

## English 5650 Sec. 090

### The Imagination of Commercial Life in Fiction and Film—Pandemic Edition

Online course                      Fall 2020

Professor Howard Horwitz    LNCO 3619; [h.horwitz@utah.edu](mailto:h.horwitz@utah.edu)

Office hours: MW: 9:40-11:00; or by appt. All office hours may occur by Zoom.

I AM INCLUDING the course description and syllabus to a previous edition of this course. THE ACTUAL SYLLABUS WILL BE SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT. I WILL ADAPT THE SYLLABUS TO INCORPORATE ELEMENTS FROM THE CURRENT HEALTH AND ECONOMIC CRISIS. The health crisis affects different economic classes unequally. Workers in “essential” businesses are at greater risk of infection than workers who, like me, can conduct our work at home. Workers at greater risk also tend to have less access to affordable health care. Structural factors in society and the economy have meant that certain minorities (African-American, Hispanic, Native-American) suffer higher infection and mortality rates than other demographic groups. Even before shelter in place orders, the pandemic quickly produced a precipitous drop in demand. Discretionary spending has plummeted and even essential spending has slumped. Workers in small businesses have lost their jobs or been “furloughed” in droves. At this date, 8 May 2020, 33 million workers have filed unemployment insurance claims in the past 6 weeks. Small businesses have received less federal support than large businesses. Banks and lenders have not been asked to sacrifice. These events resonate with trends about consumption, aggregate demand, and the concentration of capital that regularly appear in the course materials.

In general, this course considers narratives of economic life. We find these narratives in economic writing as well as in fictional narratives. In the past, this course has concluded with a section on the 2008-2009 financial crisis. During the summer, I will select journalism and economic analysis so that we can consider the current crisis, which will surely extend through the fall semester, in a highly politicized environment of a presidential election year. I will not find much fiction treating the current crisis, but I will be able to discover profiles that indicate the way some individuals experience the crisis. Right now, I anticipate cutting much of the literature from the early stages of the course, and retaining *Real Women Have Curves* and *Margin Call* among the films. Events will change rapidly and I will adjust the syllabus so that we can consider key concepts in the course in the context of the ongoing crisis. The administrative details in the old course description, regarding requirements for the course and grading factors, will still apply.

### OLD COURSE DESCRIPTION AND SYLLABUS

This course is an American Studies capstone senior seminar for English majors (other majors can take the course with permission of the instructor). The course is an **online format**. We will examine representations of commercial life in fiction, film, journalism, economic theory, and a memoir by the first great oil magnate, John D. Rockefeller. We will consider the sorts of narratives that appear in these different genres. We will ask how characters and persons in these texts experience commercial life in different settings. To what extent do persons and fictional characters identify

themselves through commercial relations? How does economic life affect our sense of ourselves?

**Course materials. No books are on order at the University Bookstore.** Readings will take the form of PDFs and occasional links to websites. We will read short literature by Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Don DeLillo, and a few others, and study three films, which will be available for streaming through the Marriott Library. *Safety Last!* (1923) concerns activity around a department store. *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) considers the relation between community life and banking practices (and yes, with some attention to the Christmas season). We will study *Margin Call* (2011) when we consider materials about the global financial crisis @2008. We will read recent newspaper articles about economic life and read excerpts by economic theorists like Franklin, Adam Smith, Milton Friedman, John Maynard Keynes, Thorstein Veblen, Karl Marx, and Joseph Stiglitz. We will examine the economic materials as narratives, recounting the progress of economies but also the aspirations of individuals and populations. Generally, we will attend carefully to the language and strategies of all the course materials, so that we can learn how to interpret them. The range of materials will give us a broader view of the issues than reading fewer, longer texts. If any of the films we study for some reason become unavailable for streaming through the Marriott Library (*It's a Wonderful Life*, for example, has at times been unavailable), they are available on Netflix or YouTube or other websites.

