

HIS 597 | CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS: THE REEL HISTORY OF MODERN AMERICA

Directions: Select three of the following topics to address. Each topic will require one essay, which may be broken down into subsections labeled A,B,C, etc. as provided in the topics below. Each essay is worth 50 points.

Length: I would suggest that each of your essays be 750 to 1500 words. You may exceed this word limit if you must, but I do not believe you can provide adequate answers in less than 750 words.

Citations: Please cite all ideas that are not your own. Since this project must be completed in Microsoft Word, please use the Chicago Manual of Style as your model. A quick guide is posted on the manual's website at: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Due Date and Procedure: All exams must be emailed to me as a single Microsoft Word file by midnight on July 25 (Note: this is a change from the syllabus to offer you a little more time with this project). Please do not send more than one email, and please do not submit revised essays.

TOPIC I

“The 1890s witnessed a momentous change in American values. During that decade, Americans were engaged in a full-scale revolt against a stifling Victorian code of propriety and the confining routine of urban, industrial life.” - Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, “Introduction” from *Hollywood's America*.

- A. Based on your reading of Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, what were the characteristics of Victorian culture and entertainment?
- B. Describe the important changes that took place in American sports, music, women's roles, and cultural values during the 1890s and explain why these changes took place.
- C. How can one explain the sudden obsession with sport, strength, and virility?
- D. The late nineteenth century also saw the emergence of mass communication and commercialized forms of entertainment. What new instruments of modern mass culture and commercialized entertainment appeared during the era?
- E. What common background did most of the creators of this new mass culture share?
- F. What kind of aesthetic style characterized the new mass culture, and how was it different from the “genteel tradition” of the Victorian era?
- G. Describe the social consequences of the rise of mass communication and commercialized entertainment. How did the new commercial amusements reshape American leisure patterns?

TOPIC II

"On February 18, 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* was shown at the White House, and at the end of the showing President (Woodrow) Wilson is said to have remarked that "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." - John Hope Franklin, "*Birth of a Nation*-Propaganda as History."

- A. Filmmaker D.W. Griffith was a strong proponent of social message films. How did he get involved with *The Birth of a Nation*, and what was it based upon?
- B. What was Griffith's perspective on the Civil War and Reconstruction? How would you account for the flaws in this film as a depiction of the past?
- C. Assess the film's portrayal of African Americans as participants in the drama of Reconstruction. Which blacks were regarded as "good" and "bad"? Explain.
- D. In what ways does the definition of "womanhood" play a role in Griffith's vision of the South and Reconstruction? Comment on the film's contrasting depictions of women (Northern/Southern, white/mulatto, white/African American).
- E. Although civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People lobbied against the film, it was a commercial success. What does this fact reveal to you about the values, attitudes, and objectives embraced by Americans of the Progressive generation?

TOPIC III

"America's dilemmas (today) are in many ways similar to those faced by the country just after the turn of the (twentieth) century – overcrowding, sexual inequalities, political corruption, and corporate irresponsibility still find their way into a cinema that solves those problems in a private fashion, just as the early films did. But never again will the process be quite so blatant as in the silent social problem films (of the early twentieth century)." - Kay Sloan, "Front Page Movies."

- A. Based on your reading of Kay Sloan and James J. Lorence, how would you describe the Progressive reformers' take on the new medium of popular film? Did the reformers' position on film evolve over time? If so, how. If not, why not? Be specific and cite examples to illustrate your argument.
- B. From your general analysis of the Progressive era move to the films *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and *The Crime of Carelessness* (1912). What do these films tell us about the tensions and themes of the Progressive era?

TOPIC IV

“You’re going to get a kaleidoscope panorama of the fast side and fast set of New York life which movie fans like ... bright lights ... theaters ... night clubs ... dancing ... recklessness ... madness ... Greenwich Village ... wild escapades at night ... dash ... spice!” – Pressbook for *Dancing Mothers* (1926)

A. What does the film *Dancing Mothers* reveal about women’s life experiences in the 1920s? What does the betrayed wife’s personal crisis indicate about family values and marital relationships in the era? What is the significance of her final decision?

B. What is “it,” as represented in the character portrayed by Clara Bow in *Dancing Mothers*?

C. As you observe the images of consumption projected in *Dancing Mothers*, consider their significance in relation to the tastes and aspirations of the audience. What social and economic element in American society is dealt with in the film? What do these images of consumer behavior reveal about the economic changes of the era and the social function of the motion pictures?

D. In *Dancing Mothers*, what is the relationship of the young and the old?

E. What evidence is there in *Dancing Mothers* that a clash is taking place between traditional and modern morality in the 1920s?

TOPIC V

Was Frank Capra's 1939 film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a paeon to the American populist hero, the patriotic little man who stands up to corruption, or did it (along with *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Meet John Doe*) represent what Michael Rogin and Kathleen Moran called “Capra’s deeply ambivalent view of the people and his investment in the personal power of the media manipulator?” Explain.

TOPIC VI

“Seen the pitcher last night, *Grapes of Wrath*, best cussed pitcher I ever seen. *The Grapes of Wrath*, you know is about us pullin’ out of Oklahoma and Arkansas, and down south, and a driftin’ around over state of California, busted, disgusted, down and out, and a lookin’ for work. Shows how come us to be that a way. Shows the dam bankers men that broke us and the dust that choked us, and comes right out in plain old English and says what to do about it. It says you got to get together and have some meetins, and stick together, and raise old billy to hell till you get youre job, and get your farm back, and your house and your chickens and your groceries and your clothes, and your money back. Go to see the *Grapes of Wrath*, pardner, go to see it and don’t miss. You was the star in that picture. Go and see your own self and hear your own words and your own song.” – Woody Guthrie, *People’s World*, 1940.

- A. Is the *Grapes of Wrath* a radical, liberal, or conservative film? In what ways does it address the future of the capitalist system? What does the film's perspective on capitalism's survival reveal about the function of the motion picture in the time of America's greatest financial crisis?
- B. What evidence do you find in the film to clarify the filmmaker's view of Franklin Roosevelt and his administration's New Deal policies?
- C. What perspective does the film take on labor unionism and organizational activity in addressing the capitalist exploitation of workers? How would you explain this perspective?
- D. It has been argued that *The Grapes of Wrath* was more a stimulus to nostalgic memory of agrarian community than a realistic program for a post-agrarian future society emerging in the United States by 1940. What is your view?

TOPIC VII

Prelude to War, the first film in Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series, was released for public viewing on May 27, 1943. The film depicted World War II as a battle between the "slave world" and the "free world." America's enemies -- Germany, Italy, and Japan -- were portrayed as evil, militaristic, dictatorial regimes that sought to enslave the world. In contrast, America was portrayed as a just, peaceful, egalitarian society that sought to liberate the world.

Based on your reading of John Dower, you are to evaluate Capra's characterization of the United States during World War II. Discuss the ways in which the American government presented the war, the degree to which the government lived up to its rhetoric of freedom, and the way in which wartime realities often conflicted with the government's idealistic presentation of the war.

You may also use the materials presented on my website to address this question. See the following:
<http://www.studythepast.com/ww2fortah/>

TOPIC VIII

It's still the same old story

A fight for love and glory

A case of do or die.

The world will always welcome lovers

As time goes by. – "As Time Goes By," sung by Arthur "Dooley" Wilson, in *Casablanca*

- A. What kinds of films did Hollywood produce during World War II? What do these films tell us about the attitudes and concerns on the home front?
- B. How did the federal government seek to shape wartime films?
- C. Most importantly: what were the political messages conveyed by the classic film, *Casablanca*?