

HISTORY 3495: REPRESENTING THE PAST: FROM HOMER TO HOLLYWOOD

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Office Hours: Wednesday: 12:00-2:00

Class meeting time: Wednesdays 2:10-4:00 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. The course consists of three parts: Part A (4 sessions) examines the difference between narrative history and representational history, as applied to students' own lives; Part B explores the philosophical ramifications of different modes of historical representation, ranging from historical novels, movies and musicals to museums, video games, and re-enactments (7 sessions); during this time, each student will begin work on an historical representation of their own; Part C is devoted to student presentations of their historical representation project (4 sessions).

REQUIREMENTS

- a) Three short historical exercises (no research) from the PART A, one each for classes 2, 3, and 4. Each exercise is 500-words (or the equivalent): 1/6 of grade.
- b) Theoretical Essay and Class Leadership: Every student will be paired with another to guide the discussion for each of the 7 classes in Part B of the course. Students will have some choice as to which session they supervise. In addition, each of the paired students leading the discussion will write a 5-page essay on the issues they found to be interesting or significant for their session (1/6 of grade);
- c) "Your Representation and Analysis of a Significant Historical Topic," as outlined in PART C: an 8-page paper—a representation of a significant historical topic-- and presentation to the class (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.

CLASS SCHEDULE

PART A: INTRODUCTORY

JAN 19: (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). The session will include a special activity relating to the construction of historical narratives.,

JAN 26: (WEEK 2) A **NARRATIVE HISTORY** OF (A TINY PART) OF YOUR LIFE

In preparation for this class, write a 500-word historical narrative of a one-hour period of your own life during the previous week. On the day of the class, you will present your narrative to the class.

The only rule is that your narrative must be factually true. For the sake of your classmates—or posterity—your narrative should be interesting or somehow meaningful. You can define “interesting” and “meaningful” as you wish.

The choice of perspective is your own. For example, you may use the first person: “On Friday, I awakened at 7:30 a.m. and. . .” Or you may choose an omniscient, third-person narrator (as did Henry Adams in his famous *Education of Henry Adams*): “On Friday, Amanda-the-Morningside-Heights Student awakened and. . .” Most likely, your narrative will take the form of an essay. But you can employ other narrative modes employed by historians. For example, you might wish to do a documentary, which you could submit 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

Everyone should post their presentations by 10:00 PM Tuesday evening, the night before the class. We shall discuss the presentations, especially in light of the historical philosopher, Hayden White. Keep reading.

 READING FOR WEEK 2: HAYDEN WHITE

Read Hayden White, especially his *Metahistory*, Introduction and Chapters 1-2 (It is available, full-text, in Clio). Unfortunately, Hayden White's prose is difficult and elusive. You will save yourself considerable consternation by first reading the following review article on White:

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

Also, as an introduction to White, consider this thought experiment. If you were asked to write a 100-page history of your life, you would probably decide to break it into chapters. But where would you break up your life and how would you entitle your chapters?

One obvious division: Biological age. Year 3, Year 4, Year 5. . . ?

Or perhaps "stages of life". Chapter 1: Infancy; Chapter 2: Childhood; 3: Teenager.

Or perhaps by schooling: K-3; 4-6; 7-9; High School, College.

Or perhaps by residence: Cupcake Kansas, Paterson New Jersey, Morningside Heights.

Or perhaps by paramount friendship. John, Janice, Jomysha, Jordan.

Or perhaps by climactic events: Scoring the Winning Goal at the Sectionals/Death of Grandmother/The Accident/Recuperation in the Hospital/Admittance to College.

Your choice of chapter and title will influence what you say. What happened in your life did not change; but your choice of mode of presentation changed the **history** of your life. In short, the task of writing your life story requires that you create a plot—a narrative arc that will allow readers to draw meaning from your life. But though your life may be rendered as a narrative, you almost certainly have not lived it in such a way. That is, your life unfolded naturally, organically, confusedly, without special regard for the narrative lines you may have imposed on it after the fact. The act of writing your personal history consists of making choices that **distort** the truth of your life in some fundamental way.

