Popular Culture in America, 1800 to Present

HIST 449; Spring 2021; MW 9:45-11:00am; Online through Canvas
Instructor: Prof. Richard Popp (popp@uwm.edu)
Office hours: Mondays, 12pm-2pm and by appointment

Course Description
This class explores the development of popular culture in the United States. Surveying more than 200 years, we’ll cover everything from the music of enslaved people in the Early Republic to the early years of social media in our own digital age. In between, we’ll examine the rise (and sometimes fall) of such phenomena as the popular theater, the saloon, daily newspapers, spectator sports, the circus, urban amusements, comics, magazines, advertising, film, music, radio, television, and video games.

A key precept of the course is that the commercialization of pop culture over the course of more than two centuries has been one of the most important long-term historical processes in the nation’s formation, influencing everything from its political culture to its social and economic structures. A second key idea is that popular culture has long served as a resource through which ordinary people have laid claim to a sense of dignity, happiness, and self-concept in everyday life and that it is a site upon which power has been contested at a societal level. As such we’ll pay very close attention to how popular culture has indelibly shaped conceptions of class, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality in dynamic ways across various eras.

Though the focus will be on the US, the course will pay close attention to how American culture took shape in a transnational context, whether it be through the hybridized influence of dozens of immigrant cultures to the global export of American films, fashion, music, and television.

Course Objectives and Goals
By the end of this course, you will:
1. learn an overview of the cultural transformations that have shaped US society over the past two centuries; become familiar with the leading arguments historians have made about how to understand these changes;
2. gain a more sophisticated understanding of the complex roles played by cultural dynamics in historical processes of change; understand how culture serves as a field of conflict and contestation in and around social movements;
3. improve your ability to interpret, discuss, and analyze primary and secondary sources, especially the sorts of popular texts and artifacts commonly utilized by cultural historians; and
4. improve your research, writing, and analysis skills through class discussions and assignments.

Readings

All other course readings are available as e-books through the library or will be posted as PDFs to the course Canvas page. If you have any issues accessing online course material, please call the campus help desk (414-229-4040) or email: help@uwm.edu.

**How the Course Will Work**

On **Mondays**, you’ll work through a set of recorded lectures and examples I’ve created and curated for the course Canvas site. On **Wednesdays**, we’ll meet synchronously via Collaborate Ultra on Canvas for discussion. To facilitate discussion, the course will be divided into several groups. At the midway point of the semester, we’ll reschedule the groups.

Please note that our Wednesday class sessions will be **audio-visually recorded** for students who are unable to attend at the scheduled time. Students who participate with their camera engaged or who utilize a profile image are agreeing to have their audio/video or image recorded. Likewise, students who un-mute during class and participate orally are agreeing to have their voices recorded.

**Course Requirements**

**Discussion Posts**

These involve finding and analyzing an example that speaks to themes in that week’s material. You’ll write a post and a response to another student’s post.

- 4 @ 9 points each: 36 points total
- Due dates: Feb. 12, March 5, March 19, April 30

**Reading Responses**

100-125 word response responding to questions and summarizing the author’s primary argument. Over the course of the semester, you must turn in 6 response papers. There will be 13 opportunities to turn these in.

- 6 @ 4 points each: 24 points total
- Due: Wednesdays by 9am

**Syllabus Quiz**

Short quiz testing you on your knowledge of the syllabus and course Canvas site.

- 2 points
- Due: Feb. 1

**Realtime Meeting Participation**

This portion of your grade is based on your contributions to class discussions. To receive full credit, students should plan on contributing at least 2 informed comments or questions per meeting.
• 4 points for the first half of the semester + 4 points for the second half of the semester: 8 points total

Short Paper
4-6 page work of historical analysis engaging course themes and using primary and secondary sources.
- 15 points
- Due: April 16

Final Exam
Take home exam in which you’ll answer 2 of 4 essays. Each answer should run 3 paragraphs in length.
- 15 points
- Due: May 19

Schedule of Topics and Readings
Jan. 25 & 27: Intro: Understanding History Through Pop Culture
Readings:
- Avila, Introduction

