Obscenity and Censorship in American Popular Culture

Honors Seminar 480
Fall 2012
Thursday 4 – 6:20
353 Old Main

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Office Hours:

Pillen: TH 3-4 (353 Old Main) or by appointment

Rabe: MW 8:30-11, 12:30-3:30; T 10:30-12:30; or by appointment

Required Texts (available at MU Bookstore):


** Additional required readings, in the form of journal articles, book chapters, or web postings, will be available online.

Course Description: This seminar is an exploration of the complex and sometimes contentious relationship between freedom of expression and the censorship of allegedly obscene materials in American arts and popular culture from the late 19th century to the present day. It examines issues like the boundaries between art and obscenity/pornography, evolving definitions of the obscene, shifting legal frameworks for limiting or protecting speech, and the politics surrounding public expression. Arranged chronologically, the course seeks to historicize the study of obscenity and censorship and provide ample opportunity for discussion of related issues in the present day.

Learning outcomes: At the conclusion of the course, students will be able to:

- trace shifting definitions and bounds of obscenity and censorship in the social and legal realms
- articulate changing social values underlying censorship issues, such as decency or “good taste,” normative conceptions of sexuality, race, and gender; and religious beliefs
- describe and analyze various public and private mechanisms employed to facilitate the censorship of art and other forms of popular culture
- employ skill in critical reading and analysis of cultural products in order to make well-informed critiques
- conduct scholarly research that will generate a high quality written paper and a related oral presentation

**Types of Assignments:** Students will demonstrate their proficiencies in these areas through a combination of reading, writing, and classroom discussion. Written reading responses and discussion questions will ask students to engage critically with the assigned texts and display an adequate level of understanding by articulating well-reasoned conclusions about them. The research paper assignment will require students to delineate a particular topic, understand the existing literature on the subject, and offer a sound argument supported by relevant evidence. Students will also give an oral presentation based on the same research project. Students will do occasional in-class exercises and group work that asks them to reflect on and discuss media/cultural products, or articulate points of view about controversial or unresolved issues related to course content.

**Attendance Policy:** Students are expected to attend all scheduled class sessions. Each student is allowed one unexcused absence during the semester without penalty. Each unexcused absence beyond that will result in two lost percentage points on the final grade. If you miss class due to illness, family emergency, or some other unforeseeable reason, you should get an excuse from the Office of Dean of Students. Please refer to the Marshall University student handbook for the official policy on excused and unexcused absences. If possible, try to let one of us know ahead of time when you are gone and turn in missed assignments before your absence. It is fully the student's responsibility to arrange to make up missed assignments.

Tardiness is disruptive and disrespectful. Please be on time for class so as not to annoy your professors and fellow students. Attendance is taken at the beginning of class and anyone who is late for class will be considered absent for that class period. Laptop computers may be used to take notes, but cell phones and/or other electronic gadgets should be turned off and stored in your pocket or bag during class. Calls, text messaging, web surfing and similar activities are absolutely prohibited and the professor reserves the right to confiscate phones and other devices until the end of the class session. Disruptive students will be asked to leave the classroom.

Students should make every effort to be respectful of new and diverse beliefs and opinions during classroom discussions. We will read and discuss material that might challenge your political, religious, or cultural beliefs about controversial subjects. Discussions may be vigorous, but they will be civil; it is unacceptable to engage in abusive or intolerant conduct.

**Academic Dishonesty:** Students must do their own work. Cheating (which includes plagiarism, copying or borrowing the work of another person, or having someone else do your work) on any class assignment or exam means an automatic F for the course and may result in further discipline by the University. Please refer to the Marshall University academic dishonesty policy in the 2012-2013 undergraduate student handbook. Written assignments may be submitted to the Turnitin.com plagiarism prevention system for evaluation.

