In this course for non-majors, 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. As a means to consider the kinds of questions students in the humanities ask, we will consider the sorts of narratives that appear in these different genres. As one asks about any narrative, we will ask how characters and persons in these texts experience commercial life in different settings. To what extent do persons and characters identify themselves through commercial relations? How does economic life affect our sense of ourselves?

We will read short essays and excerpts from writings by several well-known economists. We will examine these economic materials as narratives, which recount the progress of economies and 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.

Course materials. No books are on order at the University Bookstore. All readings for the course are fairly short or very short. Readings will be available as PDFs posted in the Course Notes page of the course Canvas page. A few recent newspaper articles are available at links to websites.

We will examine some 18th century materials (for example, excerpts from Paine’s *Common Sense*; Benjamin Franklin’s short story “The Way to Wealth” and some of his writing on paper money; a famous passage from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*). We will look at some 19th century materials (by authors like Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Karl Marx, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, John D. Rockefeller, and Thorstein Veblen) to consider changes in narratives as the need for large-scale capitalization intensifies and as credit becomes a more primary mode of economic transaction. We will study some early to mid-20th century materials: the films *Safety Last*, starring Harold Lloyd [1923] and *It’s a Wonderful Life*, by Frank Capra [1946]; excerpts from John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman). We will spend the closing month of the semester with fiction (DeLillo), film (*Margin Call*, 2011), and economic analysis produced in the wake of the recent financial crisis. (Let me note that *Margin Call* contains much foul language, which is supposed to capture the speech patterns of workers in the financial sector. But the film has no sex scenes and no physical violence, and it is the best film I know on the recent financial crisis; I prefer it to *The Big Short*.)

Three of the four films we will study will be available for streaming through the Marriott Library. *Safety Last!* concerns activity around a department store. *It’s a Wonderful Life* considers the relation between community life and banking practices (and yes, with some attention to the Christmas season). *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) concerns Latina
women working in a dress factory. These workers face very specific social expectations as Latina women. *Margin Call* concerns an investment firm during the collapse of the stock market in, say, late September 2008. *Real Women Have Curves* is not available for streaming through the Marriott Library, but this film, as well as the others, is available on Netflix or YouTube or Xfinity and other websites, for a fairly small fee if not for free. DVDs of these films will be available at the Marriott reserve desk.

**Issues treated in the course.** 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 2020 presidential election campaign, even 10 months before the election. 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. The early 20th century economist 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* (1867), 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 nonetheless fairly short 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. By far most of the Trump administration’s payments to farmers to mitigate the trade slump caused by tariffs the president has levied on various nations, especially China, in fact go to large agribusiness rather than to small farmers. Globalization and large-scale capitalization were well underway in the 19th 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 excerpt 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, was a bigger box office draw than Charlie Chaplin—illustrates both the enthusiasm and stress that commercial life stimulates in us.

**This course is an online course.** The course involves no class meetings. Instead, students will participate about twice a week in online Discussions on Canvas. A week or so before we arrive at each text in the syllabus, I will post on the course Canvas site a video version and a PDF version of a Lesson on the upcoming course materials. Because we want to help students in English classes attend to the language and structure of texts, the Lessons will often focus on specific passages in the primary texts. The Lessons also provide an introduction to the careers of the authors we study. Generally, two students will post initial comments on a question for each Discussion. Each student shall initiate three Canvas Discussions during the term. The assignments to initiate Discussions follow the alphabet. I will send students the Lesson and questions for the Discussion they will initiate at least a week in advance. For each Discussion, the other students will respond to one of the initial posts, with the individual option to engage in a broader conversation with other students.

**Writing assignments:** regular, brief exercises (@ 75 words; 15% of the final grade); one 2-page, optional, ungraded, diagnostic essay, to begin a conversation about writing with individual students; 2 formal, 3-page essays and a third essay, at 4-5 pages. I will distribute questions for all the essays. Students have the option to form their own question for the final essay. The first formal essay is worth 20% of the final grade; the second and third formal essays are each worth 25% percent of the final grade. Students can revise the first two essays, and the grade on the revision replaces the old grade. **No exams.** Contributions to the Discussions on Canvas will be worth 15% 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. 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. The brief exercises enable me to gauge whether students are keeping up with assignments and understanding the material as we proceed. The exercises substitute for exams. 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.

