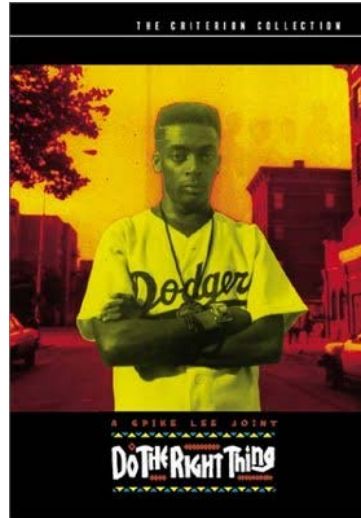


# Popular Culture & American History



History363  
MWF 12\* (See important note below)  
MU 116

Prof. John Kasson  
Ms. Ashley Mays

## COURSE OBJECTIVES:

This course will study selected examples of American popular arts and entertainments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, placing them in historical, cultural, artistic, and critical contexts. Instead of approaching these materials as idle diversions to be consumed and discarded, we will consider them as works that can repay critical analysis and historical and cultural interpretation. Through our efforts, the class will attempt to rediscover the broadly shared imaginative and aesthetic life of America usually only touched upon in historical and literary studies. Major issues will include: the character of popular or commercial art and its relation to other kinds of art; the significance of the rise of these commercial arts and their relation to other institutions of cultural authority; racial stereotypes and appropriations from the minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through *Amos 'n' Andy* to rhythm & blues, rock, and on to Spike Lee; gender roles and stereotypes from the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity through Mae West to *I Love Lucy* and recent developments; and (as the phrase goes) much, much more! Throughout the course, we will persistently ask two overriding questions: (1) **how have the popular arts served to provide a national democratic culture and identity?** (2) **What have been the terms of inclusion and exclusion?**

In the process of our inquiries, you will be learning not simply *more* history, but a different way of understanding history and what constitutes historical materials. At the same time, you will learn new ways of practicing aesthetic and cultural criticism that can be applied both historically and contemporarily. The course seeks, in short, to increase both your historical knowledge and your critical and interpretive abilities, to help you learn not only answers but also better ways of asking questions.

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\* Please note that on seven occasions discussion groups will substitute for Friday lectures, though the actual time of a given discussion will necessarily vary.

## **COURSE FORMAT: LECTURES AND DISCUSSION GROUPS:**

Class meetings in this course are divided into lectures and discussion groups (the latter meeting seven times during the semester, in each case substituting for a Friday lecture, so that you will need to pay close attention to the schedule of classes). We intend the two formats to complement one another, and we regard both as integral parts of the course. The lectures will provide contexts for the topics under study and will also offer interpretations for you to consider. Students should attend lectures faithfully and listen critically. Attached as I may be to some of my discoveries, I don't wish you simply to record my words and commit them to memory. (Don't worry if occasionally I go too fast and you don't get down *everything*. Do especially note, however, names, dates, and the significance of materials to which I devote special attention and which are included on lecture outlines (available on our course Blackboard site). The ultimate aim is to learn from my efforts how to develop your own interpretations and, equally importantly, how to communicate your discoveries (in papers and examinations, for example) clearly and persuasively.

The role of the discussion groups is to assist in this process of learning. Discussion groups should serve, in effect, as the course workshops, where you come to exchange ideas and questions about the various topics under study, to sharpen your critical tools, and to work toward new understandings and hypotheses, more satisfying and penetrating than those you might have previously held. Discussions, then, are collective enterprises that, to function successfully, demand *every* member's preparation, attendance, and participation. In these groups the instructor will *lead* discussion, not mount an additional lecture. Leaders will help the class define problems and formulate questions, but the success of discussion depends on each member accepting responsibility and demonstrating initiative in the group. So please plunge in.

## **BLACKBOARD WEB SITE:**

We will use a password-protected Blackboard website (blackboard.unc.edu) to provide materials, announcements, messages, links, and other aids to the course. Please make sure you have access to this site and visit it at the outset of the semester to familiarize yourself with its contents. **Note especially materials under Course Information, including "Questions for Thought and Discussion," "Critical Reading," and "A Time Line."**

## **OUTLINE AND SCHEDULE OF CLASS TOPICS AND READINGS:**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Aims and Expectations: Everything You've Always Wanted to Know about History 579--*But Were Afraid to Ask* (Jan. 9)

Stars and Stripes Forever: Defining "Folk," "Popular," and "High" Art (Jan. 11) **Start reading *Barnum, Life*, as listed below.**

### **2. POPULAR ARTS AND URBAN CULTURE IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA**

#### **Reading:**

- *The Life of P.T. Barnum, Written by Himself\** (1855), 9-13, 28-35, 39-40, 111 (bottom)-117 (top), 136-90, 211-65, 292-343.

