

**History 447: History of American Popular Culture
(Online Course)**

Fall 2021

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Office hours: any weekday by appointment

Required texts:

- James W. Cook, *The Colossal PT Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe* (2005)
- John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (1978)
- Subscription or rental access to films as specified in the calendar below.
- All other readings available on Blackboard.

Course Description:

This course offers an introduction to the history and meaning of American popular culture, from the rise of mass entertainment as a “culture industry” in the nineteenth century to contemporary digital cultures. As we explore these shifting patterns of representation, we will ask a number of enduring questions about the history of popular culture: What can we learn from the commercial nature of mass culture? Does popular culture reflect the values of its consumers—or does it shape them? What can pop culture tell us about conflicts over race, gender, and national identity? By exploring these questions across a range of texts, this class will develop the tools for integrating cultural analysis into your understanding of history.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Develop skills for interpreting and contextualizing the history of American popular culture.
2. Support arguments with credible evidence in discussions and writing assignments.
3. Become an informed creator, consumer, and participant in contemporary popular culture.
4. Critically examine the relationship of popular culture to other domains of historical study.

Colonnade Outcomes (Connections: Social and Cultural)

1. Analyze the development of self in relation to others and society.
2. Examine diverse values that form civically engaged and informed members of society.
3. Evaluate solutions to real-world social and cultural problems.

Course Structure:

This course will be taught asynchronously, which means there is no specific time when everybody will be logged on simultaneously. There will be no quizzes, exams, or zoom meetings. Instead, 65% of your grade is based on your writing in the discussion board. Rather than memorizing facts, you should think of this class as a college-level book club where we will analyze, critique, and discuss the readings. In addition to the discussion board, there are three essay assignments worth a total of 35% of your grade.

Monday and Tuesday: These days are reserved strictly for reading. During this time, I will post a set of framing remarks to guide the discussion.

Wednesday: Each student will submit a 500-word post (which can be longer if you wish) to the Blackboard discussion board. Your post can address any aspect of the readings and should not simply mirror what I have written in my framing remarks. Dissent is encouraged.

Thursday and Friday: Each student will submit at least three comments (for a combined total of at least 500 words) responding to the posts submitted by your fellow students.

Technology Requirements:

Students are required to have access to a computer and reliable Internet connection to use Blackboard and to write and submit your assignments. To avoid losing your work in progress, you are encouraged to compose your drafts in a word processing program before submitting your posts on Blackboard. Although your discussion board posts can be conversational in tone, they still require careful thought, planning, and proofreading. You should also have a plan for an alternate way to connect to the internet in case of emergency. If you are unfamiliar with Blackboard, visit the Online Orientation for Online Learners at <http://www.wku.edu/online/orientation/index.php> before the course begins. Readings are located in the Content section and assignments can be found in the Essays section. If you have any problems using the online tools for this course, please contact me as soon as possible.

Late Assignments and Grade Disputes:

Late assignments will result in a penalty of 10 points per day for essays and 20 points per day for the discussion board. Grade disputes must be submitted in writing. Do not assume that your request will succeed; I reserve the right to lower your grade upon reconsideration.

Academic Dishonesty:

The maintenance of academic integrity is at the heart of higher education. Acts of plagiarism or any other form of cheating will not be tolerated. Engaging in academic dishonesty risks serious punishment, including a failing grade in the class. Please read the relevant section of the WKU Student Handbook: www.wku.edu/handbook/academic-dishonesty.php.

ADA Notice:

In compliance with University policy, students with disabilities who require academic and/or auxiliary accommodations for this course must contact the Student Accessibility Resource Center located in Downing Student Union, 1074. SARC can be reached by phone number at 270-745-5004 [270-745-3030 TTY] or via email at sarc.connect@wku.edu. Please do not request accommodations directly from the professor without a faculty notification letter from the Student Accessibility Resource Center.

Sexual Misconduct/Assault:

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is committed to supporting faculty, staff, and students by upholding WKU's Title IX Sexual Misconduct/Assault Policy (#0.2070) at <https://wku.edu/eoo/documents/titleix/wkutitleixpolicyandgrievanceprocedure.pdf> and Discrimination and Harassment Policy (#0.2040) at https://wku.edu/policies/hr_policies/2040_discrimination_harassment_policy.pdf.

