HIS 396: American Popular Culture

Lec 396-01: Topics in US History
DEC: K & 4/SBC: SBS+
Prof. Masten, SBS S313
TA: Gabe Tennen, SBS N322
TuTh 10:00AM-11:20AM
Frey Hall 105
TuTh 12-1 (MWF by appointment)
TuTh 2:45-3:45 (M by appointment)

Description: Designed for upper-division students, this course provides an in-depth study of a specific topic relating to American history. Our topic is popular culture in the United States between the Revolution and the Civil War, approached through the theories and methods of Social History and Cultural Studies. We begin with the premise that every cultural form derives its meaning and value from the immediate conditions of its production and reception. We cannot know the significance of a dance competition in 1842, a circus act or theater production in 1856, or a baseball game in 1864 unless we know about the historical circumstances and shifts that influenced its form and content, as well as who practiced it, whether it represented a social pastime or an employment, where it was enjoyed, staged or exhibited, who consumed it, who promoted, distributed, and marketed it, and who condemned it.

Our Objectives:
1. To become familiar with a variety of cultural activities engaged in by the various classes during the 19th century
2. To see how popular culture reflected America’s political ideas and institutions
3. To explore the relationship between popular culture to the formation of American identity
4. To discover the different meanings (social, political, economic) given to cultural practices by participants and spectators
5. To trace the transformation and bifurcation of popular social and cultural activities into commercial entertainment and high culture
6. To analyze the eclipse of popular culture (the social and cultural activities of ordinary people) by commercial entertainment
7. To explore the ways popular culture influenced debates about race, class, gender, immigration, morality, equality, and other issues

**Assessment:** You will be asked to read between 10 and 100 pages of history and/or theory a week and to participate in discussions and activities that correlate the lectures and readings, to take one weekly quiz (or engage in a group activity) that requires you to discuss the reading materials in writing (100 points), to take two in-class midterms (80 points), write two 5-page papers (100 points), and, on our last day, compete in word games (20 points). Regular, punctual attendance and class participation (26 points) will account for the rest of your grade (326 points). Class attendance is not merely bodily presence; it means alertness, engagement with the material, note taking, and **disengagement with any electronic devices.** Tardiness and early departures are disruptive and will be considered absences. Attendance points allow for three unexcused absences (we meet 29 times). Extra or make-up credit (up to ten points) can be gained by visiting the Long Island Museum.

**Required Texts:**

Study sheets and additional readings and documents will be posted on blackboard.

- Raymond Williams “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” 407-423
- Pierre Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class,” 357-373

**Recommendations:**

1. **Keep Up with the Reading:** The three texts are available for purchase online. They are also on reserve in Melville Library. I strongly recommend that you buy the books so you can mark passages and write comments and questions in the margins. Your personally annotated copies will be invaluable in studying for the quizzes, writing your papers, and figuring out what you think about the practices, people, events, and ideas you encounter in the course. In fact, one could argue that to really own a book you must mark it up. Readings should be completed before the discussion date, when you will be
asked to answer questions about the readings and make thoughtful comments in class. Our discussions will be much more lively and interesting if everyone keeps up with the readings!

2. **Bring your Book to Class:** Please bring the assigned readings to class the week we are scheduled to discuss them, so that we can subject them to close scrutiny. Having an underlined, annotated copy on hand is essential for effective class participation.

3. **Proofread your Paper:** Your papers must be written clearly, accurately, and grammatically to receive a high mark. Always proofread your papers for errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and syntax. Never turn in a first draft. I encourage you to consult a dictionary. I also encourage you to read your paper aloud to yourself or someone else. If you need help ask a peer or a tutor at the Writing Center read your final draft before you turn it in. A second set of eyes can often help you spot grammatical errors, sharpen unclear sentences, or bolster weak arguments.

4. **Do Your Own Work:** I expect all written work to be your own; it should convey your own ideas and opinions in your own unique voice. That’s who I want to hear! Keep this advice in mind when deadlines loom and temptation clouds your better judgment. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade, not just for the assignment but for the entire course. Faculty and TAs are required to report any suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Contact me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, or other dodgy behavior. For more information on academic integrity, please refer to the academic judiciary website at [http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/](http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/).

5. **Get Any Extra Help You Need:** Students with disabilities may receive assistance to enable them to participate fully in this course. If you have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact the Student Accessibility Support Center at 128 Educational Communications Center [https://www.stonybrook.edu/dss/](https://www.stonybrook.edu/dss/) (631) 632-6748. They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate and alert me of your needs. All information and documentation is confidential.

**Critical Incident Management:** Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Judicial Affairs any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students’ ability to learn.
Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper (1800-1829)

Weekly Schedule (May be revised to accommodate unexpected occurrences.)