Public figures frequently speak of the need to spur economic growth. When public figures discuss economic growth, education, climate change, and so forth, they appeal, although not always explicitly, to people's assumptions about the relation between commercial life and identity. Bear in mind that an important factor in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election (including the primary campaigns) was people's sense of their relation to trends in manufacturing, evolving global markets, and individual debt. Similar concerns will loudly punctuate the presidential election campaign during Fall semester. The fiction and films we will study manifestly dramatize ways we form our sense of ourselves in commercial contexts. Benjamin Franklin's 1757 short story "The Way to Wealth," for example, concerns shopping and debt. I hope students will become adept at discovering similar dramas in journalism and excerpts from economic theory. Non-fiction involves narratives of the self as much as fiction does.

Most of the selections from economic theory are accessible to a general audience. The excerpts from John Locke and Adam Smith and the essays by John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman—all very famous figures—are straightforward as well as brief. Each author tells a lively story. Thorstein Veblen wrote more difficult prose (he did so deliberately, for reasons I will explain when we study him), but the excerpt is not that long and not that hard, and Veblen introduces a crucial concept, "pecuniary emulation," as well as the better known term "conspicuous consumption." The 20-page excerpt we will study from Karl Marx's *Capital*, on the inevitable concentration of capital, is hard to read, a result of his writing style, quirks of German, and problems of translation. But this excerpt, I think, explains a key element of modern economic activity. (Consider the frequency of mergers nowadays. Google and Amazon, for

example, constantly seek means to expand their footprint, as in Google's acquisition of YouTube or Amazon's recent acquisition of Whole Foods and the online pharmacy PillPack. Globalization was well underway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.) Marx thinks people desire the concentration of capital (and thus the huge growth of a few firms at the expense of smaller firms and at the expense of labor), even as we protest many of the effects of these increases in economies of scale. The Marx is difficult, but you will forever think differently about large scale capitalization and consumer demand.

The course materials largely concern the American context. American colonials rebelled against the British monarchy under the auspices of commerce, upset that British rule unduly restricted American commerce and hopeful that the new nation could survive because of its commerce. Yet Americans have often been ambivalent about commerce. While Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*, announced that commerce would provide a basis for a "common bond," Thomas Jefferson worried that individuals' pursuit of commerce would dissolve the social fabric. The course materials reveal a wide range of responses to commercial life. The extremely popular, 1923 silent film *Safety Last*, for example—and at the time its star and creative force, Harold Lloyd, equaled Charlie Chaplin as a box office draw—illustrates both the enthusiasm and anxiety that commercial life stimulates.

**This course is an online course.** A week or so before we arrive at each text in the syllabus, I will post a video lecture on the Canvas site, in the page titled Lessons. (I will post PDFs of the Lessons as well, for students who prefer just to read text. I myself would prefer to watch the video and follow along, as the text scrolls down.) These Lessons contain some biographical material about authors' careers and some historical context, but we want students in English classes to attend to the language and structure of texts, and the Lessons will focus on specific passages in the primary texts and on passages in ancillary materials. While the class is studying each text, students will participate in Canvas Discussions of the materials. Generally, two Canvas Discussions will take place each week. I will distribute study questions for the texts we discuss, and two or so students will select study questions to initiate discussions. Students are welcome to develop their own study questions. For each Discussion, the other students will respond to each of the initial posts. As the semester proceeds, I will try to devise a format for students to collaborate in initiating group discussions. Students do not need to be online at the same time.

Contributions to the Discussions on Canvas will be worth 10% of the final grade. **If you submit responses to all the Canvas Discussions, you automatically receive an "A" for this portion of the final grade.** Otherwise, your grade for the Discussions will reflect the percentage of posts you submit during the semester, evaluated on a curve. In addition, as I do for traditional class discussion, I will add a bonus to some students' grade for the Discussions, if their Discussion posts are particularly helpful.

