

AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II

History 337W/437
W 2-4.40
RR 456
Fall 2012



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Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. . . . Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.

-Franklin D. Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," 3 March 1933

This seminar is an investigation of American cultural life during the Great Depression and Second World War (1929-1945). The emphasis is on the interpretation of primary sources, particularly literature and film, as clues to the meanings at stake in the ideas, values, and signifying practices of this pivotal period in the history of the United States.

BOOKS

Most of the following books have been ordered at the UR Bookstore, and all are available at Amazon (at reduced prices). They are also on 2-hour reserve in Rush Rhees Library.

Michael Adams, [The Best War Ever](#)
Stanley Applebaum, ed., [The New York World's Fair 1939/40](#)
Raymond Chandler, [The Big Sleep](#)
William Faulkner, [Absalom, Absalom!](#)
David Gelernter, [1939: The Lost World of the Fair](#)
Bruce Lenthall, [Radio's America](#)
Lawrence and Cornelia Levine, ed., [The Fireside Conversations](#).
Mary McCarthy, [The Company She Keeps](#)
Mary McCarthy, [Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936-1938](#)

Jeffrey Meikle, Twentieth-Century Limited
 John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath
 Studs Terkel, The "Good War"
 Nathanael West, A Cool Million
 Richard Wright, Native Son
 Philip Wylie, Generation of Vipers

Shorter readings are on electronic reserve via Blackboard. Two general cultural histories of the period, Michael Denning, The Cultural Front and Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, are highly recommended, but not required reading.

MOVIES

Movies are an important part of this course, as they were of the culture of the Depression and World War II. Screenings of the course films will be held on Mondays at 7.40 in Meliora 208 as follows. Most of these movies are also readily available on DVD or from Netflix.

10 September Grapes of Wrath
 17 September Plow that Broke the Plains and The River
 24 September Citizen Kane
 1 October Christmas in July
 8 October Gone with the Wind
 15 October Porgy and Bess
 22 October The Women
 29 October Gold Diggers of 1933
 5 November Shall We Dance?
 12 November The City
 26 November Double Indemnity
 3 December Hail the Conquering Hero
 10 December Best Years of Our Lives



COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Class Meetings: All students are expected to attend and actively participate in the weekly seminar discussions.

Movie Guides: Every week, by noon Monday of that week, one or more students will provide the rest of the class with a brief guide to the week's movie. In composing these guides, you may find useful the helpful guide to film reference works prepared by librarian Nora Dimmock: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=332>

Discussion Questions: Each week each student will prepare two questions for discussion, one on the document, the other on the movie. These questions will be sent to all members of the class via e-mail by 10 pm on the Tuesday evening before class. Preparation of these questions will be an important part of participation in the class.

Papers: Every student will write three papers of modest length. The first two of these papers (1500 words) will be critical essays, one on a major course document and the other on a course movie. These papers are due the week the document or the movie is assigned. Every student must have completed one of these papers by 3 October and the other by 7 November. The third, somewhat longer paper (2000-3000 words), one requiring a good measure of research, will be a critical introduction to a document in the cultural history of the period not assigned in the course. This may be a book, a movie, a radio show, a building, or any other sort of significant document of your choosing. Due 12 December.

In addition to the three short papers described above, each graduate student, will write an essay review (2000-3000 words) of the sort that might be published in Reviews in American History of one (or more) books on the cultural history of the period, chosen from the attached list. If they wish, undergraduates may write this paper in lieu of one of the two critical essays. Due 28 November.

GRADING

Grading in the course will be weighted as follows: Undergraduates: short papers (20% each); longer paper (40%); class participation (20%). Graduate Students: short papers (15% each); longer paper (30%); book review (20%); class participation (20%).

CLASS MEETINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

5 SEPTEMBER INTRODUCTION

Recommended: Warren Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties"
Lawrence Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression"
Susan Smulyan, Popular Ideologies, Introduction
Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 3-12



Purple Rose of Cairo (in class)

12 SEPTEMBER DOWN AND OUT

John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath
♪ Woody Guthrie, Dust Bowl Ballads (audio streamed on electronic reserve)

Recommended: Michael Denning, The Cultural Front, 259-282
Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 70-153, 522-530

