Humanities 123: American Popular Culture  Reading study questions

See syllabus / class reading schedule for all reading assignments and deadlines.

• “Introduction to the Study of Film Form and Representation,” from America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

• “Classical Hollywood Cinema and Class,” from America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

• “Masculinity in Classical Hollywood Filmmaking,” from America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

• “African Americans and American Film,” from America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

• “Native Americans and American Film,” from America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin and Sexuality at the Movies, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

• “The Un-American Villain and the All-American Man’s Man,” from Classics and Trash, Harriett Hawkins (University of Toronto Press, 1990).


• “Gangsta Rap and American Culture,” from Between God and Gangsta Rap, Bearing Witness to Black Culture, Michael Eric Dyson (Oxford University Press, 1997).


• “Tragedy, the Enquirer and the Critics,” Trash Culture and the Great Tradition, Richard Keller Simon (UC Press, 1999).
Reading and assignment tips: Tips for reading, study question responses, essays, and presentation assignments.

Multiple assignments in this class better prepare you for college and post-graduate work by improving your ability to comprehend readings, participate in class discussion, and express your ideas through writing. Reading and writing well are skills that will serve you well in all of your future endeavors. The following reminders and suggestions can assist you in developing these skills through thoughtful note-taking and responses about your reading.

• Eliminate distractions when reading. Do not attempt to “multi-task” when reading an assignment.

• Read every word of an assignment. Do not scan or speed read the reading – this is a complete waste of time as it will not result in an understanding of anything. All paragraphs must be understood in the context of the entire reading, all sentences must be understood in the context of their paragraph, and all phrases must be understood in the context of their sentences.

• Circle new vocabulary. Look up new words and re-read the sentence. Find a way to use that word in class discussion. The best way to develop your vocabulary is to use newly acquired words. (Note that newly learned vocabulary can be used for an occasional think piece assignment).

• Underline or highlight key ideas and summarize in your own words in your notes or directly on the reading.

• Underline or highlight how an author supports their argument (specific examples, further explanation, etc.). Similarly, identify the overarching idea of the reading and how the reading illustrates this idea.

• Develop answers to your reading study questions in the following way: 1) locate and make note of the page or paragraph where the author addresses the question. 2) Re-read the section to better clarify what they are stating. 3) Re-word the author’s statements using your own wording. Do not simply quote the author. Quoting the author does not indicate an understanding of the reading.

• Use the study questions and your responses to prepare for class discussion. Thoughtfully prepared, insightful responses to the reading study questions do much to enhance your comprehension, your participation and final grade, and your ability to read, think and write effectively.
Study questions for *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

“Introduction to the Study of Film Form and Representation,” pp. 3 - 20

1. Which of our “pros and cons” is most relevant to the assumptions of this chapter? In other words, what do the authors assume about popular culture and how can you relate that to a “pro” or “con” we’ve discussed in class? (Refer to the list of pro and con arguments listed in your reading supplement).

2. Explain the difference between film’s “form” and its “content” by providing a specific example of each. For example, choose a film you know well and describe an aspect of its form and its content. Be specific.

3. How do the authors describe stereotypes (put this in your own words, but base it on the author’s ideas). What is wrong with stereotypes? Think of a film you know that you believe promotes a stereotype. Explain what is stereotypical about the character.

4. Consider the way the authors describe the term ideology and provide an example of a specific film and the ideology you believe it expresses.

5. Do the authors believe that American cinema is merely “entertainment”? Explain why or why not.

6. The authors discuss the process by which subcultures, often political in content, become depoliticized commodities. Think of an example of popular culture that you believe has been mainstreamed, watered down or commodified in this way. Be specific and make it clear what has been lost in this process.

1. How was work redefined by the Industrial Revolution? How might this have affected people’s sense of self?

2. According to the authors, how do images produced in American popular culture reflect its capitalist economic base? In other words, how do commonly repeated narrative and character types in American film ultimately support a capitalist society?

3. According to authors, do most classic Hollywood films critique class oppression?

4. Describe the Horatio Alger myth and explain why it is a popular, oft-repeated character type in American popular culture.