- John S. Smith, “The Quack Doctor: A Negro Farce in One Act and One Scene” (on course website).

To the Astor Place Riot: The Theater and its Publics (Jan. 13)

HOLIDAY: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (No class Jan. 16)

The Rise of Blackface Minstrelsy (Jan. 18) **Complete Smith, “Quack Doctor.”**

P.T. Barnum, the Dialectics of Class, and the Legitimization of Amusement (Jan. 20) **Complete Barnum, *Life*, selections.**

Urban Anxieties and Domestic Ideals (Jan. 23)

Women on Display: From Powers’s *Greek Slave* to Thompson’s British Blondes (Jan. 25)

**Discussion Groups:** The Significance of P.T. Barnum (Jan. 25-27)

### 3. SENTIMENTALITY, SLAVERY, AND SOCIAL REFORM

#### **Reading:**

- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*\* (1852), including introduction by Ann Douglas in the Penguin edition.

“Scribbling Women”: Women as Professional Writers (Jan. 30) **Finish first half of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, including introduction by Ann Douglas.**

Death and the Cultivation of Sentiment (Feb. 1)

Fugitive Slave Narratives as Appeal and Critique (Feb. 3)

“God Wrote It”: Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Feb. 6) **Complete *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by this lecture.**

Race, Reform, and the Sentimental Strategy (Feb. 8)

**Discussion Groups:** *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Feb. 8-10)

### 4. MARK TWAIN AND THE DILEMMA OF THE HUMORIST IN POSTBELLUM AMERICA

#### **Reading:**

- Mark Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*\* (1894), pp. 51-226 of Penguin ed.
- Mark Twain, Whittier birthday dinner speech (1877; on course web site).
- Excerpt from majority decision of U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896; on course website).

Mark Twain and His Audiences (Feb. 13) **Read Whittier Birthday Dinner speech and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.**

*Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Legal Fictions, and Cosmic Jokes (Feb. 15) Read **excerpt from *Plessy v. Ferguson*.**

**Discussion Groups:** *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (Feb. 15-17)

**FIRST ESSAY DUE IN CLASS WEDNESDAY, FEB 22)**

## 5. THE POPULAR ARTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW MASS CULTURE

### Reading:

- John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century\** (1978).

Amusement Parks and Vaudeville Houses (Feb. 20) **Read *Amusing the Million*.**

Coney Island and Cultural Revolt (Feb. 22)

Louis Armstrong and the Popular Reception of Jazz (Feb. 24)

## 6. THE STRENUOUS LIFE: AMERICAN CULTURE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

### Reading:

- Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes\** (1912).

The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity (Feb. 27) **Read *Tarzan of the Apes*.**

The Tarzan Escape (Feb. 29)

**Discussion Groups:** *Tarzan* in Cultural Context (Feb. 29-Mar. 2)

## SPRING BREAK: MAR. 3-11

## 7. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DETECTIVE STORY

### Reading:

- Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon\** (1930).

(Recommended but not required is the definitive film version of Hammett's novel, (1941, directed by John Huston; starring Humphrey Bogart, available at the Media Center, Undergraduate Library).

From Genteel Detectives to "Tough Guys" (Mar. 12) **Read *The Maltese Falcon*.**

*The Maltese Falcon*: Game and Ritual in a World of Chance (Mar. 14)

## MIDTERM EXAMINATION: Mar. 16

## 8. AMERICAN FILM COMEDY: LATE SILENTS AND EARLY TALKIES

**Films:** You are responsible for **two** of the following four films:

- *Duck Soup* (1933), starring the Marx Brothers (65-V93; 70 min.).  
**Screening Monday, March 19, at 6:30 in UL 205.**
- *Modern Times* (1936), directed by & starring Charles Chaplin (65-DVD1325; 89 min.).  
**Screening Monday, March 19, at 7:45 in UL 205.**
- *42nd Street* (1933), dances staged & directed by Busby Berkeley (65-DVD575; 89 min.).  
**Screening Tuesday, March 20, at 6:30 in UL 205.**
- *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), starring Mae West & Cary Grant (65-V1556; 65 min.).  
**Screening Tuesday, March 20, at 8:00 in UL 205.**