Movie: Grapes of Wrath

19 SEPTEMBER NEW DEAL

Lawrence and Cornelia Levine, ed., The Fireside Conversations.
 Michael Bernstein, "Why the Depression Was Great"
 David Kennedy, "What the New Deal Did"
 Jefferson Cowrie and Nick Salvatore, "The Long Exception"

Movies: Pere Lorentz, Plow that Broke the Plains and The River

26 SEPTEMBER POPULAR FRONT

John Dos Passos, The Big Money
 ♪Paul Robeson, "Ballad for Americans"

Recommended: Michael Denning, The Cultural Front, xiii-xx, 3-114,
 163-199, 362-402, 423-462
 Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 342-354, 441-463, 477-506

Movie: Citizen Kane

**3 OCTOBER LITTLE MAN, WHAT NOW?**

Nathanael West, A Cool Million
 Dale Carnegie, How to Win Friends and Influence People,

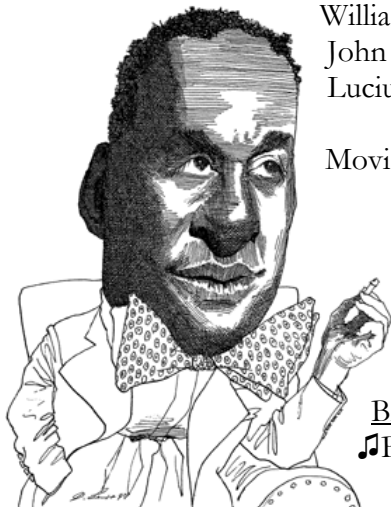
Recommended: Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 215-310

Movie: Christmas in July

**10 OCTOBER THE BURDEN OF SOUTHERN HISTORY**

William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!
 John Donald Wade, "The Life and Death of Cousin
 Lucius" in Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand

Movie: Gone with the Wind

**17 OCTOBER AMERICAN DILEMMA**

Richard Wright, Native Son
 Richard Wright, "Introduction" to St.Clair Drake and Horace Cayton,
Black Metropolis
 ♪Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit"

Recommended: Michael Denning, The Cultural Front, 323-361
 Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 173-211, 464-476

Movie: Porgy and Bess



24 OCTOBER FAST TALKING DAMES

Mary McCarthy, The Company She Keeps
 Mary McCarthy, Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936-1938

♪Duke Ellington, "Sophisticated Lady"

Movie: The Women

31 OCTOBER SOUNDTRACK

Bruce Lenthall, Radio's America

♪Bing Crosby, "Dancing in the Dark," "Stardust,"

"Pennies from Heaven"

♪Duke Ellington, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got that Swing," "Mood Inigo," "Take the A Train"

♪Benny Goodman, "One O'Clock Jump," "Sing, Sing, Sing"

♪Aaron Copland, "Fanfare for the Common Man," "Appalachian Spring"

Alex Ross, "Music for All"

Recommended: Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 408-438

Michael Denning, The Cultural Front, 283-322

♪Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall, 1938

Movie: Gold Diggers of 1933

7 NOVEMBER STREAMLINED ELEGANCE

Jeffrey Meikle, Twentieth-Century Limited

John Mueller, Astaire Dancing, 114-125

Recommended: Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark, 357-407

Movie: Shall We Dance?

14 NOVEMBER TOMORROWLAND

Stanley Applebaum, ed., The New York World's Fair 1939/40



David Gelernter, 1939: The Lost World of the Fair
 Warren Susman, "The People's Fair"

Movie: The City

21 NOVEMBER

NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING



the Conquering Hero

28 NOVEMBER LA NOIR

Raymond Chandler, The Big Sleep
 James M. Cain, "Paradise"
 Philip Hanson, "The Arc of National Confidence and the
 Birth of Film Noir"

Movie: Double Indemnity

5 DECEMBER THE GOOD WAR

Studs Terkel, The "Good War", pp. 3-107, 198-203, 207-211,
 277-282, 366-372, 561-573
 Michael Adams, The Best War Ever