5. According to the authors, what characters are heroically portrayed and what characters are portrayed as villains in many of the earliest films of the 20th century (c.1900-1909)? What kinds of audiences were these films intended to appeal to?

6. At what point did American films begin to appeal to the middle classes and why?

7. Compare the Horatio Alger character type to Charlie Chaplin’s “Tramp” character. What is similar or different?

8. What changes occurred in film narratives in the 1930s and why? Describe at least two popular genres or narrative types in 1930s’ film.

9. What sort of myths are promoted through popular images and culture and what ideas do these myths support?

10. Think of ways you can relate specific observations from this chapter to the film Modern Times. Prepare to discuss these in class.

1. According to the authors, have our definitions of “manhood” stayed the same?

2. What do the authors mean when they say that mass media or pop culture representations “naturalize” notions of masculinity?

3. Which “con” or criticism of popular culture best relates to this essay?

4. How did urban men interact with nickelodeons? What do the authors suggest they enjoyed about them?

5. How did Hollywood films respond to the “crisis in masculinity/ virility” brought on by the Great Depression? (Explain examples other than the Chaplin type; he strays from many Hollywood norms at the time.)


7. How did the film noir genre deal with gender roles and how is film noir related to postwar society?

8. What does film noir suggest about masculinity in the postwar years?

9. How are audience members formally (in terms of film’s formal elements) encouraged to identify with the male hero protagonist in film noir film? What are the unique features of the film noir “hero”?

10. In what ways did WW2 bring about a new type of hero different than that of the hero in High Noon (also a post-WW2 film, but an unusual one).

11. Describe the following male types in film as described by the authors: a. Valentino type b. Chaplin type c. John Wayne type d. Fred Astaire type. How do they differ? What was the appeal of each?

12. What effect did corporate culture and the pressure to conform in the 1950s have on the portrayal of men in films of the period?

13. In what ways was Rio Bravo made “in response to” High Noon?
“African Americans and American Film,” pp. 78 – 101

1. The authors note that much has changed in the ways that African Americans are portrayed in cinema, but what do they say has not changed?

2. Of the five main stereotypes identified at the outset of this chapter, choose one that you think resembles or one that can be significantly contrasted with a contemporary portrayal in film or television. Explain your example.

3. Explain why the film *Birth of a Nation* was significant, and explain what sort of visual / film techniques were used to underscore particular attitudes.

4. What were “race movies”? Do the authors suggest there are positive / negative aspects of these films? Explain.

5. How are films of the 1940s affected by World War II?

6. How did the McCarthyism of the 1950s affect films?

7. Based on the examples provided in this chapter, which decade appears to be most groundbreaking in terms of television portrayals of African Americans?

8. What connection do the authors draw between the origins of Fox television and the demographic it appealed to?

9. How do the authors compare Hollywood films and independent films featuring African Americans?

10. Summarize the notable developments in terms of African Americans in film from the 1960s through to the 21st century. Provide at least one example for each decade.
“Native Americans and American Film,” pp. 102 – 122.

1. What are the two prevailing stereotypes of Native Americans? How do they differ, and what do they have in common?

2. What does Manifest Destiny refer to and how does it relate to films addressed in this chapter?

3. What is the iconography of the typical Western film?

4. What is the Western’s typical thematic myth?

5. What ideas from this chapter can be related to the film *High Noon*? Are there any ways in which *High Noon* can be related to typical Westerns? Any significant ways it differs?

6. Prior to Western films, what were some of the earlier pop culture forms that expressed themes and iconography similar to the Western?

7. What coincided with the birth of cinema in the U.S.; why is this important?

8. Describe an early film type noted in this chapter and compare it to a contemporary film genre.

9. What qualities did John Wayne project that in turn expressed national ideals / spirit?

10. At what point did American filmmakers begin to challenge the cultural assumptions of the Western genre, and what film genre notably challenged mythical assumptions of the Western?

