Apply these theories to the study of particular popular culture forms and texts
- Describe the major developments in the history of American popular culture
- Explain the connection between the emergence of these popular culture forms and their historical context.

IV. What Is Expected of You?

1. You must attend regularly and be on time for class. It matters. Please note that attendance and participation represent 20% of the grade in this course.

2. Take notes on your readings. These notes will be useful when studying for the final.

3. Bring the assigned readings to each class. We will work with those items in each session.

4. You must do the assigned readings before the class meeting. Remember to pace yourselves.

5. Beepers and cell phones. I recognize that many of you may be parents. So am I. So, I too have a cell phone. But please, be considerate and keep it turned off, unless there is an urgent need to do otherwise.

V. Academic Integrity

All work you turn in for this class must be your own. Any deviation from this standard will result in a "0" for the assignment.

Plagiarism. According to the MLA style guide, plagiarism "is to give the impression you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from someone else." [Joseph Gibaldi and Walter Achttert, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 3rd edition (New York: Modern Language Association of American, 1988), p. 21.] If you borrow an idea, a sentence, or more from a source, you must let the reader know what that source is. It's only fair to the original author.

If you do not know what plagiarism is, ask me, consult a work such as the MLA guide, or check out web sites like this one: [http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html)

VI. How I Grade and the Things You Get Graded On
A. Class Participation (10% of grade)

You are expected to contribute in class. A large part of your grade depends on it. Anyway, it makes class more fun, and it is easy to do. Just come to class having done the reading. If you have trouble speaking in class, or are unaccustomed to doing it, please speak with me, and we will work out a mechanism that will allow you to contribute regularly.

Click here to see how I grade for class participation.

B. Essays

Click here to see how I grade essays.

1. Source Analysis Paper (20% of grade). Due Feb. 16

Select a document from the Library of Congress American Memory site American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920. You are to write a 5 - 7 page (more is fine) essay that analyzes the document using one of the critical theories we have discussed in class and you have read about in the assigned readings. This essay is a "think piece" and does not require additional research.

2. Term Paper (30% of grade)

You are to select a single document, such as a film, a novel or some other item, and write a 10 - 15 page (more is fine) essay that explores the connections between it and the culture of the period in which it was produced, employing one or more of the theoretical approaches we have considered in this course.

For example, you might view the film, The Graduate and write a feminist historical analysis of the film, outlining the ways we can use the movie to understand something about the history of American women in the 1960s.

This paper will require that you do additional research into the period in order to establish the context for the document.

There are three steps to this paper:
a. Select a topic and submit your idea to me. **Due: March 2.** Worth 5% of your paper grade.

   Topic submissions consist of a 1 page (longer is fine) statement that discusses the subject you have chosen, and outlines the interpretive perspective (drawing on the work we have done in the early weeks of the course) you think appropriate for this project. Clearly, this requires some thinking and preparation. It cannot be done the night before it is due.

   Submissions will be evaluated for clarity and cogency. I will ask: How well do you understand the topic you have selected? How reasonable/appropriate is your approach?

b. Submit an annotated bibliography, in the proper format, of the works that you will use in the process of writing your paper. **Due: April 4.** Worth 10% of your paper grade.

   This bibliography will contain 5 secondary sources and 3 primary sources. Primary sources might be things like reviews, interviews, commentary, and the like. **No web sites please.**

   Need help on understanding how to prepare a bibliography like this? Have a look at this site called "How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography," or this one, "Academic Writing: Annotated Bibliography."

   Worth 5% of the paper grade
   **Due: Monday, March 24**
   Late submissions are not accepted.

c. TURN THE PAPER IN!

   **Due: At the final exam.**

   Late papers lose 1/3 of a letter grade for every class period they are late. If it is due on Monday, and you turn it in on Wednesday, your B+ has become a B, and so on.

