

UM-SJTU Joint Institute
VR205 American Ways: US Culture
Summer 2015

Instructor: Dr. Pamela Mansutti

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Office Hours: Monday 11:00am-12:00pm - Wednesday 11:00am-12:00pm - or by appointment.

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Location: Yuliming Center

Course Description

What do we mean by “American culture”? What are the political and philosophical foundations of the US nation and who are the most important public figures in American cultural history? This course will introduce students to the most prominent American scholars and writers from the 19th century to the present, and it will explore concepts and ideas that are traditionally celebrated and deployed by American culture, such as *independence*, *individualism*, *frontier*, *freedom*, *optimism* and many others. The course will examine a variety of texts, from political essays to novellas, from Presidential speeches to short stories, from movies to visual artifacts, with the purpose of clarifying what these concepts mean historically, why they are so important, how they have evolved. At the same time, the course will also highlight how ideas of *racism*, *war*, and *exceptionalism* among others characterize the most powerful country in the Western world.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will

- have learned the fundamental philosophical and political concepts in American culture
- know a variety of texts and genres from American literature and culture
- be able to analyze verbal and visual texts in the US cultural production
- develop an appreciative and at the same time critical stance toward ideas, artifacts and texts from US culture
- be able to articulate an original point of view about one aspect of American culture

Honor Code

You MUST refer to the 2014 UM-SJTU Joint Institute Undergraduate Student Handbook, Sections 8 and 9, for a description of what acceptable academic conduct is. In particular for this course,

- “it is dishonorable for students to receive credit for work that is not the result of their own efforts” (2014 USH, 32).
- “Plagiarism is taken extremely seriously at JI. A student is required to follow the rules of citation and attribution as set down by the instructor.” The following list includes some specific examples of plagiarism:
 - Use of any passage of three words or longer from another source without proper

attribution. Use of any phrase of three words or more must be enclosed in quotation marks (“example, example, example”). □

□ Use of material from an uncredited source, making very minor changes (like word order or verb tense) to avoid the three-word rule. □

□ Inclusion of facts, data, ideas or theories originally thought of by someone else, without giving that person (organization, etc.) credit. □

□ Paraphrasing of ideas or theories without crediting the original thinker.” (2014 USH, 33).

Course Policies and Expectations

Use **MLA format** for all assignments. **Late penalties:** one letter grade will be deducted for late assignments. Assignments will not be accepted for marking one week after the due date. **Extensions** will only be given in exceptional circumstances (personal illness or family emergency, with proper documentation). **Expectations:** in general, students are expected to attend classes and participate, be polite, help classmates when needed, manage their schedule, speak English during class time and office hours with instructor and TAs, avoid plagiarism. Students must turn off electronic devices in class and concentrate on the lecture. Do not email your instructor asking for feedback in the 24 hours before an assignment is due. To dispute a grade, students must wait 24h before emailing the instructor. You are encouraged to consult your instructor or TAs whenever you have any doubt or question.

Course Material

Provided by the instructor – check Sakai regularly for updated information and resources.

Assignments and Value

- **Attendance and Participation 10%**
- **Midterm Exam 20%**
- **Presentations 20%**
- **4 Critical responses @ 5% each = 20%**
- **Research Essay 30%**

Attendance and Participation 10%

You MUST refer to the 2014 UM-SJTU Joint Institute Undergraduate Student Handbook, Section, 8.6.4., for attendance and absences. In VR205, you will get 7/10 if you attend all classes. To get extra points for participation, you are expected to attend class regularly, do the weekly readings, contribute to class discussion and be able to engage critically with the texts we will analyze. Also, your grade will come from the questions you will ask during lectures and presentations, from consultation with the instructor/TA, and from any group work in class.

Midterm Exam 20%

Scheduled on **Monday, June 15th**. It will cover all the material discussed in class up to that date.

Presentations 20%

Every Wednesday (unless schedule changes) starting from Week 4, two group presentations will take place in class. You will give a 20min. group presentation on a topic that you may choose from a range proposed by your instructor. **TWO DAYS BEFORE** the presentation due date, you will submit to your instructor a synopsis of your project that will be posted on Sakai, so that the rest of the class can come prepared with questions on the day of your in-class presentation. More details on this assignment will follow in Week 2, when you will be asked to sign up for a specific topic and presentation date.

Four critical responses @ 5% each = 20%

Multiple due dates, week by week. Throughout the semester, you will submit 4 critical responses on a text, a quotation, a visual artifact, a concept/idea, a political speech, etc... that we will have analyzed in class. You will present your critical understanding of such text in a crystal-clear, concise prose. The response must be **ONE PAGE** long (200-300 words), **DOUBLE-SPACED**. It is up to you to decide when to submit your responses based on the proposed reading schedule.