11. Compare the Billie Jack films to earlier Westerns. What is problematic with each example?

12. What do the authors suggest about the “softer, gentler” portrayals of Native Americans?
“The Un-American Villain and the All-American Man’s Man,” from *Classics and Trash*, Harriett Hawkins

1. Hawkins is addressing an American hero type that became very popular in what time period?

2. How does Hawkins identify the unique characteristics of this kind of hero?

3. What does she suggest are the roots of this?

4. How does she relate this character type to American virtues?

5. What qualities are associated with the villain?

6. In what ways have these films been historically inaccurate or misleading?

7. How specifically has the stereotype of the intellectual German villain been misleading or historically inaccurate?

8. How has the macho male stereotype changed over time, compare the earlier WW2 period films to those of the 80s?

9. How does she address the symbolism of “freedom”?

10. What arguments against popular culture does the Hawkins essay support?

11. Hawkins examines villain and hero types that were prominent in a specific time period. Can you think of more recent examples of villains and heroes that are different than the ones she discusses? Explain.

12. Can you relate Hawkins’ discussion of the “all-American hero” and the “un-American villain” types to perceptions of political figures / leaders past or present?
Ways of Seeing excerpt, John Berger

1. In Ways of Seeing John Berger asserts that publicity is rationalized in our culture. How is it rationalized or for what reasons?

2. When John Berger states that publicity never speaks of the present moment but to the past and the future, what does he mean?

3. According to Berger, how is publicity linked to ideas about freedom?

4. How does Berger challenge the perceived relationship between freedom and publicity?

5. What is the “general proposal” that publicity makes to its viewers?

6. Berger says that publicity is about social relations, not objects. What does he mean by that?

7. What do some publicity images have in common with the tradition of oil painting? What are the differences between the two?

8. Berger states that publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. What does he mean by this?

1. Why do you think he calls this “the magic system”?

2. According to Raymond Williams, what are the essential features of advertising and how have they changed in time? (Summarize the key significant changes and developments noted by Williams.)

3. What does he mean when he says, though we are often called an overly materialistic society, that perhaps we are not materialistic enough?

4. What does Williams mean by “psychological” advertising?

5. What does Williams mean when he states that the borderline between journalism and promotion is difficult to draw? Give an example.

6. Williams notes that the advertising industry has responded to criticisms of it. In what ways have advertisements responded to criticisms?
“Lichtenstein’s Borrowed Spots,” *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*, Cecile Whiting

1. What are the main themes of Lichtenstein’s comic strip inspired imagery? What types comic strip subjects does he focus on?

2. According to Whiting, how do the meanings of the original comic strip material change in Lichtenstein’s work?

3. Whiting argues that there is a significant difference between the way that gender is portrayed in the comic strips of pop culture and the way that gender is portrayed in Lichtenstein’s appropriated images of comics. What are the differences? Which is she suggesting is more socially progressive, the original comic strips or Lichtenstein’s appropriated versions? Which is more traditional and conservative?

4. How did art critics distinguish Lichtenstein’s work from the popular culture it resembled?

5. How does Whiting compare the way male Pop artists (such as Roy Lichtenstein) are portrayed in the media to the way that Abstract Expressionist artists (such as Jackson Pollock) are portrayed? How are their personae different and how might you compare this to the male types, both hero and villains, described in Harriet Hawkins’ essay?

6. Whiting notes that Lichtenstein’s art is an example of high art elevating itself above the status of consumer culture. What does she mean by this? In what way does Lichtenstein’s work do this?

7. In what ways could you say that Lichtenstein’s work is *ironic*?
“Gangsta Rap and American Culture,” from *Between God and Gangsta Rap, Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, Michael Eric Dyson.

1. In what ways does Dyson compare ideas or values expressed in gangsta rap to other aspects of mainstream American culture? Provide a specific example.

2. Describe the social and economic conditions that hip hop culture emerged out of.

3. Based on his description, what are some of the positive aspects of the gangsta rap and other forms of rap?

4. What are the most negative aspects of rap?

5. Does Dyson believe that certain gangsta rap should be censored? Why or why not?

6. What does he say about the critics of rap generally? How does he criticize these critics?

7. According to Dyson why are African Americans particularly sensitive to the image of the gangsta rap performer?

8. Dyson acknowledges serious problems with American culture; what does he imply is the source of those problems?

9. Does Dyson appear to believe that gangsta rap is an example of art imitating life? Or does he seem to think that life imitates art?

