

HIST 2302
Course Syllabus
Artists and a Revolution:
History, Fiction, and Film
Room TBA
Jan Term, 2020, 9:00-12:00
1:00-4:00

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Satisfies UC Ways of Knowing and Historical Contexts Tags

I originated this course to satisfy the Ways of Knowing requirement in the 2012 version of the University Curriculum. It also satisfies the requirement for that tag under the 2016 UC, Historical Contexts I for the 2012 curriculum and Historical Contexts for the 2016 curriculum. It's a history course, but it's interdisciplinary with a strong emphasis on how creative artists, particularly film makers, have made sense of an important moment in the American past. It requires learning how to understand a film, as opposed to just watching it. Because of Jan Term constraints, there is a pre-class reading requirement with two conventional historical accounts of the subject. Both are short and highly readable. Aside from a few documents, they are your only readings. The vast bulk of the work for the course will come from in-class screenings and discussions. The course is fun.

As a working historian I once described myself as “nailed to the earth with footnotes and bibliographies.” Artists who are drawn to the past 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 whole 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. I'll list them:

- Most fundamentally, I've spent my entire professional lifetime trying to understand revolutionary America. I'm still doing so, with a major book underway. 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 think that way. 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). I've been a contributing editor and author for *The BFI Companion to the Western*. I've published film articles on subjects 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 1940s from truly awful 1930s films made on Hollywood's "Poverty Row."
- I have a lot of experience with the eight-day J-Term format. 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 the Jan Term format.
- I've taught this particular course in both Jan Term and May Term format and I've learned from experience what is both possible and not possible during the time we'll have together.
- It's a seriously fun subject—double meaning intended.
- 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 the events that have formed their raw material, using the creative freedom that art gives to them.

Student Learning Outcomes

For Ways of Knowing:

Students will demonstrate knowledge of more than one disciplinary practice.

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

For Historical Contexts:

Students will contextualize, in their own prose, main events, actors, and primary sources in a defined historical period.

All of the course SLOs will be met in the three writing assignments and the 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.

Grading Criteria:

Class participation 20%

Short Essays 10% each

Projects 50%

Required Reading Prior to the Class:

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

Recommended Reading

Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes*

Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*

Jane Kamensky, *A Revolution in Color*

Emily Ballew Neff and Kaylin H. Weber, *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World*

Required Viewing Prior to Class:

Historians and Understanding the Revolution: <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-14/no-03/lovell/#.WHKqPX2uC2o>

Required Viewing over the mid-course weekend

“1776,” (Peter H. Hunt, 1972)

Required Listening Outside Class Time

Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton* (Original Broadway Cast Recording)

Schedule of Classes

Required pre-class assignment (per SACS regulations): Read both Morgan *The Birth of the Republic* and Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty*. Both are short introductions. Morgan has a very clear and simple thesis statement. To his mind, the American Revolution was about “a search for principles.” What does he mean by that? How does he explore and support that idea? Please forget who wrote the other book. His statement (okay, mine) would be that if we are to understand the American Revolution, we must realize that race and slavery counted in it, heavily. What does he (do I) mean by that? How does it relate to Morgan’s argument?

Also, by the start of class on January 7 read the two short stories that are posted on Canvas, Washington Irving’s “Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molyneux.”

January 4

First short essay, on historical understanding based on pre-course reading by Morgan and Countryman, due at midnight: Based on the two assigned pre-class readings, what does Morgan mean by describing the Revolution as a “search for principles?” Come up with a similar one-phrase statement about Countryman’s book. Can you reconcile those two statements? Take no more than two double-spaced pages.

January 6

Morning *History: The Revolution, A Quick Overview* based on pre-class reading of Morgan, *Birth of the Republic*, and Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty* and on your first essays.

Afternoon: *Meaning in Historical Art*: a practicum. Visuals by eighteenth-century “history painters”; short stories, “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving and “My Kinsman, Major Molyneux” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and film clips from the work of John Ford and others.

January 7

Morning *Screening*: “Drums Along the Mohawk,” (John Ford, 1939) and discussion

Afternoon: *Screening*: “The Patriot” (Roland Emmerich, 2000)

January 8

Morning: *Screening: “Revolution”* (Hugh Hudson, 1986, revised cut) and discussion

Afternoon: *Discussion with clips and extra material: Three serious feature films*

Second Short essay due at midnight: How, respectively, do “Drums along the Mohawk,” “The Patriot,” and “Revolution” deal with the question of how people got involved in the Revolution. Take no more than two pages.

January 9

Morning: *Screening: “The Book of Negroes”* (Clement Virgo and Lawrence Hill, 2015), episodes 1-3

Afternoon: *Screening: “The Book of Negroes”* episodes 4-6

January 10

Morning *Screening: “The Book of Negroes”* production material. Discussion based on screenings and *Countryman, Enjoy the Same Liberty*

Afternoon: Writing time: second short essay

Weekend: Listen to Miranda, “Hamilton” Soundtrack and the Hamilton Mixtape, read Hamilton material on Canvas, search YouTube for any clips find and if possible read Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton, The Revolution*.

Third Short Essay, due January 11 at midnight: How do the films we have seen so far deal with the intertwined problems of race and slavery during a time of revolutionary changes? Take No more than two pages

January 14

Morning: Screening, 1776

Afternoon Discussion of 1776 and of the Declaration of Independence

January 15

Morning: The Hamilton Phenomenon

Afternoon: Hamilton, continued

January 16

Morning: Review Discussion: Artists and the American Revolution

Afternoon: Exams distributed by e-mail at 1:00, due at 4:00 as e-mail attachments

The exam will be essay style, based on close observation of the works of art in relation to the historical events they portray and to one another, as an ongoing discussion.

Grading Criteria:

Class participation 20%

Short Essays 15% each

Final Exam 50%

Course Requirements:

1. Class attendance and participation policy:

Class attendance is compulsory. *Every* class counts. Do not miss any. Do not be late, because the first moments of any film establish its direction. 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:

Disability Accommodations: Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Disability Accommodations & Success Strategies (DASS. Students may call 214-768-1470 or visit <http://www.smu.edu/alec/dass.asp> to begin the process. Once registered, students should then schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible, present a DASS accommodation letter, and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement.

Religious Observance: Religiously observant students wishing to be absent on holidays that require missing class should notify their professors in writing at the beginning of the semester, and should discuss with them, in advance, acceptable ways of making up any work missed because of the absence. (See University Policy No. 1.9.)

Excused Absences for University Extracurricular Activities: Students participating in an officially sanctioned, scheduled University extracurricular activity should be given the opportunity to make up class assignments or other graded assignments missed as a result of their participation. It is the responsibility of the student to make arrangements with the instructor prior to any missed scheduled examination or other missed assignment for making up the work.

Academic Honesty: 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 us and we will work with you. But do not try to pass off as your own the work of anybody else. If a case of cheating occurs prior to the date for withdrawal, the person involved will be dismissed from the course and will be referred to the Honor Council. If cheating occurs after the date for withdrawal, the person involved will receive a failing grade and will be referred to the Honor Council.

I hope the last point is just *pro forma* but for legal reasons I need to make it. I've never had the slightest difficulty on the count of academic honesty with any graduate student. More than that I hope we have a great semester together.

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