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**Paper Format and Other Matters**

- Papers will be evaluated for both content (evidence and argument) and style of presentation. Well-written papers are important.
- I will read and comment on drafts, if provided to me in sufficient time. (Don't drop a paper on me 3 days before it is due!) Because of this, I do not permit rewrites. If you feel unsure about what I want, about how you write, or the general thrust of your paper, get a draft done and submitted early.
- Format for all written work to be turned in: Papers are to be typewritten, in a 12pt. font, and have one-inch margins.
- Text on the 1st page must begin at the upper margin of the paper.
Papers must bear a **standard title page**, and be stapled in the upper left hand corner.
No plastic paper covers, please.
Other than the title page, each page must be numbered.
Footnotes and a bibliography are required, if you use books and/or resources I have not assigned. Please the [University of Chicago](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/) style.
Spelling counts. Use spell-check on your computer, or get someone to proofread for you.

C. Exams

**Midterm (20% of grade) Final Exam (20% of grade)**

The exams are entirely essay in format and are designed to test your knowledge of the readings and lectures.

D. Other notes:

1. Please recognize that failure to hand in papers, make presentations and take exams will seriously jeopardize your chance to pass this course. If you don't hand in a paper, for example, that grade is recorded as a “0.”

2. The grading scale is: A+ = 97% and above; A = 96-94%, A- = 93-90%; B+ = 89-87%, B = 86-84%, B- = 83-80%; C+ = 79-77%, C = 76-74%, C- = 73-70%; D+ = 69-67%, D = 67-64%, D- = 63-60%; F = below 60.

3. The final exam can be made up **only** in the case of a documented (i.e. a doctor's note or other official certification of your absence) emergency.

4. Late papers will be accepted, with academic penalty of 1/3 of a letter grade per class session late.

5. I do not permit extra credit work.

6. Please note that attendance and participation represent 10% of the grade in this course.

VII. Texts:

Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock and Roll*, 1982


Copy packet from Far Better Copy

**VIII. Me:**

My office is 514 Whitehead Hall

Office Hours: 2:30-3:30 Tuesday or by appointment. Please make an effort to see me in office hours. If you need to see me and cannot make my office hours, let me know and we will set something up.

Email: Pnapoli@brooklyn.cuny.edu

*Note: I cannot check my email every day.*

**Course Calendar**

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<td>Jan. 26</td>
<td>Introductions and Theory</td>
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<td>Jan. 31</td>
<td>Culture and Civilization</td>
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<td>Williams, Thompson</td>
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<td>Feb. 2</td>
<td>Structuralism and Post Structuralism</td>
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<td>Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry:</td>
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<td>Enlightenment as Mass Deception”</td>
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<td>Feb. 9</td>
<td>Antebellum American Popular Culture</td>
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<td>Feb. 14</td>
<td>Minstrelsy</td>
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- Eric Lott, “Blackface and Blackness: the Minstrel Show in American Culture,” (copy packet)
- Primary sources in copy packet

Feb. 16 & 23 Popular Literature

- Bret Harte, “The Luck of Roaring Camp,”
- Stephen Crane, “The Blue Hotel,”
  - http://www.4literature.net/Stephen_Crane/Blue_Hotel/
- Jack London, “To Build a Fire,”
  - http://www.online-literature.com/london/101/
- Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick, or Street Life in New York*

**Source Analysis paper due Feb. 16**

Feb. 28 & March 2 Drinking Culture and Night Life


**Final paper topic selection statement due March 2.**

March 7 & 9 Early 20th Century Film

- Larry May, *Screening Out the Past* (chapters 1-4, pp. 1-95, chapter 8, pp. 200-236.)

March 14 & 16 Early 20th Century Radio

- Susan Douglas, *Listening In*, chapter 1-6, pp. 3 - 160.
March 21 **Midterm Exam**

March 23 & 28 Advertising


March 30 & April 4 Blues and Jazz

- Burton W. Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture* (Chicago, Ivan Dee, 1997), chapter 1-5.

**Annotated bibliography due April 4.**

April 6 & 11 Rock and Roll


April 25 & 27 Television


May 2 & 4 MTV


May 9 & May 11 Hip Hop


May 16 Conclusion

**Final paper due.**