

ENVI/HIST/HMCS 236
CONSUMER NATION: AMERICAN CONSUMER CULTURE
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Macalester College, Spring 2008
MWF 2:20-3:20, Olin-Rice 100

Prof. Chris Wells

Office: Olin-Rice 249c
Phone: x6803
Email: wells@macalester.edu
Office Hours: Tues 2:30-3:30, Wed 1:15-2:15
and by appointment

Course Description: “Of all the strange beasts that have come slouching into the 20th century,” writes James Twitchell, “none has been more misunderstood, more criticized, and more important than materialism.” In this course, we will trace the various twists and turns of America’s vigorous consumer culture across the twentieth century, examining its growing influence on American life, its implications for the environmental health of the world, and the many debates it has inspired.

Required Readings:

The following books are available for purchase at the college book store:

John Kasson, *Amusing the Million*
Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*
McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*

Copies of all other readings, marked with an **X**, are available as e-reserves through the library. Access them at <http://clinet.clic.edu/search/p>. You will only be able to access these readings if you are registered for the course.

Be advised that this course has an appropriately heavy reading load for a history course at this level. I have chosen readings for readability and interest, but please plan ahead—particularly when assignments are due—so that you are able to complete the readings. *Completing the readings is vital to succeeding in this course.*

Grading: Your grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

First and second papers (5-7 pages)	25% each
“Found object” paper (6-8 pages)	30%
Participation	20%

Writing Assignments

The First Two Papers are designed to give you the opportunity to assess the ideas of this course and to engage its readings and lectures. I will distribute the prompt for each paper in class two weeks before it is due. The writing assignments are a serious component of this course, and should represent your best efforts to think through the issues involved and to produce polished, carefully edited, thoughtfully considered prose. *You will be assessed a late penalty of one-third of a letter grade for each 24-hour period that your paper is late*, so plan accordingly.

The Found-Object Paper asks you to select an everyday object and to write an interpretive essay on its relationship to American consumer culture throughout the twentieth century. I will distribute more detailed instructions on this paper later in the semester.

Many wonderful resources exist that will help you with this class. **The MAX Center** offers drop-in consultancy on writing projects, and can provide helpful feedback and advice on your work before it is due. The center is located on the first floor of Kagin Commons, and is open for tutoring Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., and from Sunday through Thursday from 7:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. Find them on the web at <http://www.macalester.edu/max/>, and be sure to check out the writing handbook at <http://www.macalester.edu/max/writinghandbook/index.html>. I strongly encourage all of you to make use of this wonderful resource. Please also spend some time perusing Prof. Zachary Schrag's website, <http://www.schrag.info/teaching/index.html>, which contains extraordinarily helpful advice for doing well in a history course.

Participation grades will be based on class attendance and participation in discussions. Discussions are a vital part of this class, so it is particularly important that everyone comes to class prepared to discuss the day's readings. Our project in class meetings will be to explore connections between events, to answer questions, to clear up any confusion, to discuss the major themes of the course, and above all to engage with the readings. For those who are less comfortable than others speaking in class, remember that asking a good question is often as valuable a means of participation as delivering a long-winded oration. Participation does require speaking, however, so please join the discussion. If you are having trouble contributing, please talk to me outside of class so that we can develop a strategy for improvement.

Regular attendance is required in order to receive a passing grade for the course, regardless of how well you do on your written assignments. Absences will directly affect your class participation grade.

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. All of your written work should reflect your own ideas, and should properly attribute the work of others who you engage. On avoiding plagiarism, see <http://www.macalester.edu/max/writinghandbook/plagiarism.html>.

Our course's Moodle website duplicates much of the information in this syllabus, including the reading schedule and assignment due dates. It also provides a direct link to our course's e-reserves, as well as an option for submitting your papers electronically. Go to <http://moodle.macalester.edu/>, and log in using your username and password.

Class Schedule

All reserve items are marked X

UNIT ONE: MAKING A MASS MARKET, 1880-1919

- M 1/28 Introductions and lecture: Culture as History (41)
W 1/30 * Durning, "The Stuff of Life," 89-102. X
* Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, 1-15. X
* Heath and Potter, *Nation of Rebels*, 1-9. X
* Diamond, "What's Your Consumption Factor?" 1-3. (in-class handout)
F 2/1 In-class screening of *Affluenza*—no reading.
- M 2/4 Lecture: Cheap Amusements: Commercial Leisure before World War I (108)
W 2/6 * Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 3-54.
F 2/8 * Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 57-112.
- M 2/11 Lecture: Land of Desire: Merchants and Mass Culture (194)
W 2/13 * Strasser, "The New Retailing," 203-251. X
* Barron, "With All the Fragrant Powders of the Merchant," 155-191. X
F 2/15 * Price, *Flight Maps*, chs. 1-2.

