

History 213: Jews and American Popular Culture

University of Wisconsin, Madison
Spring 2017
Tuesday-Thursday, 1:00-2:15
Humanities 1641

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Description

This course explores the interplay between Jews and U. S. popular culture, covering such subjects as early 20th century vaudeville, the "golden age" of Hollywood, rhythm and blues music, television, and stand-up comedy. It uses lectures, films, music, and readings to explore the development of American popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries through the experiences of Jews, as performers, writers, and businesspeople. Using Jews as the primary, though not only, case, the course examines themes in the history of immigration, race, Americanization, youth culture, and business. By examining processes of cultural integration and differentiation of Jews in US society, the course attempts to address broad questions about the nature of American national identity.

Learning Outcomes

A major objective of this course is the development of critical analytical skills, that is, the ability to formulate and examine questions as they relate to the course topics. As students of American culture, we will *not* ask whether any given form of entertainment—film, music, theatre, comedy, etc.—is good or bad, funny or offensive, enjoyable or dull. These considerations are surely relevant questions in determining personal preferences, but they do not necessarily help us understand culture as a phenomenon. Instead, we will ask why forms of culture arose when they did, how people responded to them, and how they help us understand the development of American culture, and the role of Jews and other minority groups, especially African Americans, in that process.

Culture, by its nature, does not lend itself to objective measurement; for this reason, rigorous analysis is all the more necessary in order to understand it. Our goal is to learn how to use evidence and logical argumentation to understand culture. Our premise is that culture requires serious consideration, no less than science, business, politics, or any

other aspect of human civilization. Indeed, as we will see, culture is intertwined with these other realms of society. How to understand culture in relation to society is an objective of this course.

Finally, attainment of knowledge is a central goal of this course. This requires mastery of the information in the readings, lectures, and other course materials, in addition to the concepts that help us understand that information. The departure point for this course is a single premise: that for a host of historical reasons Jews played central roles (in both the creative and commercial realms) in the development of American culture, but did so in conjunction with members of other minority groups, African Americans most significantly. Thus, a main purpose of the course is to explore how multiple cultures infused what was known as American culture, even in ways that were not readily apparent.

Readings

The course packet will be available for purchase from the Social Science Copy Center (Sewell Hall, Room 6120, 1180 Observatory Drive)

Course Requirements

You are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Failure to participate *actively* in each and every discussion section will result in a failing grade for participation (see below). The assigned reading should be completed in time for your discussion section. The Teaching Assistant will give you a separate sheet explaining the requirements (which may include brief assignments) for sections. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please speak with the Teaching Assistant or me. Finally, computers or any other electronic devices are not permitted during lectures and discussions.

You will have three assignments due on the following dates:

Midterm exam: Feb. 23

First Assignment: March 16

Final assignment: May 9

Warning: we reserve the right to give pop quizzes.

Note: Prior to your discussion sections on March 15, you are required to watch the film "Gentleman's Agreement" (1947) outside of class. See Week 9 below for more information.

The breakdown of grades is as follows:

Participation and attendance: 20%

Midterm: 25%

First assignment (5 pages): 25%

Final assignment (10 pages): 30%

Unit 1: From Stage to Screen

Week 1 (Jan. 17-19): Jews in American Culture: Connections and Questions

Leora Auslander, "The Boundaries of Jewishness, or When Is a Cultural Practice Jewish?" *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* vol. 8, no. 1 (March 2009): pp. 47-64.

Week 2 (Jan. 24-26): The Yiddish Word

Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 69-124.

Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), pp. 3-43, 78-81.

Week 3 (Jan 31-Feb. 2): The Yiddish Stage

Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 91-221.

Week 4 (Feb. 7-9): The Hollywood Question

Larry May and Elain Tyler May, "Why Jewish Movie Moguls? An Exploration in American Culture," *American Jewish History* (Sept. 1982): 6-25.

Steven Carr, *Hollywood & Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 1-93.

Week 5: (Feb. 14-16) *The Jazz Singer*

Michael Rogin, "Black Sacrifice, Jewish Redemption," in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century*, eds. V. P. Franklin, et. al. (Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998), pp. 87-101.

Charles Musser, "Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture," *Film History* vol. 23, no. 2 (2011): 196-222.

Unit 2: Between Black and White: Jews and American Popular Music

Week 6 (Feb. 21-23): The Jazz Age

Midterm: Feb 23

Jonathan Karp, "Of Maestros and Minstrels: American Jewish Composers between Black Vernacular and European Art Music," in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, pp. 57-78.

