Consumer Culture in U.S. History, 1870s-1970s

Honors Seminar 480  
Fall 2011  
Thursday 4 – 6:20  
Old Main 230

Professor Rabe  
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Schedule & Readings:

http://mupfc.marshall.edu/~rabe/consumerculture.htm

Office Hours:

Monday, Wednesday  
8:30 - 11  
12:30 - 2

Thursday  
12 – 4

Required Texts (available at MU Bookstore):

Christina Cogdell, Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Elizabeth Fraterrigo, Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America (Oxford University Press, 2009).


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

Course Description: This honors course investigates the political, economic, and social influences of consumer culture as it emerged in the United States between the 1870s and the 1970s. The central idea is that the emergence of consumer culture has had a profound, though often misunderstood, influence on American history through shifts in the relationship between individuals and institutions, changing perceptions of identity, and altered patterns of behavior. The course examines the growth of consumer industries (mass production, mass marketing and advertising), the commercialization/commodification of leisure, consumer citizenship, product design as a means of modifying behavior, “middlebrow culture,” ideas about “the good life,” and the mechanisms by which identities are formed and re-formed via consumption. The course also examines the long-running critique of consumer culture that has been expressed in the arts, religious discourses, the social sciences, and the popular media.
Objectives: At the completion of this course, students will:

- understand basic theoretical and interpretive concepts used to discuss and analyze consumer culture and issues related to consumption
- have a solid basic understanding of major trends in the history of American advertising, marketing, and consumer history
- be able to assess political and economic changes related to the emergence and evolution of consumer culture in American history life
- be able to discuss intelligently the various ways that consumer culture has affected conceptions of citizenship, identity, and humankind's relationship with nature and the environment
- be familiar with major critiques of American consumer culture
- develop skills in critical reading and analysis of cultural products in order to make well-informed critiques
- demonstrate the ability to conduct scholarly research in the field of consumer culture studies and produce high quality written or multi-media projects
- have a foundation of knowledge and self-reflection necessary to make well-informed and historically-grounded decisions as a citizen consumer in the 21st century world

Students will demonstrate their proficiencies in these areas through a combination of reading, writing, and classroom discussion. Written assignments will ask students to engage critically with their texts and display an adequate level of understanding, as well as the ability to articulate well-reasoned conclusions about them. The research 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 do in-class exercises, and group work that asks them to reflect on their own media habits, interpret and discuss media/cultural products, or articulate points of view about controversial or unresolved issues related to course content. As much as possible, students will be asked to present what they have learned and contribute observations about their personal experiences to the class for analysis and discussion.

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 me 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 professor 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. Cell phones and other personal electronic devices should be turned off and stored in your pocket or bag during class. 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. It is possible that we will read and discuss material that challenges 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 during class.

This course follows the university’s policies on Affirmative Action, which can be found in the 2011-2012 undergraduate catalog. All students will be afforded equal opportunity without regard to race, color, sex, religion, age, disability, national origin, or sexual orientation.

**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 2011-2012 undergraduate student catalog. 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 bibliographic essay, one research paper, classroom activities, and eight 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 mostly be a reflection of how much you contribute to the class. Course grades break down as follows:

- **Bibliographic essay:** 20% of final grade
- **Research Paper:** 30% of final grade
- **Response Papers:** 30% of final grade
- **Participation:** 20% of final grade

Course grades are based on an 8-point scale:

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

**Bibliographic Essay:** Each student will prepare a 5-6 page bibliographic essay that discusses primary and secondary source material to be used in the final research paper. The assignment asks students to carefully consider the available sources and write about how they are useful and necessary to the project. The essays should also demonstrate a sound knowledge of how the sources inter-relate and help define the scholarly field of which they are a part. A more specific set of assignment guidelines will be distributed early in the semester. The essay is due October 27 and is worth 20% of the course grade.

**Research Paper:** Students will write a 12-15 page scholarly research paper on some issue or concept related to the study of consumer culture in American history. Students have freedom to select research topics according to their own interests, but topics must be approved and developed in consultation with the professor. The papers should be presented in MLA, APA, or Chicago Style and contain appropriate documentation and citation of source material, as well as an annotated list of sources. The paper is due December 1 and counts for 30% of the course grade.