**Writing assignments:** One 2-page, **optional**, ungraded, diagnostic essay, to begin a conversation about writing with individual students; two formal, 4-5 page essays on assigned questions; a seminar length essay, whose topic students develop themselves. The shorter essays will help students prepare to develop a longer essay. The two

shorter essays can be revised, the grade on the revision replacing the old grade. Regular, brief exercises (@ 75 words. **No exams.** (The exercises in part replace exams.)

In the closing weeks of the semester, students will either record or post in writing a presentation on their seminar essay projects. The presentations can take the form of an approximately 10 minute recording or 3-5 pages of text. All other students will comment on the presentations. We will discuss the mechanics of these presentations.

The first graded essay is worth 15% of the final grade; the second essay is worth 20% of the final grade. The seminar essay is worth 40% of the final grade. The brief exercises total 10% of the final grade (and submitting them regularly can only help a student's grade). The Discussions are worth 15% of the final grade. The brief exercises enable me to gauge whether students are keeping up with assignments and understanding the material as we proceed. The exercises help students gain practice articulating ideas about the course materials. The stakes are low for any single exercise, and so you can try out ideas. As I comment on the exercises, I can often identify the germ of an argument for the formal essays. Submitting the exercises regularly can only help a student's grade; if you don't submit the exercises, your grade by definition will suffer.

In a traditional classroom setting, we discuss matters of composition for 5-10 minutes each class meeting. I will try to post discussions of some element of composition, but students should read and review the file **Matters of Composition** posted on Canvas. Some of the brief exercises may ask students to revise a sentence that in present form is ineffective. I try to help students learn to organize essays around a concrete thesis, with every stage of the essay developing this core argument. I try to help students learn to organize sentences around concrete, active verbs.

You will likely have questions about any number of the matters I have outlined above. For example, how do I evaluate the Exercises? What does the optional, diagnostic essay involve? Or, what do I expect on revisions of essays? In ordinary classroom settings, we regularly discuss such issues during class meetings. You will find on the course Canvas site explanations of these and other matters in the pages General Instructions and Writing Assignments. As specific issues or questions arise, I can communicate with individual students or the entire class via an Announcement or in a Canvas Discussion or by posting a video or PDF.

***University Writing Center:*** The University Writing Center offers one-on-one assistance with writing. Tutors can help you understand your writing assignments, work through the writing process, and/or polish your drafts for all the courses in which you are enrolled. Sessions are free of charge, and you can meet as often as you need. To make an appointment, call 801.587.9122. The Writing Center is located on the second floor of the Marriott Library. Visit the website at [writingcenter.utah.edu](http://writingcenter.utah.edu). Let me suggest that before you visit the Writing Center, come to my office, and certainly show me outlines and drafts of the formal essays. I myself have helped train some of

the tutors at the University Writing Center, and these tutors are well trained and experience. But bring me your writing first. Discussing with me your exercises, on which the stakes are low, might be useful as preparation for longer writing assignments.

***Students with Disabilities (ADA statement):*** The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability & Access, 162 Olpin Union Building, 581-5020. CDA will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations. *All written information in this course can be made available in alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability & Access.*

***University Safety Statement:*** The University of Utah values the safety of all campus community members. To report suspicious activity or to request a courtesy escort, call campus police at 801-585-COPS (801-585-2677). Members of the University will receive important emergency alerts and safety messages regarding campus safety via text message. For more information regarding safety and to view available training resources, including helpful videos, visit [safeu.utah.edu](http://safeu.utah.edu).

***Addressing Sexual Misconduct:*** Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender (which includes sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) is a civil rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, color, religion, age, status as a person with a disability, veteran's status or genetic information. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you are encouraged to report it to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 135 Park Building, 801-581-8365, or the Office of the Dean of Students, 270 Union Building, 801-581-7066. For support and confidential consultation, contact the Center for Student Wellness, 426 SSB, 801-581-7776. To report to the police, contact the Department of Public Safety, 801-585-2677 (COPS). For fuller explanations of sexual assault and sexual misconduct, visit <http://safeu.utah.edu/>.