10. From our list of criticism and defenses of popular culture, which arguments best relate to this essay?

1. Does Walters think that women’s roles in film or tv have improved over the years?

2. What does Walters mean by “postfeminism” and a “postfeminist discourse”? What are the effects of either of these? Cite specific examples.

3. According to Walters, how are feminists perceived?

4. Walters analyzes specific films that she believes demonstrate a postfeminist backlash. Can you think of any others (or examples of television shows) that support her argument? Name at least one and explain how or why you think it is relevant to Walters’ argument.

5. How does Walters compare the current backlash against feminism to other backlashes like that of the 1940s and 50s?

6. What is Walters’ criticism of the “Superwoman” type?

7. What does Walters mean by the “veneer of feminism” in certain films?

8. Compare and contrast two examples from the films and female types Walters analyses (*Working Girl, Pretty Woman, Baby Boom, Fatal Attraction, The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, etc.) Do not simply imitate what Walters has said about either example, but think about the similarities and / or differences, and consider the ways in which they construct notions of female identity.
“Racism and the Aesthetic of the Hyper-Real Violence,” from *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, Henry A. Giroux

1. Giroux notes that certain cinema appears to provide a new language and aesthetic in which urban areas are the site of social disorder and black youth are the agents of crime and moral decay. Describe these types of films.

2. How does Giroux use statistics to challenge media portrayals of African American youth?

3. How does Giroux characterize the difference between the violence of the spectacle and representational violence that allows viewers to identify with suffering?

4. What distinction does Giroux make between three forms of visual violence: ritualistic, symbolic and hyper-real?

5. This essay attempts to “move beyond condemning representational violence in a wholesale fashion” focusing instead on drawing more subtle distinctions between types of violence. In other words, Giroux is one of a few critics who argue that criticism should move beyond the simplistic condemnation and lumping together of all forms of violence. What is the value of Giroux’s critical approach?

6. Giroux suggests that while violence appears to cross over borders of race, class, and social distinctions, the representation of violence in popular media is largely depicted in racial terms. Explain how he supports this argument. Can you think of other examples that would support his argument?

7. In addition to the discussion questions noted above, prepare to discuss the film *Fight Club* in relation to this reading. Of the types of cinematic violence that Giroux identifies, which category do you believe the film *Fight Club* falls into? (Note: you will not be responsible for this question until we have begun screening of the film).
“Tragedy, the Enquirer and the Critics,” Trash Culture and the Great Tradition, Richard Keller Simon

1. According to author (and/or quoted authors within the chapter) what is the value of tragedy or how does it function in readers’ lives?

2. Cite specific similarities between literary tragedy and tabloid tragedy as noted by the author.

3. What are some of the differences between tabloids and literary tragedy? (Remember to use specific examples but do not quote text.)

4. According to the author, how does People differ from the Enquirer? (You may find exceptions to his comparison in your own examination of the magazines, but for this question summarize his findings using your own words.)

5. The author suggests one is less embarrassing and the other more acceptable in polite society, and while this is generally agreed upon assumption, he suggests a less common explanation as to why one is more acceptable and one more “impolite.” Explain his point.

6. What aspects of the individual appear to be valued in the examples the author addresses? What kind of hero or anti-hero emerges from these examples?

7. What aspects of the Enquirer convey a sense of the unknown or that which is beyond our grasp? What do you suppose is the appeal of this tabloid content?

8. The author argues that contemporary tabloids are most similar to which type of post-romantic era tragedy, public or private? Explain.

9. How does the author compare the works of Shakespeare and Beckett to the content of People and the Enquirer?

10. In what ways are tabloids similar and how are they different from the American gangster genre in film?

11. In what ways do narratives from the Enquirer challenge certain assumptions of our consumerist society?

12. In his conclusion, the author notes an important distinction between literary tragedies of the past and those of contemporary tabloids concerning public opinion and the individual. Explain what differs between these examples.

13. Based on what we’ve discussed in class about the Horatio Alger myth, would you say that the author’s examples fit this archetype or differ from it? Choose a specific example and explain your response.