**Course Grades:** The grades in this seminar are based on your performance on one research paper, a presentation, classroom activities, and five short response paper assignments. Because this class works best when students are well prepared and take part in discussion, participation will also factor heavily into your final grade. Participation is based partly on
attendance but will also reflect the quality of the weekly discussion questions you post to Blackboard and how much you contribute to the class. Course grades break down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage of Final Grade</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Paper and presentation</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Papers</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
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</tbody>
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Course grades are based on an 8-point scale:

- A = 92-100%
- B = 85-91%
- C = 77-84%
- D = 70-76%
- F = Below 70%

**Research Paper**: Students will write a 12-15 page scholarly research paper on some issue or concept related to course topics and readings. Students have the freedom to select research topics according to their own interests, but topics must be approved and developed in consultation with the professors. The papers should be presented in MLA, APA, or Chicago Style and contain appropriate documentation and citation of source material. The paper is due December 13 and counts for 40% of the course grade.

**Response Papers**: Each student must hand in five response papers during the course of the semester. A response paper is a 600-700 word essay that discusses and analyzes the key issues and concepts in the week’s reading assignment. Papers can discuss the week’s readings broadly or focus on one (or several) of the individual readings. These papers are more than your personal opinion about the readings; good papers reflect a careful critical analysis of the methodology, argument, and relevance of the reading material. Students can decide which weekly reading assignments to write about, but they must turn in five papers before the end of the term. Response papers are graded on a 10-point scale. The point scores on the response papers will be turned into a percentage of the total available points (50) for the purpose of determining the final grade. Collectively they are worth 30% of the final course grade. Response papers and questions are due on the day when that week’s readings are covered in class. Late papers and questions are due on the day when that week’s readings are covered in class. Late papers and questions will not be accepted. Students not completing five papers will get zeros for each missing paper; they cannot be made up after the fact.

**Discussion Questions**: Every week, students will be expected to post two substantive discussion questions on Blackboard (these questions will count as part of your participation grade and should be posted by 6:00 pm the Wednesday before each class session). Good questions might have to do with links and relationships among the readings, unexplored areas related to the readings, weaknesses in method or analysis that should be addressed, or other similar topics. Your questions will be used to facilitate class discussion.

- Some tips: Questions that begin with “how” or “why” ask for explanations or analysis and tend to generate more discussion. Questions that identify controversies or contradictions also work well.

**E-mail Policy**: Please be in the habit of using your Marshall University e-mail address. Professors are required to use this address for any e-mail communication with students. All e-mail messages sent to the class list will be directed to your Marshall address and you are responsible for checking your mail regularly. Students should also recognize that e-mail is not a fully confidential forum; do not use e-mail to discuss grades or other personal issues that you would not wish to be made public.
This course follows all of the standard Marshall University policies on excused absences, inclement weather, students with disabilities, academic dishonesty and similar issues. All of these policy statements can be found by following the “Marshall University Policies” link on the MU Academic Affairs website at http://www.marshall.edu/academic-affairs/.

Weekly Schedule with Readings
(subject to change)

Week 1, Aug. 30 – Introduction

Week 2, Sept. 6 – The Victorian Mind


Week 3, Sept. 13 – Film Censorship before World War II


Week 4, Sept. 20 – Film Censorship before World War II


Week 5, Sept. 27 - Early 20th century – Interwar Arts


Week 6, Oct. 4 – Issues in Postwar America


Week 7, Oct. 11 – No Class (work on proposal and bibliography for final paper)

Week 8, Oct. 18 – Issues in Postwar America


Due: Proposal and preliminary bibliography for final paper.

Week 9, Oct. 25 – The Culture Wars and Gender Politics


Week 10, Nov. 1 – The Culture Wars: Rap, Race and Religion


Week 11, Nov. 8 - Obscenity and Censorship, Contemporary Issues
Readings TBA

Week 12, Nov. 15 – Obscenity and Censorship, Contemporary Issues
Readings TBA

Week 13, Nov. 22 – No Class, Fall Break

Week 14, Nov. 29 – Student Presentations

Week 15, Dec. 6 – Student Presentations

Final Session: Thursday, Dec. 13 @ 4:00

Due: Final paper
Conclusions/Discussion – How far have we come?