Rituals of Adjustment and Dreams of Triumph: Chaplin, Keaton, and Silent Comedy (Mar. 19)  
**Watch at least two of the required films.**

The Comedy of Cultural Subversion: The Marx Brothers and Mae West (Mar. 21)

**Discussion Groups:** *The Maltese Falcon* and the Movies (Mar. 21-23)

## 9. THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL, COMMERCIAL RADIO, & THIRTIES AMERICA

### Reading:

- The 1938 “War of the Worlds” Broadcast and the Panic That Ensued: excerpts from radio drama, adapted from H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, and performed by the Mercury Theatre on the Air, Oct. 30, 1938; and Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panics* (1940); on course web site.

Dance and Thirties Musicals: Berkeley vs. Astaire (Mar. 26)

The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple (Mar. 28)

Hopes and Fears for Radio in the 1930s (Mar. 30) **Read 1930s radio materials.**

## **SECOND ESSAY DUE IN CLASS WEDNESDAY, APRIL 4**

## 10. MAGIC KINGDOMS FOR THE MASSES

### Reading:

- Steven Watts, “Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century,” *Journal of American History* 82 (June 1995), 84-110 (available through UNC Library Articles and Databases under JSTOR at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2081916.pdf>)
- Karal Ann Marling, “Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa An Freeway to the American Dream,” *American Art* vol. 5, No. 1/2 (Winter-Spring, 1991), 169-207, available through UNC library at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109036>
- Eric Avila, “Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Film Noir, Disneyland, And the Cold War (Sub)Urban Imaginary,” *Journal of Urban History* / 31 #1 (November 2004): 3-22 (available through UNC Library Articles and Databases at <http://juh.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/31/1/3>)
- Gladwill Hill, “The Never-Never Land Khrushchev Never Saw,” *New York Times* (4 October 1959; on course web site).
- Frank Rich, “Who Killed the Disneyland Dream?” *New York Times*, December 25, 2010. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/26/opinion/26rich.html?\\_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=a212&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/26/opinion/26rich.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=a212&pagewanted=print)

### Film:

- Robbins Barstow, *Disneyland Dream* (1956 with commentary added in 1990s), an amateur thirty-minute documentary film about the five-member Barstow’s trip to Disneyland from their home in Wethersfield, CT, in July 1956 . Available at A4rchive.com: [http://www.archive.org/details/barstow\\_disneyland\\_dream\\_1956](http://www.archive.org/details/barstow_disneyland_dream_1956)

Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Fake Lore (Apr. 2) **Read Watts and Marling essays.**  
Disney's Utopias of the American Dream (Apr. 4) **Complete Disney readings and watch *Disneyland Dreams*.**

## **HOLIDAY: GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 6**

### **11. SEARCHING FOR SATISFACTION IN MODERN AMERICA**

#### **Reading:**

- Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1964), chapter 1, "The Problem That Has No Name" (on course web site).
- Excerpt from U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Hoyt v. Florida* (1961; on course web site).
- Elliot Tiber, "How Woodstock Happened" (1994), on web at: <http://www.edjusticeonline.com/woodstock/history/index.htm>

**Films:** You are responsible for both of the following films:

- *Nashville* (1975), directed by Robert Altman (65-DVD2369; 154 min.).  
**Screening Monday, April 16, at 6:30 in UL 205.**
- *Do the Right Thing* (1989), directed by Spike Lee (65-DVD598; 120 min.).  
**Screening Tuesday, April 17, at 7:00 in UL 205.**

I Love Lucy and the Feminine Mystique (Apr. 9) **Read Friedan and *Hoyt v. Florida* excerpts.**  
Rock 'n' Roll, Race, and Fifties America (Apr. 11)

**Discussion Groups:** Disney, Suburbia, and Postwar American Culture (Apr. 11-13)  
Woodstock Nation and Other Legends of the Sixties (Apr. 16) **Read "How Woodstock Happened."**

"It Don't Worry Me": Robert Altman's Satire of Bicentennial America (Apr. 18) **Watch *Nashville* and *Do the Right Thing*.**

**Discussion Groups:** *Nashville*, *Do The Right Thing*, and the Politics of Popular Culture (April 18-20)

Who Owns the Wall of Fame? Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (Apr. 23)

Conclusions and Evaluations (Wed., Apr. 25)

**FINAL EXAMINATION: Friday, May 4 at 12 noon** (We don't like this time any more than you do, but we can't change the date.)