**If you witness sexual assault or feel that you are in imminent and immediate danger, dial 911. Report sexual assault or sexual misconduct to campus police (801-585-2677) or the Title IX office (<https://utah.i-sight.com/external/case/new>; 801-581-8365; or [oeo@utah.edu](mailto:oeo@utah.edu)).**

***English Department Diversity Statement:*** Literature allows us to imagine the lives of others and broaden our perspectives. Our conversations about literature, in the physical or virtual classroom, are part of that process. Our diverse identities and experiences will inform and enhance those discussions. As we approach sometimes difficult topics, each member of the class is expected to help foster a respectful, generous, and supportive classroom environment that makes room for productive difference and reasoned debate.

**University Accommodations Policy:** Students should visit <http://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-100.php> to review the university's Accommodations Policy (Policy 6-100-Q., especially Q1.-Q3, and in particular Q3a.-Q3d). Students should notify me if they seek any scheduling accommodations under the terms of Policy 6-100-Q. Also in accord with this policy, please note that the content of course materials and consequently of class discussions may conflict with some students' deeply held core beliefs. Any student has the right to petition the instructor in writing for a content accommodation. Please review the syllabus carefully, and if you have a concern about the content of any course materials, please discuss it with me immediately. If you wish to petition for an accommodation, I recommend that you submit it as soon as possible.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is one form of "academic misconduct" (see Policy 6-400 (Student Code), Section 1.B. 2., at <http://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-400.php>). University Policy 6-400, Section 1.B. 2.c., defines plagiarism as "the intentional unacknowledged use or incorporation of any other person's work in, or as a basis for, one's own work offered for academic consideration or credit for public presentation. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, representing as one's own, without attribution, any individual's words, phrasing, ideas, sequence of ideas, information or any other mode or content of expression." You must cite any material you have consulted on the web or in a library; otherwise you have plagiarized the material, whether you quote (or copy) passages or just allude to concepts discussed on a website. Do not adapt other students' work nor collaborate with others on your essays. The work you submit must be your own.

Student plagiarism is often easy to detect, because plagiarized passages do not sound like student writing and often depart from a thesis you have developed for this course. Google and other digital tools make plagiarism increasingly easy to document. Faculty are required to report for disciplinary action all instances of plagiarism to the Offices of the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Students who plagiarize have not learned the skills any discipline tries to cultivate, and professors are authorized to decide appropriate penalties. We can fail plagiarized work or even fail for the course students guilty of plagiarism. Plagiarized work is generally not high quality anyway, so better to discuss with your instructor any difficulties you encounter while crafting essays. Learn from these difficulties; do not try to disguise them. In general, do not use sources you find on the web to help you fulfill assignments for this course, because you will be unable to evaluate the quality of the source. The questions we discuss in class are specific to this course, and websites will provide only general information.

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**Online course** Fall 2019

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## OLD WEEKLY SYLLABUS

All readings for this course are available on Canvas. I have **ordered no texts** for the course; you may have to rent or buy some of the films. Submit all formal essays by email; send to h.horwitz@utah.edu. When you submit essays, you **MUST** attach the essay as a Word file (.doc or .docx; don't paste the text into the email) and label the file with your name (not my name or a topic name) (for example: Jones1stEssay, or Jones3223Essay#1; **not** HorwitzEssay#1 or TwainEssay#1).

### **Week #1 (August 20):** Introduction:

Read Course Description and Syllabus, General Instructions for Online Course, Guidelines for Discussions. Discussion for Tuesday will be open for general questions (and only from 9 AM to 10 PM). Participation in Tuesday's Discussion is **not required**; I will just hang around the computer to answer questions.