And what is true of you, when acting as the historian of your own life, is even more obvious when an historian tries to tell a story about a larger subject in the past. The historian's narrative inevitably imposes a plot that ensures that the narrative differs and perhaps distorts the way the past actually unfolded. Historians may think they are telling true stories; but by choosing any narrative device, their stories significantly distort the past, or so Hayden White contends. Which raises the question: Do these accumulated distortions, omissions, shapings, etc. ensure that all narrative history is fundamentally unreal?

White further contends that historians inevitably choose from among four TYPES of **plotment**:

- *Romance: the central figures triumph over trials and tribulations;
- * Satire: the central figures are buffeted by forces beyond their control;
- * Comedy: the central figures, when confronted with forces of disruption, join in common understanding of a shared perspective
- * Tragedy: the central figures, recognizing that agreement is impossible, resign themselves to diminished expectations and accept inevitable loss.

White identifies several other modes of narrative. One concerns the character of the historian's **argument**:

- * Formalist: emphasis on classifying and categorizing self-contained and discrete elements;
- * Organicist: individual elements fit into a larger whole: an historical period can have an overarching "feel" or ethos or coherence.
- * Mechanistic: laws shape causation (Marxism is an obvious example).
- * Contextualism: events and actions are bound up in a web of time stretching way back

Lastly, White argues that historians adopt ideological perspectives—by virtue of their narrative strategies:

- *Conservative: history unfolds slowly, over time, in an organic way;
- * Liberal: individuals can speed up evolutionary change, chiefly through social actions (government and laws);
- * Radical: revolution can change the world soon
- * Anarchist: the state must be destroyed

White contends that any historical narrative can be fitted—and better understood—by determining which elements of emplotment, argument, and ideology the historian has imposed.

White's main point is that whatever narrative modes historians choose, they will inevitably impose distortions on the past. The historian's narrative is fundamentally unreal. Which calls into question the utility of the narrative historian's enterprise.

Many professional historians have found the ideas of White to be extremely troublesome—or utterly pointless. But these ideas also provide license for creative or more imaginative approaches to the past, such as attempts to "represent" the past through "you are there" modalities. Your "representational" outline reflects your sense of a conceivable alternative approach to your "history" of your classmate's celebrated hour.

FEBRUARY 2: (WEEK 3) AN **HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION** OF (A TINY PART) OF YOUR
LIFE

Using the same one-hour period you chronicled for the previous week, prepare a historical representation of that same period. While the sole requirement of your historical narrative was factual accuracy, the sole requirement of your representation is that it be interesting and/or meaningful. Your representation need not be factually accurate but it should be truthful. This statement encapsulates the conundrum this course seeks to explore in greater detail. For now, you may wish to assume that your representation is “based on a true story”—as movie producers commonly assert.

You may choose whatever perspective, and whatever medium, you wish. For example, you may wish to assume the role of an historical novelist: this means that you could compress events, combine multiple characters into one, and otherwise alter facts to promote a truthful thesis. For example, you might sharpen a conversation by transforming four suite-mates into two composite characters. Or you can do anything else you wish. But you must be prepared to justify your inventions—your **fictions**—by showing how they enhanced historical meaning and understanding.

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.

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, 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 youtube. And, of course, you are free to cast someone else to play yourself; and you can 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)

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

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

READINGS FOR WEEK 3

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*: Book II, Chapters 6 and 7. (Available online: Project Gutenberg, though any translation is fine:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm>) Note: Chapter 7, which describes the plague that struck Athens, is perhaps the first account of plague in history. Thucydides, himself, had the plague and thus his account is especially detailed.

Plato's Republic, Chapter entitled: "Theory of Art"—available online in multiple formats everywhere.

FEBRUARY 9: (WEEK 4) A HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION OF A CLASSMATE'S LIFE

In weeks 2 and 3, you were telling the story of a tiny portion of your own life, a subject about which you have boundless (if not unbiased) information. But for this week, you will do a historical representation of a subject who is not you. You will be randomly assigned to do a historical representation based solely on one of your classmate's historical narratives from the second week. That is, your historical representation may be a short story, a movie script, a painting, or any other type of representation. (You may wish to read through the remainder of this syllabus).

