

## HISTORY 3495: REPRESENTING THE PAST: FROM HOMER TO HOLLYWOOD

---

---

Mark Carnes (902 Milstein)

Class meeting time: Tuesdays 4-6 4 Credits

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

---

---

Examines the renderings of the past as conveyed by historians and by those seeking to "represent" the past, such as novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, ritualists, and artists. Analyzes the theoretical, philosophical, and evidentiary problems and possibilities inherent in various modes of historical narration and representation.

### REQUIREMENTS

---

---

- a) Two very short papers from the PART A Introductory section of the course: Tasks A plus and B (below) (1/6 of grade);
- b) Theoretical Essay: Every student will be assigned to provide a response, written (5-page essay) and oral presentation, to the readings in ONE of the weeks of the PART B "Historical Modes and Theory" segment of the course. Two students will likely be assigned for each week, and each should expect to lead a 10-minute or so discussion based on their assessment of the interesting issues (1/6 of grade)
- c) "Your Representation or Analysis," as outlined in PART C: a 10-page paper and presentation (3/6 of grade)
- d) Informed participation in ALL classes (1/6)

### "REQUIRED" PURCHASES

---

---

None of the readings need to be purchased. All of the readings are either available on Barnard Reserves, or they are available online. Much of Thucydides's *The Peloponnesian War* will be read, and the Norton Critical Edition, translated Blanco, is best; you can easily acquire a used paperback online. The same is true of Steven Pressfield's novel about the Peloponnesian War: *The Tides of War* (Doubleday).

## CLASS SCHEDULE

### PART A: INTRODUCTORY

---

#### (WEEK 1): WEEK 1: THE PAST AS A GOOD STORY: FROM LASCAUX TO HAMILTON, THE MUSICAL

---

Introductory discussion on the (contested) distinction between historical narrative (as produced by historians) and historical representation (as conveyed by novelists, filmmakers, artists and photographers, video game designers, and ritualists).

Toward the end of the class, each student will be assigned to complete either Task A or Task B for the February 1 class. Furthermore, students will be encouraged to choose different modes within their task; the class will be invited to discuss this.

#### (WEEK 2): MODES OF HISTORY (1)

---

All must Read: Plato's *Republic*, (Parts 1-3, and especially 10) "Theory of Art" (available everywhere).

Completion of Task A or Task B (see Week 1)

#### TASK A: A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF (A TINY PART) OF YOUR LIFE

---

Write a 500-word historical narrative of a one-hour period of your own life during the previous week (January 18 4:00 PM through January 25 4:00 PM). You may employ any of the following narrative modes (although these may be assigned on January 25). You may also choose whatever perspective you wish: That is, you may use the first person: "On Friday, I awakened at 7:30 and . . ." Or you may choose an external, third person narrator (as did Henry Adams in his famous *Education*): "On Friday, Amanda-the-Morningside-Heights student awakened and . . ." What you choose to narrate is entirely up to you, but it should be factually accurate. If you do a documentary, you may submit it as a youtube video, or perhaps merely as a documentary film script.

Historical Narrative: Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789)

Biography: David McCullough, *Truman*, or *John Adams*

Autobiography: Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907)

Diary: *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1660-1669)

## Documentary a la Ken Burns

TASK B: A HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION OF (A TINY PART) OF YOUR LIFE

Task B: Complete a “historical representation” of a one-hour period of your own life during the previous week. Your “work” need not be exhaustive or finished: A snippet of your representation will suffice. This may be a written work, but it must be sufficiently short for classmates to read in 4-5 minutes. As with Task A (read above), you are largely free in your choice of perspective.

In representing the past, your goal is to encourage your audience (readers, viewers, game-players) to experience more deeply the significant meaning of history. Below are a list of possible modes you might wish to consult as models, though you may be assigned to one or another mode.

If, for example, you choose to use the first person perspective-- “On Friday, I awakened and. . .”—your representation would resemble the autobiographical approach outlined in Task A. But as a historical novelist, you would be free to break free from literal truth: you could go beyond the historical facts of your one-hour period by adding events or conversations that occurred before or after that actual time slot; moreover, you could sharpen the dialogue by transforming your four suite-mates into two composite characters. You could do anything else you wish. But you must be prepared to justify your inventions—your **fiction**s—by showing how they enhanced historical meaning and understanding.

If, as a filmmaker, you decide to emulate Steven Spielberg, you may find it difficult to find a producer, cast a major figure in the title role, and film it all within a week. In that case you can resort to resort youtube. This, too, may superficially resemble the documentary film genre of Task A. But now you can cast someone else to play yourself; and you can of course add costumes, props, and digital enhancements.

If you do not know how to paint, you may be hard-pressed to emulate the technique of David’s *Death of Marat*. But you may wish to settle for some artistic alternative (collage of photographs, etc.)

Historical Novel : Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, Robert Graves, “*I, Claudius*” Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Historical poem: Maya Angelou, “Million Man March Poem”; David Lehman, “A Little History”, Sylvia Plath, “Lesbos” Rudyard Kipling, “The Land”, Charles Bukowski, “Let It Enfold You”

Hollywood Film: Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, Ava DuVernay’s, *Selma*

Historical Musical: Scene or song from *Hamilton* or *Oklahoma!*

Painting: Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat* (1793)

Monuments, sculpture, artifacts: Stonehenge, the Lincoln Memorial, the Holocaust Museum

Facebook, blog, or social media rendering:

Historical video game: *Assassin's Creed, Civilization*

Religious rituals ("The Hill Cumorah Pageant" [Mormon], Catholic mass ["the Last Supper"]; "Passover").