(Aug. 22) excerpt from John Locke, "Of Property"  
excerpt from Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*  
excerpts from Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*  
Read General Instructions on Exercises;

### **Week #2 (Aug. 27):** finish Paine; begin reading Matters of Composition (MC).

(Aug. 29): Mark Twain, "The £1,000,000 Bank Note"

**TWO-PAGE OPTIONAL, DIAGNOSTIC ESSAY** on Paine, due **Friday**

### **Week #3 (Sept. 3):** excerpts from Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*

(Sept. 5): Benjamin Franklin, "The Way to Wealth"

Franklin, "The Nature and Necessity of Paper Currency" (1729)

Franklin, "The Internal State of America" (1785?)

### **Week #4 (Sept. 10):** Herman Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids"

Alice Kessler-Harris, excerpt from *Out Of Work*

(Sept. 12): Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "Mrs. Newly-Wed and Her Servants"  
(@1900)

### **Week #5 (Sept. 17):** *Real Women Have Curves* (2002, dir. Patricia Cardoso)

(Sept. 19) Paton & Lazizzera, "Inside Italy's Shadow Economy"  
(*NY Times*, 9/20/2018)

Nelson D. Schwartz, "At Carrier, the Factory Trump Saved,  
Morale Is Through the Floor,"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/business/economy/carrier-trump-absenteeism-morale.html>

### **Week #6 (Sept. 24):** *Safety Last* (1923, dirs. Newmeyer and Taylor; starring Harold Lloyd)

(Sept. 26) Keith Bryant & Henry Dethloff, "Retailing,"  
from *A History of American Business*

**FIRST ESSAY DUE: Friday, by 5 PM.**

**Week #7 (Oct. 1 & 3):** Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, excerpt from Chapter 25,  
“The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”

**FALL BREAK, NO CLASSES, October 6-13**

**Week #8 (Oct. 15):** John D. Rockefeller,  
from *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events* (1904)  
Bryant & Dethloff, “Multinational Corporations,”  
from *A History of American Business*  
**(Oct. 17):** John Maynard Keynes, “Saving and Spending” (January 1931)  
Milton Friedman, “Relation between Economic Freedom  
and Political Freedom” (1964)

**Revision of first essay, due Friday, Oct. 18**

**Week #9 (Oct. 22):** *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946, dir. Capra)  
**(Oct. 24):** Don DeLillo, “Hammer and Sickle”

**Week #10 (Oct. 29):** Richard A. Posner, excerpt from *A Failure of Capitalism*  
**(Oct. 31):** Joseph Stiglitz, excerpt from *Freefall*  
**SECOND ESSAY DUE: Friday**

**Week #11 (Nov. 5 & 7):** *Margin Call* (2011, dir. Chandor)  
**PROPOSAL FOR SEMINAR ESSAY DUE: Friday**

**Week #12 (Nov. 12):** Student presentations start  
**(Nov. 14):** Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903)

**Week #13 (Nov. 19):** Student presentations  
**(Nov. 21):** Neil Irwin, “With Gigs Instead of Jobs, Workers Bear New  
Burdens.” *New York Times*. 31 March 2016.  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/upshot/contractors-  
and-temps-accounted-for-all-of-the-growth-in-  
employment-in-the-last-decade.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/upshot/contractors-and-temps-accounted-for-all-of-the-growth-in-employment-in-the-last-decade.html)  
Greenhouse, Stephen. “Part-Time Schedules, Full-Time  
Headaches.” *New York Times*. Saturday, 19 July 2014.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/business/part-time-  
schedules-full-time-headaches.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/business/part-time-schedules-full-time-headaches.html)

**Revisions of second essay due Friday**

**Week #14 (Nov. 26):** Student presentations  
Noam Sheiber, “A Middle Ground Between Contract Worker  
and Employee.” *New York Times*. 10 December 2015.  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/business/a-middle-  
ground-between-contract-worker-and-employee.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/business/a-middle-ground-between-contract-worker-and-employee.html)

**Week #15 (Dec. 3 & 5):** Student presentations  
**FIVE PAGES OF SEMINAR ESSAY DUE:** Monday  
(those presenting on Dec. 3 or 5, 5 pages due Friday)

**SEMINAR ESSAY DUE: Friday, December 13**