Under these policies, discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct based on sex/gender are prohibited. If you experience an incident of sex/gender-based discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct, you are encouraged to report it to the Title IX Coordinator, Andrea Anderson, 270-745-5398 or Title IX Investigators, Michael Crowe, 270-745-5429 or Joshua Hayes, 270-745-5121. Please note that while you may report an incident of sex/gender-based discrimination, harassment and/or sexual misconduct to a faculty member, WKU faculty are "Responsible Employees" of the University and MUST report what you share to WKU's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Investigator. If you would like to speak with someone who may be able to afford you confidentiality, you may contact WKU's Counseling and Testing Center at 270-745-3159.

Problems?

If you are struggling or not getting the grades that you want, please contact me. I am happy to answer questions by email, and we can make an appointment to speak by Zoom or phone. I recognize that we are living through a global crisis, and many of you may be experiencing grief, illness, and other stressors. Please let me know if any pandemic-related issues are impeding your performance in this class.

Assignments and Grade Breakdown

The assignments for this class add up to exactly 1000 points (A: 901-1000, B: 801-900, C: 701-800, D: 601-700, F: 0-600). No grades will be rounded up or down. Please note the very high percentage of the grade devoted to the discussion board. *The best way to succeed in this class is to actually do the readings every week.* Our goal is to engage deeply and critically with the readings.

1) Discussions (65% of grade)

Weekly discussion of reading—560 points (56% of grade).

Each week, you will submit a 500-word post (which can be longer if you wish) to the Blackboard discussion board. Your post is due by **Wednesday at 11:59pm**. In addition, you will submit at least three comments (for a combined total of at least 500 words) responding to the posts submitted by your fellow students. Responses are due by **Friday at 11:59pm**. Each thread is worth 40 points. Although you can write with a casual, conversational tone, you are expected to proofread all submissions. You will not receive full credit for posts that simply mirror my remarks rather than demonstrating your own thoughts on the readings.

Engagement with peers—90 points (9% of grade).

At the end of the semester, I will go back through all fourteen discussion forums and assess the overall quality of your responses to others. Although your comments are part of your weekly grade, these points are reserved for stepping back at the end and assessing overall quality.

2) Essays (35% of grade)

Pandemic Mixtape—50 points (5% of grade)

For this assignment, please create a 10-song playlist of songs you listened to during the pandemic. Then, write a short essay (600-word minimum) reflecting on how your patterns of consuming popular culture changed as a result of the upheaval of the last eighteen months. Does pop culture play a different role in your life now than it did before the pandemic? Have you noticed any changes in pop culture itself? You do not need to explain your song choices. **Due 9/3.**

Famous for Being Famous—100 points (10% of grade)

For this assignment, select any celebrity in American popular culture who does not have a clear talent (such as singing, acting, playing basketball, or modeling) and instead might be considered “famous for being famous.” Then, research as much as you can about this person to try to figure out how and why they became celebrities and write an essay (800-word minimum) sharing your findings. Recent examples such as the Kardashians are acceptable, but this phenomenon is not simply a product of the internet, since the term was popularized decades earlier to describe figures such as Joan Rivers (perhaps unfairly, since she was a gifted comedian). You can choose a person from any time period for this essay. **Due 10/22.**

The Publics of Pop Culture research paper—200 points (20% of grade)

Pop culture is sometimes dismissed as a mere commodity, something that consumers purchase for entertainment. But as Michael Warner argues in “Publics and Counterpublics,” the public is not as passive as it might seem at first glance. Far from being brainwashed by mass culture, audiences hold the power to criticize, build fandoms, remix songs, create parodies, and more. For this essay (1000-word minimum), select any example from American popular culture that we did not cover in class. Then, describe some of the creative and surprising ways that audiences engaged with your topic. What sort of communities formed around your chosen example? Did it create new ways of thinking about politics and social life? Topics might include anything from a television series such as *The Bachelorette* to a musical like *Hamilton*. **Due 12/3.**

Schedule

Weekly structure:

Monday and Tuesday: These days are reserved strictly for reading. During this time, Dr. Olson will post a set of framing remarks to guide the discussion.