**Response Papers and Discussion Questions:** Each student must hand in *eight* 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. Each paper should also include a set of 4-5 meaningful questions, drawn from the readings, that will be used to spur discussion during class sessions. 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 eight 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 (80) 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 will not be accepted. Students not completing eight papers will get zeros for each missing paper; they cannot be made up after the fact.

**In-Class Assignments:** Each student will select one reading during the semester and lead class discussion on the issues and ideas it contains. There may also be several short in-class assignments, which might require small group participation, that ask you to make a short oral or written report on some cultural practice or product, or an issue related to the week’s readings and lecture topics. These activities will take place in class and cannot be made up. They contribute to the participation grade.

**Bibliography annotations:** I have been maintaining an online bibliography of sources related to the history of advertising and consumer history for a number of years. Students are encouraged to contribute to the site by bringing new books, articles or other material to my attention or by writing short annotations of the sources already listed on the site. I am particularly interested in creating a new category of online scholarly sources, but any kind of relevant scholarly material is great. The website can be found at: [http://mupfc.marshall.edu/~rabe/adindex.htm](http://mupfc.marshall.edu/~rabe/adindex.htm). Students who contribute to the site can expect extra participation points.

**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.

**Policy for Students with Disabilities:** Marshall University is committed to equal opportunity in education for all students, including those with physical, learning and psychological disabilities. It is the responsibility of students with disabilities to contact the Office of Disabled Student Services (DSS) in Prichard Hall 117 to provide documentation of their disability. The DSS Coordinator will send a letter to the student’s instructor outlining the academic accommodation he/she will need to ensure equality in classroom experiences, outside assignment, testing and grading. The instructor and student will meet to discuss how the accommodation(s) requested will be provided. For more information, please visit [http://www.marshall.edu/disabled](http://www.marshall.edu/disabled) or contact Disabled Student Services Office at Prichard Hall 11, phone 304-696-2271.
Course Schedule: (Subject to change)

Reading assignments should be completed before class to facilitate high quality class discussion each Thursday.

**Week 1 (August 25)**

Course overview and introductions

**Week 2 (Sept. 1)** - Definitions and approaches to studying consumer culture


**Week 3 (Sept. 8)** - Mass production, advertising, and the new world of goods


**Week 4 (Sept. 15)** - Palaces of consumption and the rise of shopping

- Abelson, Elaine S. “Shoplifting Ladies,” in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*

**Week 5 (Sept. 22)** - The commercialization of leisure I


**Week 6 (Sept. 29)** - The commercialization of leisure II


**Week 7 (Oct. 6)** - Pocketbook politics and consumer citizenship

Week 8 (Oct. 13) - Eugenics, consumption, and the ideal modern American


Week 9 (Oct. 20) - Race/Gender issues in consumer culture I

From *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*:

- Heinze, “Jewish Woman and the Making of an American Home.”
- Chauncey, “Lots of Friends at the YMCA.”
- Gelber, “Do-it-Yourself.”
- Scanlon, “Advertising Women.”

Week 10 (Oct. 27) - Race/Gender issues in consumer culture II

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY DUE

From *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*:

- Breazeale, “In Spite of Women.”
- Barnes, “Face of the Nation.”

Week 11 (Nov. 3) - Race/Gender issues in consumer culture III

From *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*:

- Steele, “Reduced to Images.”
- McClintock, “Soft-Soaping Empire.”
- Cosgrove, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare.”
- Weems, “Consumerism and the Construction of Black Female Identity.”

Week 12 (Nov. 10) - Consumer culture in war and cold war:

**Week 13 (Nov. 17) - Consumer culture triumphant?**

- Cohen, Lizabeth. “From Town Center to Shopping Center,” in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*.

**Week 14 (Nov. 24) - NO CLASS  FALL BREAK**

**Week 15 (Dec. 1) - Postwar men and the “good life”**

**RESEARCH PAPERS DUE**


**Final Session (Dec. 8)**

Course wrap up and final thoughts.