Charles Hersch, "'Every Time I Try to Play Black, It Comes out Sounding Jewish': Jewish Jazz Musicians and Racial Identity," *American Jewish History*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (July 2013): 259-282.

Week 7 (Feb. 28-March 2): From Rhythm & Blues to Rock & Roll

Jonathan Karp, "Blacks, Jews, and the Business of Race Music, 1945-1955," in *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism*, ed. Rebecca Kobrin, (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 141-167.

Jonathan Karp, "Brokering a Rock & Roll International: Jewish Record Men in America

and Britain,” in *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History*, eds. Rebecca Kobrin and Adam Teller (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015): 125-152.
Ken Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air: The Bomp and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era* (Viking, 2005), pp. ix-xvi, 1-91, 121-140.

Week 8 (March 7-9): The Rock Revolution

David Kaufman, *Jewhooing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 155-211.

Ellen Willis, “Velvet Underground” in *Beginning to See the Light: Sex, Hope, and Rock-and-Roll* (Univ. of Minnesota Press edition, 2012 [1982]), pp. 110-124.

Unit 3: Into the Mainstream

Week 9 (March 14-16): Post-War Film

Assignment due: March 16

Note: You are required to watch the film “Gentleman’s Agreement”(1947) outside of class. Check the State Historical Society for availability. Video rental stores, such as Four Star Video might have it. You may also view it for \$2.99 via You Tube, iTunes, and Amazon Video. The film is 2 hours long, so make sure you leave sufficient time to watch it in advance of your discussion sections.

Eric A. Goldman, *The American Jewish Story through Cinema* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2013), pp. 50-96.

Matthew Silver, *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel’s Founding Story* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 109-149.

Week 10 (March 21-23): Spring Break

Week 11 (March 28-30): Funny Girls

Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 43-67.

June Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbara Streisand: Jewish Women Entertainers as Reformers,” in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Brandeis Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 68-84.

Neil Gabler, *Barbara Streisand: Redefining Beauty, Femininity, and Power* (Yale Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 1-30, 60-83, 103-167.

Week 12 (April 4-6): Stand-Up Comedy

Elliot Oring, “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct. 1983): 261-271.

David E. Kaufman, *Jewhooing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 99-154.

Week 13 (April 11-13): The Schlemiel as Filmmaker

Abrams, *The New Jew in Film*, pp. 19-42.

Mark Schechner, “Woody Allen: The Failure of the Therapeutic,” in *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen

(Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 231-244.
Sanford Pinsker, "Woody Allen's Loveably Anxious 'Schlemeils'," *Studies in American Humor* (Summer, Fall 1986): 177-189.
Leonard Quart, "Woody Allen's New York," *Cineaste* (1992): 16-19.
Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, "The Catskills Reinvented (and Redeemed): Woody Allen's 'Broadway Danny Rose,'" *The Kenyon Review* (Summer-Autumn 2003): 264-281.

Unit 4: The Multi-Cultural Era

Week 14 (April 18-20): "Will It Play in Peoria?"

Donald Weber, "Taking Jewish American Popular Culture Seriously: The Yinglish Worlds of Gertrude Berg, Milton Berle, and Mickey Katz," *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (Autumn 1998-Winter 1999): 124-153.
Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got Berg-larized in the Process)," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Summer, 1999): 45-67.
David Zurawick, *The Jews of Prime Time* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 78-103.

Week 15 (April 25-27): The Jewish Return to Television

Vincent Brook, "Bring in the Klowns: Jewish Television Comedy since the 1960s," in *Jews and American Popular Culture*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Buhle, (Praeger, 2007), pp. 237-256.
Zurawick, *The Jews of Prime Time*, pp. 201-217.
Jerrod Tanny, "Decoding Seinfeld's Jewishness," in *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World. Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. Eds, Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel Finder (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016): 53-74.

Week 16 (May 2-4): Jews and Difference in the Twenty-First Century

Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "How Jill Soloway Created 'Transparent'—Jewiest Show Ever," *Forward* (Oct. 21, 2014).
Ariel Levy, "Dolls and Feelings: Jill Soloway's Post-Patriarchal Television," *The New Yorker* (Dec. 14, 2015).
Jonathan Freedman, "'Transparent': A Guide to the Perplexed," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (April 10, 2016).

Final assignment due: May 9.