As a working historian I once described myself as “nailed to the earth with footnotes and bibliographies.” Artists who are drawn to the past for their subject matter do not have such limitations. They are free to let their imaginations run. Except for documentary filmmakers, they can create characters who never existed, take liberties with characters who did exist, allow those characters to do things that clearly never happened (such as repeatedly bursting to song in 1776 or the current Broadway hit Hamilton), and create dialogue, plot and relationships. This course will look at how writers and artists have imagined the founding era of the American Republic. Emphatically, it will not be about whether a novelist or filmmaker or painter was “right.” Instead we will explore the conventions that lie behind different ways of “presenting the past,” and how the artists (along with historians) have worked within those conventions to make sense of the time of the American founding. Musicals (1776 and Hamilton), feature-film costume dramas, written fiction and poetry, history painting, strict filmic recreations, and conventional documentaries all present specific “ways of knowing.” So, of course, does normal history-writing. I want to explore these different ways of knowing in terms of one specific subject, the founding time of the American Republic.

I bring several strengths to the course.

- Most fundamentally, I’ve spent my entire professional lifetime trying to understand revolutionary America. I’m still doing so, with a major book that I have underway. When May Term is over I’ll return to writing it. I’m not going to inflict that book on students in this course. But I’ll say without fear of being contradicted that the set of events which we call the American Revolution was huge and transformative and that all sorts of people involved themselves, far beyond the conventional image of “the Founding Fathers.” I’ll also say without fear of contradiction that I bring as full a knowledge of the Revolution’s events and its problems as any scholar now working.
- I’m by no means the only person to be thinking about our subject for these eleven intense das. Every one of the novelists, poets, painters, musicians, and filmmakers at whom
we’ll be looking at has asked exactly the same questions I have asked. For our purposes, the interest is how they have addressed them.

- I have a lot of experience dealing with the inter-disciplinary problem of artists interpreting the American past. Much of it comes from a dozen years of experience at my previous campus (Warwick, UK) teaching a very successful course on Westerns as History and Myth. Before I took that course on solo, I learned the conventions of film study through two years of collaborating with one of the founders of the whole subject of film studies, the late Robin Wood. Working with him amounted to adding a whole graduate field to my repertoire. I’ve co-written one book in the field (a study of the great Western “Shane” for the British Film Institute “Film Classics” series), been a contributing editor and author for *The BFI Companion to the Western*, and have published film articles on subject as remote from one another as the “pantheon director” John Ford’s *Drums Along the Mohawk* (which will feature in this course) to John Wayne’s rise during the 1950s from truly awful 1930s films made on Hollywood’s “Poverty Row” studios to top rank stardom.

- I have a lot of experience with the eight-day Jan Term and eleven-day May Term formats I know how to pitch the material within what our time frame allows. I also know how to make a course like this *fun* as well as intellectually serious. This syllabus is not a condensation of a full-semester course. I’ve designed it specially for Jan Term and May Term. I do expect, eventually, to write a book about what we’re studying.

- Finally, this is a course in cultural history in relation to how people “know” about it. It is *not* about whether a novelist, writer, or filmmaker got it “right.” Instead it is about how such artists have sought to understand the significance and meaning of a major historical event, using the tools and methods available to them.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

1. Students will demonstrate knowledge of more than one disciplinary practice.
2. Students will explain how bringing more than one practice to an examination of the course topic contributes to knowing about that topic.

Both SLOs will be met in the two writing assignments and the take-home final examination. In all cases, students will approach the relevant works of art from both the conventions of artistic genre and criticism, and from the recognition that like historians the artists in question are engaged in representing the past through the artistic means available to them.

The respective artists deal with the same fundamental problem, which is race and slavery in revolutionary America. As a serious historical topic that question did not exist half a century ago; now it does and there is considerable discussion among historians about it. Hill and Miranda address it directly. The others bring the problem into their work. How do they do it? The issue I will ask the students to confront is not whether either of the artists is “right” in his artistic choices but how the artistic freedom available to them enhances understanding of the American founding era in ways that go beyond the normal range of historians’ interpretive
possibilities. The ‘knowing more about the topic” consists in knowing more about the contemporary cultural significance of the American origin story, which is a legitimate historical and cultural concern. It is worth noting that despite its power, Hill’s book and accompanying film have not had the massive impact of Miranda’s play. There is ample on-line commentary available for students to explore this dimension within the time constraints of a May Term course.