Research Essay 30%

The major assignment in VR205 **due on the final day of classes, July 29th**. Topics will be distributed earlier in class. You are allowed to develop your own topic, but you must see me for approval before you start working on the essay. Failure to do so will result in penalties on your final grade. For this essay, you will need to use at least **TWO** critical sources to be listed in a Works Cited page, following MLA style. Criteria for evaluation are written style, clarity of thought, coherence of argument, formal organization, quality of the evidence provided, comprehension of texts and concepts.

Final course grades will be assigned as follows:

Final average	Course grade	Final average	Course grade
98% and above	A+	77% and above	C+
93% and above	A	73% and above	C
90% and above	A-	70% and above	C-
87% and above	B+	60% and above	D
83% and above	B	59.9 and below	F
80% and above	B-		

Reading Schedule (may be subject to changes)

Class Dates	Texts for Class Discussion – Readings due	Assignments & Important Notes
<p>Week One May 11th – 13th – 15th</p>	<p>Fundamentals of US cultural and political thought</p> <p>Declaration of Independence and US Constitution</p> <p>Alexis de Tocqueville’s <i>Democracy in America</i></p>	<p>First day of class: Introduction /Orientation and syllabus presentation</p>
<p>Week Two May 18th - 20th</p>	<p>Alexis de Tocqueville’s <i>Democracy in America</i></p> <p>Selection of Walt Whitman’s Poems</p>	<p>Critical response: Tocqueville’s <i>Democracy in America</i> OR Walt Whitman’s Poems</p> <p>Sign up for oral presentations</p>
<p>Week Three May 25th – 27th - 29th</p>	<p>Henry David Thoreau’s <i>Civil Disobedience</i></p> <p>Film screening: <i>Into the Wild</i> (2007)</p>	<p>Critical response: Thoreau’s <i>Civil Disobedience</i></p>
<p>Week Four June 1st – 3rd</p>	<p>Melville’s <i>Bartleby the Scrivener</i></p>	<p>Critical response: Melville’s <i>Bartleby the Scrivener</i></p> <p>PRESENTATIONS</p> <p>Wednesday, June 3rd:</p> <p>GROUPS 1 & 2</p>
<p>Week Five June 8th – 10th – 12th</p>	<p>The Frontier and the American Dream</p> <p>Selected passages from F. J. Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”</p> <p>Gatsby and the Roaring Twenties</p> <p>Joshua Zeitz’s “F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Age of Excess”</p> <p>Wrap-up Group Discussion</p>	

Week Six June 15th – 17th		Midterm Exam Monday, June 15th PRESENTATIONS Wednesday, June 17 th : GROUPS 3 & 4
Class Dates	Texts for Class Discussion – Reading due	Assignments & Important Notes
Week Seven 22nd NATIONAL HOLIDAY, no class June 24th – 26th	Presidential Rhetoric Speeches by Lincoln, Roosevelt, Johnson and Reagan	Critical Response on a Presidential Speech
Week Eight June 29th July 1st	Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement (1960) Selection of Langston Hughes' Poems Tony Morrison's "Recitatif"	Critical Response: Tony Morrison's "Recitatif" OR Langston Hughes' Poems PRESENTATIONS Wednesday, July 1 st : GROUPS 5 & 6
Week Nine July 6th – 8th – 10th	Arts and Architecture in the US Analysis of architectural projects by Frank Lloyd Wright and Robert Venturi Andy Warhol, Postmodernism and Celebrity Culture Film Screening	Critical Response on an architectural project OR a postmodern artifact PRESENTATIONS Wednesday, July 8 th : GROUPS 7 & 8
Week Ten July 13th – 15th	Andy Warhol, Postmodernism and Celebrity Culture (cont.d) Science Fiction, Comics and Superheroes Selected passages from Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman"	Critical Response on a postmodern OR a Sci-fi/comic artifact PRESENTATIONS Wednesday, July 15 th : GROUPS 9 & 10
Week Eleven July 20th – 22nd – 24th	US Wars and 9/11 Selection of Newspaper/Magazine Headlines and Articles The Myth of the West Sam Shepard's <i>True West</i>	Critical Response on a news article Individual feedback on essay drafts on Friday, July 24th

Week Twelve July 27th – 29th	The Myth of the West Sam Shepard's <i>True West</i>	Critical Response on <i>True West</i> Final Research Essay Due Wednesday, July 29th
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