

AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, 1929 TO THE PRESENT
History 3320

Spring 2015
Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00 – 3:15
216 Heller Hall

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 8:00 –
9:30, and by appointment

Course Description

This course will examine the intersections of the American popular arts – especially film, music, the visual arts, and literature – and national and international politics from the Great Depression to the present. We will explore the domestic and global conflicts that have shaped and transformed American society and the manner in which the resultant tensions have been reflected in a multitude of cultural productions and artifacts. To aid us in understanding the history of the past eighty years, we will read fictional works by John Okada (*No-No Boy*), Tim O'Brien (*The Things They Carried*), and T. C. Boyle (*The Tortilla Curtain*). We will explore the censorship debates that greeted the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, and the “blacklisted” film *Salt of the Earth* (1954). We will examine the America portrayed by artists and photographers such as Norman Rockwell and Dorothea Lange, and we will consider the ways in which politics has infused much American music, such as songs performed by Billie Holiday, Country Joe and the Fish, and Merle Haggard. And through films ranging from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) to *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Three Kings* (1999), we will study Hollywood’s influence in the shaping of political and historical consciousness and memory.

The primary objectives of this course are twofold: to critically analyze the popular arts as not merely a source of leisure but as a force that shapes – and is shaped by – the schisms of American society, and to employ history as a means of understanding the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of the twenty-first century.

Required Books

Glenn C. Altschuler. *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

T. C. Boyle. *The Tortilla Curtain*. New York: Penguin Books U.S.A., Inc., 1995.

Thomas Doherty. *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Tim O’Brien. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.

John Okada. *No-No Boy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976.

Course Requirements

1. Class Participation and Attendance. Attendance is mandatory. If you are unable to attend class (legitimate excuses for an absence include a religious holiday, a verifiable illness, a serious family emergency, a subpoena, jury duty, military service, or participation in a group activity sponsored by the University), I must be notified in a timely fashion. I also expect students to have completed all of the weekly readings listed on the syllabus before the first class meeting of the week. I may call on you to answer questions or discuss pertinent points. However, the class meetings will largely complement, not duplicate, the required readings. You are encouraged to speak with me during my office hours if you are confused or concerned about any of the material. If you cannot meet during my regular office hours, you may contact me to schedule an appointment at another time. (10 percent of final grade)

2. Quizzes. There will be three quizzes during the semester. They will cover various topics addressed in the readings, films, and lectures/discussion. The quizzes will be given on February 19, March 26, and April 23. Make-up quizzes will not be allowed. (30 percent of final grade)

3. Final Exam. The final exam will be given on May 15 from 8:00 to 9:55 a.m. It will be a comprehensive exam covering material from throughout the semester. (20 percent of final grade)

4. Research Paper. You will be required to write an eight-page double-spaced paper incorporating research in both primary and secondary sources. In the paper you will need to explain the meaning and significance of a particular cultural artifact (such as a movie, play, novel, television program, poem, or painting). The artifact cannot be one of the artifacts we have covered in class. Moving beyond whether you find the artifact entertaining, you will want to explore what it actually *means*. In other words, are American films just well acted stories? Is American visual art nothing more than colors on canvas or pieces of metal welded together? Is American literature merely words printed on a page? You must choose an artifact (or artifacts) created between 1929 and 2000 and explain what it might tell us about the United States at that time. (NOTE: While sporting events could arguably be considered elements of American popular culture, they are not acceptable artifacts for purposes of this paper.) There are a number of questions you might consider as you work on your paper. What does the artifact reveal about American national identity? Is there such a thing as national identity? Or are there multiple national identities? What have scholars said about the historical, cultural, and political context of the artifact? What meaning have they assigned to it? Do you agree with this meaning? If not, why not? What possible effect might the artifact have had on the lives of certain Americans? Please note that this essay is not to be merely an expression of your opinion; it must be grounded in solid scholarly analysis. Providing context – political, cultural, social – will be crucial. At least four scholarly secondary sources (books, journal articles, or conference papers, but NOT encyclopedias or book reviews) must be used. The class readings will not count as secondary sources for purposes of this assignment. Please be aware, too, that not all journal articles that appear in the UMD Library's electronic databases (Academic Search Premier, Academic OneFile, et cetera), and not all books on a given subject, are necessarily scholarly. I thus strongly recommend showing me your sources before you begin your reading – that is, at an early date – to confirm that they meet the course requirements. You will also need to draw on at least three primary sources (archival documents or documents in published collections, interviews or oral histories, contemporaneous reviews, et cetera) in your essay. I have provided links to a number of potential online sources of primary documents on the course website, though not everything that appears in these links is a primary source. If you are unsure, please ask me. You must draw on your sources to develop a coherent and tightly argued thesis that is original and is supported by the evidence you cite. All sources used –