Movie: Hail

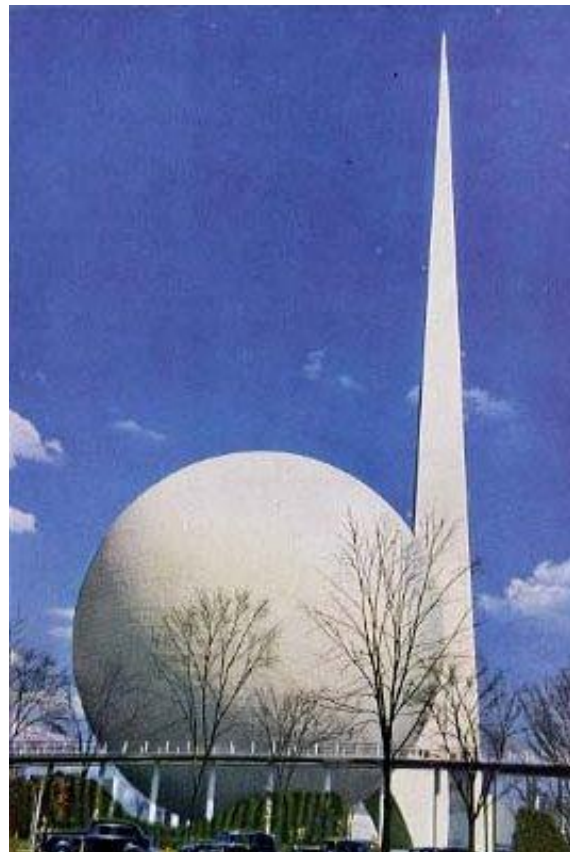
12 DECEMBER

HOME FRONT

Studs Terkel, The "Good War", 108-185,
 301-349, 574-589
 Philip Wylie, Generation of Vipers

Movie: Best Years of Our Lives

Recommended: Michael Denning, The
 Cultural Front, 463-472



HIS 437
BOOKS FOR REVIEW

Raymond Arsenault, The Sound of Freedom
 Ehrhard Bahr, Weimar on the Pacific
 Jeanine Basinger, The World War II Combat Film
 Andrew Bergman, We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films
 Sheri Biesen, Blackout
 John Blum, V Was for Victory
 Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest
 Laura Browder, Rousing the Nation
 Raymond Carney, American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra
 Stanley Cavell, Pursuits of Happiness
 Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal
 Peter Conn, The American 1930s: A Literary History
 Terry Cooney, Balancing Acts
 _____, The Rise of the New York Intellectuals
 James Curtis, Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered
 Michael Denning, The Cultural Front
 Maria DiBattista, Fast-Talking Dames
 Morris Dickstein, Dancing in the Dark
 Thomas Doherty, Projections of War
 Erika Doss, Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism
 Lewis Erenberg, Swingin' the Dream
 John Diggins, Up from Communism
 John Dower, War Without Mercy
 Barbara Foley, Radical Representations
 Paul Fussell, Wartime
 Gary Giddens, Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams
 Alice Goldfarb, Hopes and Ashes
 Linda Gordon, Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits
 David Goodman, Radio's Civic Ambition
 James Goodman, Stories of Scottsboro
 William Graebner, The Age of Doubt
 James Gregory, American Exodus
 Molly Haskell, Frankly, My Dear
 Joseph Horowitz, Understanding Toscanini
 David Jenemann, Adorno in America
 John Jordan, Machine-Age Ideology
 Elizabeth Kendall, Runaway Bride
 Richard King, A Southern Renaissance
 Joe Klein, Woody Guthrie
 Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, Hollywood Goes to War
 Judith Kutulas, The Long War
 Peter La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie
 Alan Lawson, A Commonwealth of Hope

Sean McCann, Gumshoe America
Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream
Karl Ann Marling, Wall-to-Wall America
Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture
James Murphy, The Proletarian Moment
David Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet
Richard Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams
David Plotke, Building a Democratic Political Order
Dana Polan, Power and Paranoia
Paula Rabinowitz, Labor and Desire
George Roeder, Jr., The Censored War
Barbara Savage, Broadcasting Freedom
Thomas Schatz, The Genius of the System
Amity Shlaes, The Forgotten Man
Robert Shulman, The Power of Political Art
Daniel Singal, The War Within
Lauren Sklaroff, Black Culture and the New Deal
Wendy Smith, Real Life Drama
Michael Staub, Voices of Persuasion
Catherine Stock, Main Street in Crisis
William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America
David Stowe, Swing Changes
Gregory Sumner, Dwight Macdonald and the Politics Circle
Michael Szalay, New Deal Modernism
Robert Vanderlan, Intellectuals Incorporated
Alan Wald, Exiles from a Future Time
_____, Trinity of Passion
Heather Warren, Theologians of a New World Order
David Welky, Everything Was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression
Donald Worster, Dust Bowl