Feb. 1 & 3: The City and the Country: Amusements in the Early American Republic
Readings:
- Avila, Chap. 1: “American Culture in Red, White, and Black”
- Week 2 Evidence Set
- Due: Syllabus Quiz (Feb. 1); Reading Response

Feb. 8 & 10: Southern Folk Life: Plantation and Backcountry Culture
Readings:
Feb. 15 & 17: Minstrels, Penny Papers, and the Age of Barnum
Readings:

Feb. 22 & 24: Parlor Life: The Middle Class & Sentimental Culture
Readings:

March 1 & 3: Mechanized Entertainment: Circuses, Fairs, and Wild West Shows
Readings:
- Avila, “Chap. 3: The Age of the City, 1860-1900.”

March 8 & 10: Ads, Magazines, and Consumer Culture
Readings:

- Avila, “Chap. 4: The New Mass Culture, 1900-1945.”
- Week 7 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

March 15 & 17: Entertaining the Immigrant City: Dance Halls and Moving Pictures

Readings:

- Week 8 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response; Discussion Post 3 (March 19)

March 22 & 24: No Class – Spring Break

Week 10: March 29 & 31: Electrified Sounds: Records and Radios

Readings:

- Week 10 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

April 5 & 7: Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Culture, 1920-1950

Readings:

April 12 & 14: Moral Panics: Comic Books and Rock & Roll
Readings:

April 19 & 21: Living Room Culture: Television and Suburbia
Readings:
- Avila, “Chap. 5: The Suburbanization of American Culture.”

April 26 & 28: Hip-Hop, Punk, and the Birth of Contemporary Culture
Readings:

May 3 & 5: Digital Culture: Video Games and Web 1.0
Readings:

• Week 15 Evidence Set
• Due: Reading Response

May 12: Wrap Up
Reading:
• Avila, “Chap. 6: The World Wide Web of American Culture.”

Final exam: Wed. May 19, 7:30-9:30am

Note: Schedule is subject to change during the semester.

Tech Help
If you’re running into issues with Canvas, contact the UWM Help Desk. 
https://uwm.edu/canvas/support-request/

If you need a quiet and wi-fi friendly place to work outside the home, the Student Union has been rearranged to create socially distanced workspaces for students. It will be open until 10pm. The Learning Commons at Golda Meir Library will also feature socially-distanced workspaces. Please check the Library’s webpage for hours of operation: 
https://uwm.edu/libraries/about/hours/

Course Policies
Late papers will be penalized 10% per day after the due date. If your paper is more than one week late (7 calendar days), you will receive a zero on the assignment. Note: students cannot turn in reading response papers or discussion posts late.

No extra credit assignments will be given.

Acts of academic misconduct, including plagiarism and collaborating on quizzes and individual assignments, will be treated severely. Students are responsible for the honest completion and representation of their work and for the proper citation of sources. Please familiarize yourself with the university’s policies and procedures regarding academic misconduct.
https://uwm.edu/deanofstudents/conduct/academic-misconduct/

If you need accessibility accommodations in order to meet the requirements of this course, please contact your instructor as soon as possible, preferably during the first week of the semester. You must have an Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) visa to receive any accommodation. For more see: http://uwm.edu/arc/
University Policies
Please familiarize yourself with the university’s policies on accessibility, religious observances, active military duty, incompletes, discriminatory conduct, Title IX/sexual violence, academic misconduct, complaint procedures, grade appeal procedures, LGBTQ+ resources, tobacco use, and final examinations. Information on these policies can be found at:

Allocation of Student Time for the Semester
- Time in class (Canvas lectures and meetings): 37.5 hours
- Time taking exams: 2 hours
- Time completing assignments: 62 hours
- Time for preparation and study: 42.5 hours
- Total: 144 hours

Grade Breakdown
93-100 A  90-92 A-  88-89 B+
83-87 B  80-82 B-  78-79 C+
73-77 C  70-72 C-  68-69 D+
60-67 D  less than 60 F