There are a few restrictions. If your first representation (for week 3) was not in a prose format, this historical representation **MUST** be in prose: about 500 words. And your historical representation must be based on your classmate's **historical narrative**, not on their **historical representation**. You can perhaps discern meanings and realms of significance that did not occur to the person who wrote their own historical narrative. (Often historians use the letters and diaries of historical figures to advance theses that the historical figures might not recognize, much less agree with.) Often, for example, historical figures write accounts justifying their actions; historians, citing those accounts, often arrive at completely different conclusions.

You will present this "representation" in class.

READINGS FOR WEEK 4

R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History: Revised Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), "History as Re-Enactment of Past Experience" 282-302. (Collingwood argues that historians inevitably must imagine themselves to be the historical figures they study. This chapter is available on Clio. Go to Clio, and type in the following in the Search: [The idea of history \[electronic resource\] : with lectures 1926-1928](#). In Contents, choose *The Idea of History* and go to page 282. Parts of this chapter are impenetrably dense, but some of the discussion is clear and important. His main point—and it is controversial—is that narrative historians inevitably must "rethink" the thoughts of historical subjects, and that that process of "re-thinking," or "re-enacting" is the essence of narrative history. This essay may inform your narrative history of your classmate based on their submissions. How, exactly, do you go about the work of writing meaningful (and truthful) narrative history?

PART B: REPRESENTING THE PAST

Two students will be assigned to be lead the discussion for each of the class sessions in Part B (Weeks 5 through Week 10). Ideally, the two student leaders will shape the overall discussion. At the very least, each leader should prepare five questions based on the readings for that week. Additionally, the leadership team for each week should attempt to weave ONE of the Task B representations into the discussion. In some cases, this may be difficult or even impossible. (How can a poem about the 2021 pandemic relate to ancient history?) But it will be fun to give it a shot. Students are free to trade their assignments, but they must inform the instructor in advance.

FEBRUARY 16: WEEK 5: FICTION AS BIOGRAPHY

Activity:

First, read this summary of Gore Vidal's influential (and immensely popular) biographical novel, *Lincoln*. It gives you a sense of Vidal's intentions and method.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1984/06/10/gore-vidals-lincoln-log/afc1f337-4215-4400-904d-6f050adea69a/>

Then read:

Gore Vidal, *Lincoln* (Part 1, Chapters 1 & 2): Available in text form online: https://archive.org/stream/HeliganSecretsOfTheLostGardens/VidalGore-TheAmericanChronicle2-Lincoln_djvu.txt

Mark Carnes, "Introduction," *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past* (New York, 2001), pp. 13-25. Available in Courseworks under Files.

Jay Parini, "Reflections on Biographical Fiction," in Michael Lackey, ed., *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (NY: 2014), available in Courseworks under Files.

FEBRUARY 23: (WEEK 6): HOLLYWOOD HISTORY

Activity (before class): Watch Aaron Sorkin, *Trial of the Chicago 7*" (2020).

Other possibilities: Steven Spielberg, *Lincoln*; Oliver Stone, *JFK*; Mel Gibson, *The Patriot* (2000), *Cinderella Man* (2005), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Spike Lee, *Malcolm X*.

Read:

Jeanne Dorin McDowell, "The True Story of the Trial of the Chicago 7," *Smithsonian Magazine* (October, 2020): <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-trial-chicago-7-180976063/>

"A Conversation Between Mark Carnes and Oliver Stone," in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (1995): This is available online in Courseworks under Files.

MARCH 2 (WEEK 7): THE PAST AS VISUAL EXPERIENCE

Activity: View the following paintings

Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) (Which can be seen, with a nice introductory video, from the National Gallery of Canada):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0jPXX8uvAI>

James Barry, *Death of General Wolfe* (1776) THE following website i think is wrong

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/benjamin-west-death-of-a-general>