UNIT TWO: INARTICULATE LONGINGS, 1920-1945

- M 2/18 Lecture: Consumers in the Country, Consumers in the City (111)
W 2/20 * Barron, "Not the Bread of Idleness," 193-241. X
F 2/22 * Cohen, "The Class Experience of Mass Consumption," 134-160. X
- M 2/25 Lecture: Advertising—and Financing—the American Dream (78)
W 2/27 * Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," 1-38. X
F 2/29 * Strasser, "Having and Disposing in the New Consumer Culture," 162-201. X
- M 3/3 Lecture: The Making of Middle-Brow Culture: The Culture Merchants (58)
W 3/5 * Sutter, "Knowing Nature through Leisure," 19-53. X
F 3/7 * Bernstein, "Why the Great Depression Was Great," 32-54. X

UNIT THREE: THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY, 1945-1968

- M 3/10 Lecture: A Consumers' Republic: The Rise of Mass Suburbia (0)
PAPER #1 DUE IN CLASS
W 3/12 In-class activity: no reading.
F 3/14 NO CLASS

3/17-3/21 SPRING BREAK

- M 3/24 Lecture: The Conquest of Cool: Media, Protest, and Counterculture (56)
W 3/26 * Lasn, "Culture Jamming," xi-xvii, and "The Manchurian Consumer," 37-41. X
* Gladwell, "The Cool Hunt," 78-88. X
* Heath and Potter, "From Status-Seeking to Coolhunting," 188-220. X
F 3/28 Civic Forum: The Environment, Citizenship, and the Public Good. NOTE: We will attend this panel as a class, and students should meet directly at the forum. Students who can are encouraged to arrive at the panel by its 1:30 start time.

UNIT FOUR: CULTURE JAM: VISIONARIES, CRITICS, AND MALCONTENTENTS

- M 3/31 * Mitman, "Disney's True-Life Adventures," 109-131. X
In-class video: *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*
- W 4/2 * Packard, *The Status Seekers*, 61-77, 128-138, 253-263. X
- F 4/4 * Elgin, "Voluntary Simplicity and the New Global Challenge," 23-55. X
- M 4/7 * McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, introduction and chs. 1-2.
- W 4/9 * McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, chs. 3-4.
- F 4/11 * McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*, chs. 5-6.
- M 4/14 * Klein, "Local Foreign Policy," 397-419. X
- W 4/16 * Ehrenreich, "Selling in Minnesota," 121-191. X
- F 4/18 * Greenhouse, "Can't Wal-Mart, a Retail Behemoth, Pay More?" 1-4. X
* Mallaby, "Progressive Wal-Mart. Really," 1-2. X
* Roberts, "Wal-Mart's Green Makeover," 1-3. X
* Mitchell, "Keep Your Eyes on the Size," 1-4. X
* Pollan, "Mass Natural," 1-5. X
* "Big Box Mart": view at <http://www.jibjab.com/> (Click on the "Originals" tab, and it will be in the line of links just under the tabs.)
We will screen portions of "Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price" and "Why Wal-Mart Works, and Why That Makes Some People C-R-A-Z-Y!" in class
- PAPER #2 DUE IN CLASS**
- M 4/21 * Heath and Potter, "Coca-Colonization," 221-251. X
- W 4/23 * Pollan, "Desire: Control / Plant: The Potato," 181-238. X
- F 4/25 * Klein, "Bad Mood Rising," 325-343. X
- M 4/28 Lecture: An All-Consuming Century (148)
- W 4/30 * Brooks, "Consumption," 54-102. X
* Nunberg, "The Volvo Dodge," 63-71. X
- F 5/2 * Price, *Flight Maps*, chs. 3-5.

UNIT FIVE: LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION (16)

- M 5/5 * Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism," 281-290. X
* Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating," 367-372. X
* Mark and Danaher, "Business Unusual," 1-3. X
* Spend 10-15 minutes playing the "Consumption Game" at:
<http://sustainability.publicradio.org/consumerconsequences/>

Thurs 5/8 **FOUND-OBJECT PAPER DUE ELECTRONICALLY OR AT MY OFFICE BY 3 PM**