whether consulted, quoted, paraphrased, summarized, et cetera – must be acknowledged through an appropriate citation. The papers must include page numbers and use Chicago-style endnotes; if you are not familiar with this citation method, follow the “Chicago Documentation Style” link on the course website. I have also placed on the website a brief guide to citations. If you are unsure about when to cite outside sources, please come see me. The papers must be formatted using twelve-point Times or Times New Roman font and one-inch margins. They will be graded on the basis of both style and content; it is therefore imperative that the papers be well written and free of grammatical and spelling errors. If you are not a great writer, assistance is available at the Writers’ Workshop on the second floor of the Kathryn A. Martin Library (d.umn.edu/writwork; writwork@d.umn.edu; 218-726-8500). In order to ensure that your topic is manageable and meets the requirements of the course, I strongly advise you to discuss the project with me well before the deadline. The paper will require considerable research; you should therefore get started early in the semester, especially as you may need to obtain some of your research materials through interlibrary loan. I am available to assist you with the paper, but you must make the effort to come see me. Please note, too, that I am willing to review rough drafts; however, my deadline for looking at drafts is two weeks before the assignment is due. The papers are due in class on May 5. (40 percent of final grade)

Students with Disabilities

It is the policy and practice of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, to create inclusive learning environments for all students, including students with disabilities. If there are aspects of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or your ability to meet course requirements – such as time-limited exams, inaccessible web content, or the use of non-captioned videos – please notify me as soon as possible. You should also contact the Office of Disability Resources to discuss and arrange reasonable accommodations. Please call 218-726-8217 or visit the DR website at <www.d.umn.edu/access> for more information.

Grading Policy

The following criteria will be used to determine students’ grades:

- A ... Achievement outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.
- B ... Achievement significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
- C ... Achievement meeting the basic course requirements in every respect.
- D ... Achievement worthy of credit even though it does not fully meet the basic course requirements in every respect.
- F ... Performance failing to meet the basic course requirements.

Grades are based on a one hundred-point scale. The research paper, which comprises forty percent of your grade, is worth forty points, for example. I use the following scale in calculating grades:

- A ... 94 to 100
- A- ... 90 to 93.95
- B+ ... 87 to 89.95
- B ... 83 to 86.95
- B- ... 80 to 82.95
- C+ ... 77 to 79.95
- C ... 73 to 76.95

C- ... 70 to 72.95
D ... 67 to 69.95
F ... 0 to 66.95

Students who engage in academic dishonesty will be given an “F” in this course and will be reported to the appropriate university authorities for further disciplinary action. According to the *Student Guide* of the College of Liberal Arts (www.d.umn.edu/~clasa/cla1001/SA/academicdishonesty.htm), academic dishonesty includes plagiarism, fabrication, cheating, and academic misconduct. The college defines plagiarism as follows:

Plagiarism is the inclusion of someone else’s product, words, ideas, or data as one’s own work. When a student submits work for credit that includes the product, words, ideas, or data of others, the source must be acknowledged by the use of complete, accurate, and specific references. By placing one’s name on work submitted for credit, the student certifies the originality of all work not otherwise identified by appropriate acknowledgements. On written assignments, if verbatim statements are included, the statements must be enclosed by quotation marks or set off from regular text as indented extracts.