<http://website.nbm-mnb.ca/A&A/johnpottle2.htm>

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

[https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.worldhistory.biz%2Fuploads%2Fposts%2F2015-10%2F41w-90.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.worldhistory.biz%2Fcontemporary-history%2F73631-do-artists-depict-historical-subjects-accurately.html&tbnid=ZXewtK6NpCjeZM&vet=12ahUKEwjN4YCv9tbuAhXTHd8KH YCdAvQQMygIegUIARCrAQ..i&docid=1sdiyoTrx532eM&w=626&h=529&itg=1&q=Roy%20Lichtenstein%20Death%20of%20the%20General%20\(1951\)&ved=2ahUKEwjN4YCv9tbuAhXTHd8KH YCdAvQQMygIegUIARCrAQ](https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.worldhistory.biz%2Fuploads%2Fposts%2F2015-10%2F41w-90.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.worldhistory.biz%2Fcontemporary-history%2F73631-do-artists-depict-historical-subjects-accurately.html&tbnid=ZXewtK6NpCjeZM&vet=12ahUKEwjN4YCv9tbuAhXTHd8KH YCdAvQQMygIegUIARCrAQ..i&docid=1sdiyoTrx532eM&w=626&h=529&itg=1&q=Roy%20Lichtenstein%20Death%20of%20the%20General%20(1951)&ved=2ahUKEwjN4YCv9tbuAhXTHd8KH YCdAvQQMygIegUIARCrAQ)

Robert Houle, *Kanata* (1992)

<https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/robert-houle/key-works/kanata>

Read:

Ann Uhry Abrams, *Benjamin West and the Grand-style of History Painting Week*, Chapter 1: Go to Courseworks, and choose Files: Abrams;

Vivien Green Fryd, "Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's "Death of General Wolfe," *American Art* (Spring, 1995) Vol. 9, No. 1 pp. 72-85. Available through Jstor.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3109196>

MARCH 9 (WEEK 8) MUSICALS

Activity: Watch Lin Manuel's *Hamilton*.

Read:

Elissa Harbert, "History and History Musicals," *American Music* (Winter 2018), Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 412- 428. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.36.4.0412>

Lyra D. Monteiro, "Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*," *The Public Historian* 38:1 (February 2016), pp. 89-98. Available through jstor: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26420757>

Kenneth Owen, "Can Great Art Also Be Great History?" *The Independent Review* Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 509-517. Available through Jstor. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26314792>

MARCH 23 (WEEK 9) 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. Available in Courseworks under Files: Stone, Museums.

William Uricchio, "Simulation, History and Computer Games," in J. Raessens and J. Goldstein, eds., *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (2005), pp.327-338; online: <http://web.mit.edu/uricchio/Public/pdfs/pdfs/cybergames%20.pdf>

Claudio Fogu, "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness," *History and Theory*, Vol 48 #2 (May, 2009), pp.103-121. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25478839>

OMIT REJACK

MARCH 30 (WEEK 10) RE-ENACTING (AND REACTING TO) THE PAST

Activity:

Watch:

[The Ship \(Ep. 1\): Retracing Cook's Endeavour Voyage \(2002\) "Heading Out"](#)

[America's largest slave revolt brought back to life](#)

Readings:

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

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 (Available online: Just go to Clio and search: Minds on Fire. Then select the version of the book that says, Online E-Book. Then, in the left column, select the arrow that says E-Link/ Then scroll Down and choose Chapter 10.

PART C: YOUR REPRESENTATION OF THE PAST

LAST FOUR WEEKS (APRIL 6, APRIL 13, APRIL 20, AND APRIL 27)

These final four classes will consist of 15-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.

Your presentation will be accompanied by an 8-page representation of the past--or, if your representation takes another form (video or painting, for example), an equivalent piece of work to 8-pages.

Illustrative representations:

- A) The (partial) diary of a gay soldier during the American Revolution. (Although there are plenty of diaries of soldiers during the Revolution, those reflection the views of a gay person are mostly unknown; this absence provides reason to imagine such a diary. Obviously, this would require that you do considerable research of soldiers' experiences during the American Revolution, and also on gay life during the period;
- B) A short story (or a few pages in a novel) about family life in Philadelphia during the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918;
- C) A long poem chronicling the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965;
- D) The design for a museum display that would enable visitors to experience, say, the Palestinian perception of the loss of much of Palestine after 1967;
- E) A screenplay about two teenage women on the overland trail to the West in the 1850s: did such an experience encourage a sense of women's power and independence or the opposite?

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.