Week 1 – Popular Culture as Historical Subject
Read: Johnson, Sam Patch, preface, ix-xiii
Discussion 1: Document analysis / Discuss preface to Sam Patch

Tues. Aug 28 – Introductions and Expectations / Lecture 1 What is Popular Culture?
Thurs. Aug 30 – Lecture 2 Why Study Popular Culture? / D1

Assignment 1: Introduce yourself to me in writing and a picture
Copy a picture of yourself (as you look now, SBU ID photo will do) and write a short essay (both should fit on one sheet of 8½ x 11 paper) introducing yourself to me.
Due on or before Thurs. Sept 6. Please include:
• Your name, college year, academic major, and birthplace.
• Any previous experience or interests in history.
• Your interests in or engagement with popular culture.
• Any special skills or talents? language, sport, writing, music, acting, singing, etc.

Week 2 – An American Popular Culture
Read: Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 407-423
Read: Johnson, Sam Patch, “Pawtucket,” 3-40
Discussion 2: Williams, 407-411, “base determines superstructure” / study sheet

Tues. Sept 4 – L3 Republican and Democratic Culture
Thurs. Sept 6 – L4 Charles Willson Peale’s Republican Art / D2
Choose seat for the semester.
Week 3 – Work and Play

Read: Johnson, *Sam Patch*, “Paterson,” 41-77
Reread: Williams, 411-17
Discussion 3: Discuss reading / Fill out study sheet on blackboard / Hegemony
Apply Williams to Peale and Patch

Tues. Sept 11 – L5 Theories of Popular Culture (Williams)

Week 4 – Festival and Market Day Inversions

Read: Johnson, *Sam Patch*, “Niagara,” 79-125
Reread: Williams, 412-423
Discussion 4: Apply lectures and “Emergent and Residual Culture” to Patch

Tues. Sept 18 – L6 Rough Music, continued
Thurs. Sept 20 – L7 early circuses / D4

Paper Assignment Explained

Week 5 – Alternative vs. Oppositional Culture

Read: Johnson, *Sam Patch*, “Rochester,” up to 142.
Read: Rosensweig, “The Rise of the Saloon,” 121-156
Discussion 5: Alcohol consumption / Apply Williams “alternative vs oppositional” to Patch

Tues. Sept 25 – L8 Negro Election Day
Thurs. Sept 27 – L9 Militia Burlesque / D5

Week 6 – Public Renown vs. Modern Celebrity

Discussion 6: Discuss Patch / Go over first midterm study sheet

Tues. Oct 2 – L10 Blackface in the Street (Slavery, Race, and Class)
Thurs. Oct 4 – L10 continued, Blackface on the Stage / D6

Week 7 – The Popular Press

Discussion 7: Rough Music in Print

Tues. Oct 9 – L11 Print Revolution / D7 No Classes/Columbus Day holiday
Thurs. Oct 11 – In-class Midterm
Week 8 – Sex and Politics
Discussion 8: In-class activity / Prostitution and Libertine Republicanism

Tues. Oct 16 – D8 Sex, the oldest entertainment; Prostitution, the oldest profession
Thurs. Oct 18 – L12 From Republican to Commercial Theater

Paper 1 Due

Week 9 – Stage and Sawdust (Theatrical Democracy)
Discussion 9: Levine, 34-49 / Study Sheet
Read: Manager’s Daughter
Discussion 10: Levine, 49-66 / Apply Levine to Manager’s Daughter

Tues. Oct 23 – D9 Antebellum Theater / Levine Clip

Week 10 – The Art of Humbug
Read: P.T. Barnum, Struggles and Triumphs (1869), 79-132
Discussion 11: Document Analysis

Tues. Oct 30 – L14 Exhibitions and Entr’actes
Thurs. Nov 1 – L14 continued, P.T. Barnum / D11

Paper 2 Due

Week 11 – Cooperation and Competition
Read: Pierre Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class,” 357-362
Discussion 12: Bourdieu, key terms, Sections 1, 2, and 3 / second midterm study sheet

Tues. Nov 6 – L15 The Sorrow Songs
Thurs. Nov 8 – L16 Trials of Skill / D12

Week 12 – From Working-Class Games to Spectator Sports
Read: Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class,” 362-372
Discussion 13: Document Analysis / Bourdieu, Sections 4, 5, and 6

Thurs. Nov 13 – L17 boxing / D13
Thurs. Nov 15 – L18 Baseball
Week 13 – Exam and Thanksgiving
Tues. Nov 20 – **Second In-class Midterm**
Thurs. Nov 22 – no class

Week 14 – Cultural Exchange
**Read:** Masten, "Man and Money Ready," ...
**Discussion 14:** wear your dancing shoes

Tues. Nov 27 – L19 The Challenge Dance
Thurs. Nov 29 – **D14** dancing and discussion
**Paper 3 Due**

Week 15 – Work and Play, revisited
Tues. Dec 4 – L20 Themes and Connections
Thurs. Dec 6 – **Word Games**

American-born boxer Tom Molineaux (1784-1818)