Wednesday: Each student will submit a 500-word post (which can be longer if you wish) to the Blackboard discussion board addressing the weekly readings.

Thursday and Friday: Each student will submit at least three comments (for a total of at least 500 words) responding to the posts submitted by your fellow students. You are encouraged to check back several times on Thursday and Friday to keep up with the discussion.

Readings:

Week 1 (August 23-27): Pop Culture and the Pandemic

- Watch: *Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* (2020)
 - Note: This film is only available on Disney+. The subscription cost is \$7.99/month. Please remember to cancel your subscription after viewing the film.
- Elle Hunt, "The True Story Behind the Viral TikTok Sea Shanty Hit" (2021)
- Emily Yahr, "Taylor and Kanye" (2019)

Week 2 (August 30-September 3): Digital Worlds

- Leslie Jamison, "The Digital Ruins of a Forgotten Future" (2017)
- Clive Thompson, "The Minecraft Generation" (2016)
 - **Essay:** Pandemic Mixtape essay due on Friday, September 3rd at 11:59pm.

Week 3 (September 6-10): Trust and Technology

- Ciena Madrid, "The Lying Disease" (2012)
- Watch: *Catfish* (2010). Rental for \$3.99 on Amazon, Apple TV, and others.
- Jessica Roy, "Sarah Lawrence Student Says *Catfish*'s Nev Schulman Punched Her 'Repeatedly' In the Head in 2006," *Vulture* (2014).

Week 4 (September 13-17): Performance and Place

- Jeff Chang, "Furious Styles" (2005)
- Watch: Ozols and RDK, "Rajons" (2001). Free on YouTube.
- Watch: *Moonlight* (2016). Rental for \$3.99 on Amazon, Apple TV, Hulu, and others.

Week 5 (September 20-24): Grunge in the Pacific Northwest

- Mark Yarm, *Everybody Loves Our Town* (2011), 20-30, 96-107, and 344-354.
- Marcie Sillman and Amina Al-Sadi, "A Tale of Sub Pop" (2019)
- Watch: Nirvana in Aberdeen, 1988. Free on YouTube.
- Watch: Nirvana, "All Apologies," *MTV Unplugged in New York*, 1994. Free on YouTube.

Week 6 (September 27-October 1): The Publics of Pop Culture

- Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 65-124. *Please read this piece carefully since it provides the theoretical framework for your final essay.*

Week 7 (October 4-8): Comics and Superheroes

- Sophia Arjana, “*Ms. Marvel*, Islam, and America” (2018)
- Ramzi Fawaz, “The Family of Superman” (2016)

Week 8 (October 11-15): Hollywood and the Star System

- Watch: *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Rental for \$3.99 on Amazon.
- Carol Clover, “Dancin’ in the Rain” (1995)

Week 9 (October 18-22): Silent Comedy

- Watch: *The Blacksmith* (1922). Free on YouTube.
- Watch: Clip from *Modern Times* (1936). Free on YouTube.
- **Essay:** Famous for Being Famous essay due on Friday, October 22nd, at 11:59pm.

Week 10 (October 25-29): Amusement Parks

- John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (1978) (full book)

Week 11 (November 1-5): Toys and the Culture of Play

- Robin Bernstein, “The Scripts of Black Dolls” (2011)

Week 12 (November 8-12): Humbug and the Mass Culture Industry

- *The Colossal PT Barnum Reader* (2005), 1-8, 103-111, 122-127, 142-150, and 155-188.

Week 13 (November 15-19): Popular Literature

- Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature” (2000)

Week 14 (November 22-26): Thanksgiving Break

- No readings or discussion.

Week 15 (November 29-December 3): Blackface Minstrelsy

- Brian Rouleau, “Oh! Susanna” (2015)
- **Essay:** The Publics of Pop Culture essay due by Friday, December 3rd, at 11:59pm.