

Professor Marilyn Halter
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Spring, 2014

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HI 282

The Modern American Consumer

Wednesday, 3-6 pm, CAS Rm. 314

In this class we look at the history of consumer society in modern America addressing such questions as: When did the U. S. become a consumer society or has it always been one? Were Americans born to shop? Did they learn to do so or were they coerced? Do we control consumer culture or does it control us? In some ways, these questions strike at the heart of understanding our American national identity as well. Although we will briefly consider the roots of American commercialism, consumer culture was so transformed in the late nineteenth century that the primary focus will be on the period between 1880 and the present. Topics include the development and rise of mass marketing, product brands, advertising, department stores and shopping malls, commercialized leisure and shoppertainment as well as explorations that address the relationship of consumerism to gender, ethnicity, race, social class, religion and youth. We will also examine the history of consumer politics as well as critiques of consumer culture.

Required Books:

Lawrence Glickman, ed. *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*
William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*
John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*

In addition to the required texts, the assigned articles, book excerpts and other documents are available through (1) our **Blackboard Learn** website or (2) **Mugar Library electronic course reserves**: www.bu.edu/library/bi/reserve/index.html -- These readings are listed on the syllabus with (reserve) written after them.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Response Papers (30% of final grade)

Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to write six 2-page response papers related to that week's readings. They may only be submitted on the day they are due. The specific response topic will be announced in class and posted on the website the week before it is due.

Midterm Exam (35%)

Final Paper (35%)

An 8-10 page essay using secondary sources from our required reading to analyze primary source material that you have researched. You will receive further instructions in class concerning the final paper assignment. A short paper proposal will need to be submitted for approval by class time on April 23. The final paper is due by noon on Monday, May 5. Late papers will be marked down one-third of a letter grade per day.

Class Participation

Attendance is mandatory and participation is expected. You therefore need to keep up with the schedule of course readings as outlined in the syllabus, completing the reading assignments **by class time on each day that they are listed as due**. Active participation not only will help you to learn, but it could also be a deciding factor in your final grade. For example, if you have earned a B+ for the course but are close to an A- and you have been a fully involved participant in class discussions, I will bump you up to the higher grade.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is the passing off of another's words or ideas as your own, and it is a serious academic offense. Cases of plagiarism will be handled in accordance with the disciplinary procedures described in the Boston University Academic Conduct Code:

<http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>

CLASS SCHEDULE

Jan. 15 **Introduction: Born to Shop?**

Jan. 22 **The Roots of American Consumer Society**

Readings:

- Glickman: 1-32 & 85-129

Due: Response Paper #1

Jan. 29 **Advertising the American Dream**

Readings:

- Roland Marchand, Chapter 1, "Apostles of Modernity" and Chapter 7, "The Great Parables" in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (1985): 1-24 & 206-284 (reserve)

Due: Response Paper #2

Feb. 5 **The Brand Expands**

Readings:

- Susan Strasser, Chapter 2, "The Name on the Label" in *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (1989): 29-57 (reserve)
- Karen L. Cox, "Branding Dixie: The Selling of the American South, 1890-1930" in Anthony Stanonis, ed. *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South* (2008): 50-68 (reserve)

Feb. 12 **The Rise of the Department Store**

Readings:

- Leach, *Land of Desire*, Introduction and Chapters 1-6, 10 and 11

Due: Response Paper #3

Feb. 19 (No Class—Monday Schedule)

Feb. 26 **Gender and Modernity**

Readings:

- Glickman: 207-240
- Elaine Abelson, Chapter 6, “Shoplifting Ladies” in *When Ladies go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (1998): 148-172

Screening: *The Kleptomaniac*

Due: Response Paper #4

March 5 **Race, Ethnicity and the Consumer I**

Readings:

- Glickman: 170-206
- Jeffrey Steele, “Reduced to Images: American Indians in Nineteenth-Century Advertising” in Jennifer Scanlon, ed. *Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* (2000): 109-128 (reserve)

March 12 No Class – Spring Break

March 19 **Commercialized Leisure**

Readings:

- Kasson, *Amusing the Million*
- Janet Wasko, “Dissecting Disney’s Worlds” in *Understanding Disney* (2001): 153-182

Screening: *Coney Island*

Due: Response Paper #5

March 26 **Midterm**

April 2 **Race, Ethnicity and the Consumer II**

Readings:

- Glickman: 241-273 & 316-325
- Stuart Cosgrove, “Zoot Suit and Style Warfare” in Jennifer Scanlon, ed. *Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* (2000): 342-354

Due: Response Paper #6

April 9 **Born to Buy**

Readings:

- Lisa Jacobson, Introduction and Chapter One, ““Big Sales from Little Folks’: The Development of Juvenile Advertising” and Chapter Three, “Heroes of the New Consumer Age: Imagining Boy Consumers” in *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (2004): 1-55 & 93-126 (reserve)

Clips: *Kids + Money*

April 16 **The Abundance of Post-World War II America**

Readings:

- Andrew Hurley, “From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture,” *Journal of American History* (March 1997): 1282-1308
- Alison J. Clarke, “Introduction” and Chapter 3, “A Gift of Modernity” in *Tupperware: the Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (1999): 1-7 & 56-77(reserve)

Screening: *Tupperware!*

April 23 **Shopping for Identity**

Readings:

- Marilyn Halter, Chapter One, “Longings and Belongings” and Chapter Seven, “The Mestizo Makeover” in *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (2000): 3-24 & 170-191 (reserve)

Due: Final Paper Proposal

April 30 **Shop ‘til You Drop: Rethinking Consumerism**

Readings:

- Glickman: 341-372
- Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam* (1999): xi-xvii, 3-27, 72-83, 123-127 (reserve)

FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY MAILBOX MONDAY MAY 5 BY NOON