Grading Criteria:
Class participation 20%
Short Essays 15% each
Final exam 50%

Required Reading:
Edward Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era*
Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic*

All other readings will be on-line via Canvas

Required Listening Outside Class Time
Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton* (Original Broadway Cast Recording)

Required Viewing Prior to Class:
Historians and Understanding the Revolution: [http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-03/lovell/#.WHKqPX2uC2o](http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-03/lovell/#.WHKqPX2uC2o)

Schedule of Classes
Thursday, May 16

Morning
Course Business, Questions to ask about artists, media, film, and history

Afternoon: Artists, Writers and the Meaning of the Revolution, based on history paintings from Benjamin West to Grant Wood and on short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne (“My Kinsman, Major Molyneux”) and Washington Irving (“Rip Van Winkle”), on Canvas

Friday, May 17

Morning

Screening: “Drums Along the Mohawk” (John Ford, 1939)

Afternoon

Discussion of “Drums Along the Mohawk” in relation to what was done on Thursday

Saturday, May 19  First Essay Due at Midnight, based on Melville, Countryman, “Drums,” “Drums Along the Mohawk,” and Draft Film Script for “Independence” on Canvas: Historically and artistically, what has it meant to “hate” Indians in American life and culture?

Monday May 20

Morning

Race and Revolution: Morgan, Birth and Countryman, Enjoy

Race and Revolution: Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation Offering freedom to Slaves “pertaining to rebels;” Declaration of Independence on Canvas in Jefferson and final drafts; bring Enjoy book to class

Tuesday, May 21

Morning

Screening: “The Book of Negroes,” Episodes 1-3

Afternoon

Screening: “The Book of Negroes,” Episodes 4-5

Wednesday, May 22

Morning

Screening: “The Book of Negroes,” Episode 6 and Supplementary filmed material

Afternoon
Screening: Discussion: Black People, Indians, and the American Revolution
Images on Revolutionary People PowerPoint on Canvas

Thursday, May 23

Morning

Screening: Screening, *The Patriot*

Afternoon: Screening, Production Material from *The Patriot* and discussion: putting “history” on the screen

Friday, May 24

Morning

Screening, *Revolution*

Afternoon, Screening, interview of Al Pacino and Hugh Hudson, and discussion of a failed film

Over the Weekend: Pre-Class Historical Readings on the Problem of “the Founders” on Canvas by John P. Roche and David Waldstreicher, and work on papers; listen several times to the soundtrack of “Hamilton” on CD or MP3

Saturday, May 26   Second Short Essays Due at Midnight: How have historians and filmmakers dealt with the problem of slavery in Revolutionary America?

Monday, May 27   Memorial Day

Tuesday, May 28

Screenings:

Morning, The Founders on the Screen, I: 1776

Afternoon: The Founders on the Screen, II: Hamilton’s America

Wednesday, May 29

The “Hamilton” Phenomenon” in the Light of What We Have Done

Thursday, May 30
Morning: Wrap-Up Discussion

Afternoon: Study Time

Friday, May 31

Final Exam, Distributed by e-mail at noon, due at 3:00 p.m as e-mail attachment in Word.doc, Word.docx, or .pdf format. Follow the directions and attach it from your .hdd, not from a Cloud source

Modes of Grading and Assessment

Grading and Assessment will be based on the written assignments and the final exam.

Course Requirements:

1. Class attendance and participation policy:

Class attendance is compulsory. Every class, including , counts. Do not miss any. Failure to attend on a regular basis will result in an administrative drop or a decrease in the final grade. All students are expected to carry out the assignments for each class and to participate in all discussions. Continuing failure to do so will result in an administrative drop. Absence from a class is not an excuse for not being familiar with the material from that class if it is relevant to your answers on the mid-term and final exam.

2. Writing and Grading: My policy is to look for and reward improvement over a teaching period. A bad early grade will not count if subsequent grades rise. For normal purposes, class participation will count fifteen percent, the three short writing assignments will count fifteen percent each, and the individual projects will count forty percent.

3. Required notices:

First, if you have special needs, please notify me and supply documentation. I will work with you. Second, I call your attention to the University’s policy on plagiarism, as stated in the Student Handbook. If you have not yet read it, please go to this URL: http://www.smu.edu/studentlife/PCL_05_HC.asp. I will enforce the code in cases of suspected cheating. If you are in trouble, tell me and I will work with you. But do not try to pass off as your own the work of anybody else. The result will be an automatic fail and a report to the Honor Council.

I want this course to challenge and interest you. Most of all, I hope you will find it fun.