A student will avoid being charged with plagiarism if there is an acknowledgement of indebtedness. Indebtedness must be acknowledged whenever:

1. one quotes another person’s actual words or replicates all or part of another’s product;
2. one uses another person’s ideas, opinions, work, data, or theories, even if they are completely paraphrased in one’s own words;
3. one borrows facts, statistics, or other illustrative materials – unless the information is common knowledge.

Unauthorized collaboration with others on papers or projects can inadvertently lead to a charge of plagiarism. In addition, it is plagiarism to submit as your own any academic exercise (for example, written work, printing, computer program, art or design work, musical composition, and choreography) prepared totally or in part by another.

Plagiarism also includes submitting work in which portions were substantially produced by someone acting as a tutor or editor.

It is your responsibility to thoroughly familiarize yourself with the meaning of the other forms of academic dishonesty – which are defined at the CLA website cited above – and to avoid engaging in these practices at all costs.

Classroom Conduct

Students are expected to follow, and I will enforce, the University’s Student Conduct Code (<http://www.d.umn.edu/assl/conduct/code>). Appropriate classroom conduct promotes an environment of academic achievement and integrity. Disruptive classroom behavior that interrupts either my ability to teach or the ability of your peers to learn is prohibited. Such behavior includes, but is not limited to, reading the newspaper or books for other courses, talking to your classmates, and the inappropriate use of unauthorized technologies in the classroom.

Lecture and Reading Schedule

Note: Readings must be completed by the first class session of the week under which they appear. For example, the readings listed for week 2 must be completed by the class meeting on January 27.

Week 1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW (January 20, 22)

Week 2. FROM THE GREAT DEPRESSION TO WARTIME MOBILIZATION (January 27, 29)

- Reading ... Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, xi-34; Okada, *No-No Boy*, iii-xi, 1-68

Week 3. THE PROMISE AND REALITIES OF POSTWAR AMERICA (February 3, 5)

- Reading ... Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 35-66; Okada, *No-No Boy*, 69-213

Week 4. BUILDING THE LIBERAL CONSENSUS (February 10, 12)

- Reading ... Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 67-98; Okada, *No-No Boy*, 215-260

Week 5. NOT JUST SODA FOUNTAINS AND DRIVE-INS: CENSORSHIP IN 1950s AMERICA (February 17, 19)

- Reading ... Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 99-129; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 1-38

***** Quiz No. 1 on Thursday *****

Week 6. ANTI-COMMUNISM AND THE AMERICAN ARTS (February 24, 26)

- Reading ... Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 131-160; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 39-85

Week 7. THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND AMERICAN MEMORY (March 3, 5)

- Reading ... Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 161-192; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 86-123;

Week 8. THE CULTURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR: PART I (March 10, 12)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, vii-ix, 1-36; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 124-161

Week 9. SPRING BREAK ... NO CLASS (March 17, 19)

Week 10. THE CULTURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR: PART II (March 24, 26)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 37-80; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 162-188

***** Quiz No. 2 on Thursday *****

Week 11. AMERICA CONFRONTS ITSELF: A SHATTERED CONSENSUS (March 31, April 2)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 81-116; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 189-246

Week 12. RONALD REAGAN AND THE POSTWAR BACKLASH (April 7, 9)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 116-140; Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*, 3-97

Week 13. KICKING THE "VIETNAM SYNDROME": THE PERSIAN GULF WAR OF 1991 (April 14, 16)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 140-188; Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*, 98-194

Week 14. AMERICA IN THE 1990s (April 21, 23)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 189-230; Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*, 195-283

***** Quiz No. 3 on Thursday *****

Week 15. TOWARD A MORE PERFECT CORPORATE CULTURE (April 28, 30)

- Reading ... Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 231-260; Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*, 284-355

Week 16. ANOTHER "AMERICAN CENTURY"? (May 5, 7)

***** Due in class on May 5: Final Paper *****

NOTE: I reserve the right to change the syllabus at any time; you will be notified in class if any such changes are made.