Re-Enactments or Pedagogical Recreations: Civil War Re-enactors; "Reacting to the Past" college classes

---

### (WEEK 3) MODES OF REPRESENTING THE PAST (2)

---

#### Activity:

Those who completed Task A the previous week must now complete Task B, and vice versa, for the following week.

#### Readings:

R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History: Revised Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), "History as Re-Enactment of Past Experience" 282-302 .

---

## PART B: HISTORICAL MODES AND THEORY

---

Two students (maybe more or less, depending on class size) will be assigned to write an essay, and lead a discussion, during each of the following class sessions. Every student will be assigned to one of these weeks randomly during the first week of classes. Students are free to trade their assignments, but they must do so early in the semester and inform the instructor of the change.

---

### (WEEK 4): ANCIENT HISTORY: FROM HOMER TO THUCYDIDES

---

Homer, *The Iliad* (Book I) and *Odyssey* (Book 8) (Both available online: *Project Gutenberg*): Note: In place of Homer, students may substitute Books 1-4 from the Hindu classic, *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Herodotus, *The Histories* (Norton, 1992), Book 7. (Available online: *Project Gutenberg*, another translation, which is acceptable).

Francois Hartog, "The Invention of History: The Pre-History of a Concept from Homer to Herodotus," *History and Theory* Vol. 39, # 3 (October 2000). (Available through JSTOR)

Gregory Crane, "Truest Causes and Thucydidean Realisms," in *Thucydides, Peloponnesian War* (Norton Critical), p. 502-522.

---

### (WEEK 5): THE TRUTH OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: THUCYDIDES

---

Read: Thucydides, Blanco, ed., *The Peloponnesian War* (Norton Critical Edition): Books 6 and 7 (The Sicilian campaign), pp.232-308.

Adam Parry, "Thucydides' Historical Perspective" in Blanco, Thucydides (*Peloponnesian War*, hereafter, Norton Critical), pp. 464-472

Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Introduction and Chapters 1-2. (CLIO)

Michael S. Roth, "Cultural Criticism and Political Theory: Hayden White's Rhetorics of History," *Political Theory*, Vol. 16, # 4 (November, 1988), pp. 636-646. (Jstor) (Roth provides a useful introduction to Hayden White).

---

### (WEEK 6): FICTION AS HISTORY

---

Read: Steven Pressfield, *Tides of War* (2000) (Chapters 15-24, pp. 121-216)

Donald Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (1981), Chapters 7-11 ("The Decision to Attack Sicily," "Sacrilege and Departure," and "Athenian Strategy and the Summer Campaign of 415" "The First Attack on Syracuse," "The Siege of Syracuse," "Athens on the Defensive"

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (199): the following chapters "On the Rainy River," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Good Form"

---

### (WEEK 7): HOLLYWOOD HISTORY: CLASS TO CHOOSE MOVIE

---

Activity (before class): Watch a Hollywood "history" movie: (Class may choose)

Instructor nominations: Steven Spielberg, *Lincoln*; Oliver Stone, *JFK*; Ava DuVernay, *Selma* (2014), Mel Gibson, *The Patriot* (2000), *Cinderella Man* (2005), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

Readings:

Stanley Karnouw, "JFK" in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (1995)

"A Conversation between Mark C. Carnes and Oliver Stone," *Cineaste* Vol. 22, #4 (October, 1997)

---

### (WEEK 8): RE-ENACTING (AND REACTING TO) THE PAST

---

## Activity:

Examine a sampling of History Channel videos , focusing on the elements that include re-enactments. Presenters for session may choose to visit a Reacting to the Past class

## Readings:

Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Despatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (1999), pp. 3-17

Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?" *Criticism* 46.3 (Summer 2004), pp. 327-339 (JSTOR)

Mark Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (2014), Chapter 10: "Teaching the Past by Getting It Wrong?" pp. 246-270

(WEEK 9):

---

UNEXPECTED REENACTMENTS: MUSEUMS AND VIDEO GAMES

---

Activity: Visit a historical museum, or play an historical video game, taking notes

## Readings:

Dan Stone, "Memory, Memorials and Museums," in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (2004), pp.508-526.

William Uricchio, "Simulation, History and Computer Games," in J. Raessens and J. Goldstein, eds., *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (2005), pp.327-338; online.

Brian Rejack, "Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past," *Rethinking History* Vol 11 (September 2007) (Jstor)

---

(WEEK 10) APRIL 4: THE PAST AS VISUAL EXPERIENCE

---

Activity: View the following:

Paintings and Readings: (paintings available online)

Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770)

James Barry, *Death of General Wolfe* (1776)

Roy Lichtenstein, *Death of the General* (1951)

Robert Houle, *Kanata* (1992)

Reading:

Ann Uhry Abrams, *Benjamin West and the Grand-style of History Painting Week*, Chapters 1-3 (on reserve)

## PART C: YOUR REPRESENTATION OF THE PAST

### LAST FOUR WEEKS

---

These final four classes will consist of 20-minute presentations (followed by 10-minute Q&A) in which, for each session, four students present their “representation of the past”. These could consist of the modes such as were outlined in Task B at the outset of the course, but now the representation would be on a “significant” historical theme, though everyone is free to define “significant” as they wish.

Alternatively, students may choose to present an analysis critiquing some other significant work of historical representation, focusing on theoretical issues such as were developed in the course.

### STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

---

Although this course does not seek to “cover” historical periods, students will learn about several historical moments, such as the disastrous Athenian expedition to conquer Syracuse in Sicily in 415 B.C. But the main thrust of the course is to equip students with the theoretical background to analyze critically all productions of or about the past. Students will gain experience, too, in basic research and historical writing, much of it to prepare them for extended writing assignments in other courses.