**ITEMS TO PURCHASE:** Books marked with an asterisk are available at Student Stores.





## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS, WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS, EXAMINATIONS, ATTENDANCE POLICY, AND OTHER DIABOLICAL TORTURES:**

**A. Regular preparation, attendance, and participation in both lectures and discussion.** As explained below, Students will be penalized for unexcused absences in both lectures and discussions beyond the first three at the rate of **one-seventh** of a letter grade for each absence. A student who accumulates more than ten unexcused absences will fail the course.

Grades on short quizzes and one-page response paper on Barnum and participation in discussion = 15% of total grade.

**B. Two interpretive essays** (roughly 5-7 pages each) = 50% of total grade

**C. Midterm examination** = 15% of total grade

**D. Final examination** = 20% of total grade.

All these requirements, including preparation, attendance, and the punctual completion of assignments, apply equally to every student, whatever the basis of your enrollment.

*All students are reminded to support the Honor System in this and all their University work.*

## **BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY: ATTENDANCE AND ATTENTION:**

This course stresses face-to-face instruction within a learning community. Students are expected to attend all classes faithfully and punctually and to give your undivided attention to the instructors. To minimize distractions and to enhance everyone's concentration, please put newspapers and crossword puzzles away, turn off cell phones and other devices, use laptops only for note-taking, and do not leave class unless you feel unwell. A student disregarding these elemental guidelines will be **counted as absent** for the class meeting. Students will be penalized for unexcused absences in both lectures and discussions beyond the first three at the rate of **one-seventh** of a letter grade for each absence. A student who accumulates more than ten unexcused absences will fail the course. Please let us know *in advance* if possible when you will be absent, and please discuss unforeseen absences with us as soon as possible. It is *your responsibility* to sign the roll for each class and to make a note on it in timely fashion when you wish an excused absence to be noted. Explanations provided substantially after the fact cannot be honored. **It is not acceptable to sign the roll and then leave class or to arrive significantly late and sign in, and a student who does so will be counted as absent. It is still more unacceptable to sign in on behalf of another student, and such a violation of academic integrity will be treated as**

**an Honor Code violation.** Students may not compensate for missed classes by doing alternative or extra assignments.

**A NOTE ON PLAGIARISM:**

Plagiarism is a violation of the Honor Code and of academic integrity. As the American Historical Association states, “Plagiarism...takes many forms. The clearest abuse is the use of another’s language without quotation marks and citation. More subtle abuses include the appropriation of concepts, data, or notes all disguised in newly crafted sentences, or reference to a borrowed work in an early note and then extensive further use without attribution.” The AHA statement adds, “The plagiarist’s standard defense--that he or she was misled by hastily taken and imperfect notes--is plausible only in the context of a wider tolerance of shoddy work. A basic rule of good notetaking requires every researcher to distinguish scrupulously between exact quotation and paraphrase. A basic rule of good writing warns us against following our own paraphrased notes slavishly. When a historian simply links one paraphrase to the next, even if the sources are cited, a kind of structural misuse takes place; the writer is implicitly claiming a shaping intelligence that actually belonged to the sources.” For the full text of this statement, see: <http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/ProfessionalStandards.htm#Resisting%20Plagiarism>

For more on plagiarism and how to avoid it, visit the links on our Blackboard web site.

**INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATION AND OFFICE HOURS:**

Please feel free to talk to us individually about any matter relating to the course that interests or concerns you—or simply to chat. You should generally wait a day before seeking a conference after graded work is returned; then if you are dissatisfied, uncertain about our criticisms, or how you might improve, please have a conference with one or more of us in timely fashion rather than waiting until the next assignment or, worse, the end of the semester. Remember, too, that the Writing Center is a valuable resource. We encourage you to use it.

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