

# **The World of Things: Consumer Cultures in Historical Perspective**

Fall 2013

University of Massachusetts-Lowell

Professor Patrick Young

Coburn 108

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office hours: Tuesdays, 1-2:30, Thursdays 2-3:30 and by appointment

## **Course Description:**

This course will examine the emergence and historical impact of consumer cultures in the modern world, from the mid nineteenth century through the present. Moving between Europe, North America, Asia and Africa, it will trace the broad shift from elite luxury consumption to popular, and eventually global consumer culture over this period. Individual classes will focus on issues such as the emergence of new retailing practices and spaces of consumption; changing attitudes toward material life; the construction of modern social identities of class, gender, generation and race through consumption; and political struggles over consumption. Our approach will be an interdisciplinary one, involving multiple tools of analysis and a great variety of both written and visual historical materials. The main aim of the course is to understand how consumption of material goods has come to be so central a part of our world and our individual lives, and whether its impact has been more enriching or impoverishing.

## **Course Objectives**

After taking the course, students should be able to

- identify and understand the main historical stages of development in the emergence of modern consumer culture
- interpret a variety of original historical evidence and use that evidence as the basis for historical explanation in class and in papers
- reflect critically and historically upon their own participation in the modern consumer economy and society
- demonstrate clear improvement in written work

## **Course Materials:**

The following are the required books for the course. They are available at the campus bookstore, and should be acquired as soon as possible. Additional readings will be made available on the course website, or put on reserve at O'Leary Library. All visual resources for the class will also be housed on the course website.

Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Duke University Press, 1996)

Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Knopf, 2003)

Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton University Press, 1994)

Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Temple University Press, 1986)

### **Course Website:**

The course website can be accessed at <http://continuinged.uml.edu/online>. Click “Blackboard and Online Course Login” on the upper right hand corner of the page, and follow the instructions to obtain a user name and password.

The website is a vital component of the course, as all of the essential assignments, class readings, images and other course materials will be posted there. You should go to the web address as soon as possible, bookmark it, confirm your registration to obtain a user name and password, log on and familiarize yourself with the website’s content.

Please contact me or the Student Support Center (978 934-2474 or 800 480-3190) if you are having any difficulties whatsoever at any point in accessing or using the course website.

### **Course Requirements:**

Written Work (80% of grade)

Unit One worksheet and essay (25%)

Unit Two worksheet and essay (25%)

Final Research Paper (30%)

\*Please note: Late written work cannot be accepted without penalty unless arrangements are made with me in advance of the due date. Written work should also be submitted directly to me in hard copy format. The penalty for lateness is one-half letter grade per day. Missed or late assignments can have a dire effect on your grade, and you should contact me if there are any circumstances that make it difficult for you to complete required work in timely fashion.

Class Participation (20% of grade)

Students are expected to participate actively in discussion of the subject matter, and will be provided with multiple avenues for doing so. It is required that individual students serve as “principal discussant” during two classes of their choosing over the course of the semester. Doing so will entail submitting a short written summary of that class’s readings to me by email prior to class, and then playing a leading role in the discussion itself.

There may be additional opportunities for participation in online discussion threads connected to the papers, and that will be considered a

part of the class participation grade as well. Conversely, lateness and/or incomplete preparation for the discussion will lower the participation grade, as will any more than three absences.