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 email or in a Canvas Announcement or by posting a video or PDF.

In a traditional classroom setting, we discuss matters of composition for 5-10 minutes each class meeting. With some regularity, I will post discussions of some element of composition. 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.

English 3050  The Imagination of Commercial Life in Fiction and Film
Online course   Spring 2020
Professor Howard Horwitz   3619 LNCO
h.horwitz@utah.edu (our offices no longer house phones)
Office hours:  TTH, 11:00 AM-12:15 PM; Th., 2:15-3:15; or by appt.

PROVISIONAL WEEKLY SYLLABUS
All readings for this course are available on Canvas. I have ordered no texts for the course; you may have to rent one or two of the films. Submit all formal essays by email; send to h.horwitz@utah.edu. 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; not HorwitzEssay#1 or TwainEssay#1).

Week #1 (January 7): 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.
(Jan. 9) excerpt from John Locke, “Of Property”
excerpts from Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations
Read General Instructions on Exercises;

Week #2 (Jan. 14): excerpts from Thomas Paine, Common Sense
begin reading Matters of Composition (MC), Sections 1 & 2, & 7
(Jan. 16): Mark Twain, “The £1,000,000 Bank Note” (1893)
TWO-PAGE OPTIONAL, DIAGNOSTIC ESSAY, due Friday

Week #3 (Jan. 21): excerpts from Thorstein Veblen, Theory of the Leisure Class
Read in MC, Sections 10 & 11
**Week #4 (Jan. 28):** Franklin, “The Nature and Necessity of Paper Currency” (1729)
Franklin, “The Internal State of America” (1785?)

(Jan. 30): Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”
Alice Kessler-Harris, excerpt from *Out Of Work*
Read in MC, Section 9

**Week #5 (Feb. 4):** Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “Mrs. Newly-Wed and Her Servants” (@1900)

(Feb. 6): Nelson D. Schwartz, “At Carrier, the Factory Trump Saved, Morale Is Through the Floor,”
Read in MC, Sections 3 & 8 (The Penalty Point System does not apply to students in courses for non-majors, but it describes useful principles.)

**Week #6 (Feb. 11):** *Real Women Have Curves* (2002, dir. Patricia Cardoso)

(Feb. 13): finish *Real Women Have Curves*
Paton & Lazazzera, “Inside Italy’s Shadow Economy” *(NY Times, 9/20/2018)*
Read in MC, Section 4

**FIRST ESSAY DUE: Friday, Feb. 14**

**Week #7 (Feb.18 & 20):** *Safety Last* (1923, dirs. Newmeyer and Taylor; starring Harold Lloyd
Bryant & Dethloff, “Retailing,”
from *A History of American Business*
Read in MC, Sections 5 & 6

**Week #8 (Feb. 25 & 27):** Karl Marx, *Capital,* Volume 1, excerpt from Chapter 25, “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”
Review in MC, Sections 10 & 11

**Week #9 (March 3):** John D. Rockefeller,
from *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events* (1904)
Keith Bryant & Henry Dethloff, “Multinational Corporations,”
from *A History of American Business*
(March 5): Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887)
Revision of first essay, due Friday, March 6

FALL BREAK, NO CLASSES, March 8-15

Week #10 (March 17 & 19): *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946, Capra)
Review in MC, Sections 10 & 11

Week #11 (March 24): John Maynard Keynes, “Saving and Spending” (January 1931)
(March 26): Milton Friedman, “Relation between Economic Freedom and Political Freedom” (1964)
SECOND ESSAY DUE: Friday, March 20

Week #12 (March 31 & April 2): Don DeLillo, “Hammer and Sickle” (2009)
John Kenneth Galbraith, “The Speculative Episode”
Review in MC, Sections 10 & 11

Week #13 (April 7): Richard A. Posner, chapter from *A Failure of Capitalism*
(April 9): Joseph Stiglitz, excerpts from *Freefall*

Week #14 (April 14 & 16): *Margin Call* (Chandor, 2011)

Week #15 (April 21): finish *Margin Call*
Revision of second essay, due Monday, April 20

FINALS WEEK: Third essay due Tuesday, April 27