### **Course Outline:**

9/5 Course introduction

9/10 Relating to Material Goods: Analytical and Personal Reflections  
Colin Campbell, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming”,  
course website

Steven Waldman, “The Tyranny of Choice”, course website

**\*one-page response due: with which of these two articles do you feel more sympathetic, and why?**

### **Unit One: Industrial Modernity and Consumption, 1850-1900**

9/12 A Modern Temple of Material Progress: The Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851  
Peter Gurney, “A Palace for the People? The Crystal Palace and Consumer  
Culture in Victorian England”, course website  
view file, “Crystal Palace Exhibition” on course website

9/17 Social Class, Gender and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century  
Whitney Walton, “Constructing the Bourgeoisie through Consumption”,  
and “To Triumph before Feminine Taste”, course website

9/19 The Department Store and the New Business of Retailing  
Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 1-74

9/24 Inside the Department Store: A Ladies’ Paradise?  
Emile Zola, *Ladies’ Paradise*, chapter 4, course website  
Theresa McBride, “A Woman’s World: Department Stores and the  
Evolution of Women’s Employment, 1870-1920”, course website  
**\*worksheet due** (available on course website)

9/26 Paris, City of Consumer Spectacle  
Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 165-240  
Donald J. Olsen, “The New Paris”, course website

10/1 Impressionism: The Painting of Modern Life  
view image file “Impressionism” on course website

10/3 The Global Department Store  
William Leach, selections from *Land of Desire*, course website  
view image file, “Global Department Store”, course website

**\*Unit One paper due**

**Unit Two: The Rise of “Mass” Consumption, 1900-1945**

- 10/8 Working-Class Leisure and Consumption at the Turn of the Century  
Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, 3-114
- 10/10 Popular Amusement, from the Nickelodeon to Coney Island  
Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, 115-138  
John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, on reserve at O’Leary Library
- 10/15 Advertising and the “Dream Culture” of American Capitalism  
Stuart Ewen, “Advertising as Social Production”, course website  
view image file “1920’s Advertisements” course website  
**\*worksheet due** (available on course website)
- 10/17 Challenges of “Americanization” in Europe  
Ellen Furlough, “Selling the American Way in Interwar France”, course website  
Victoria De Grazia, “Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinema, 1920-1960”, course website
- 10/22 The New Woman of the 1920’s  
Barbara Sato, “The Modern Girl as a Representation of Consumer Culture”, from the *New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media and Women in Interwar Japan*, course website  
Mary Louise Roberts, “Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women’s Fashion in 1920’s France”, course website  
view image file “The New Woman of the 1920’s”, course website
- 10/24 At the Movies: Gender, Class and Mass Culture  
Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, 139-162  
\*in-class showing of film, “It” (1927), dir. by Clarence Badger
- 10/29 Discussion of “It”
- 10/31 Capitalist Crisis and the New Politics of Consumption in the 1930’s  
Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 18-61  
Shelley Baranowski, “Strength Through Joy: Tourism and National Integration in the Third Reich”, course website

### III. The Globalization of Consumer Society, 1945-Present

11/5 Imperialism and Consumer Culture  
Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*, chapters 1-3

#### **\*Unit Two Paper due**

11/7 Selling Soap and Hygiene in Southern Africa  
Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*, chapters 4-6

11/12 The Post-War American “Consumers’ Republic”  
Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 111-191

11/14 Spaces of Postwar Consumption: Suburbia, the Automobile and the  
Modern Consumer Home  
Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 194-256  
Simon Partner, “Creating the ‘Bright Life’”, course website

11/19 France’s “American Temptation”  
Richard Kuisel, “The American Temptation” from *Seducing the French:  
The Dilemma of Americanization*, course website  
view film, “Breathless” (1959), dir. by Jean-Luc Godard, at  
<http://vimeo.com/68340007>

11/21 The New Retailing: From the Shopping Mall to Wal-Mart  
Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 257-289  
view film, “Wal-Mart: The High Cost of the Low Price”, at  
<http://vimeo.com/52359213>

11/26 “Fast Fashion” in the Global Consumer Economy  
Elizabeth Cline, “Fast Fashion”, and “China and the End of Cheap  
Fashion”, course website

12/3 Protests and Alternatives  
Duane Elgin, “Voluntary Simplicity and the New Global Challenge”,  
course website  
Kalle Lasn, “Culture Jamming”, course website

12/5 Looking Back, Looking Ahead: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prospects for Consumer Society

#### **\*Final paper due**