

## Cultures of Consumption (050:333:01)

Mondays, 10:55AM - 1:55PM  
Remote Instruction, Sync

Professor Andy Urban  
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Office Hours by Appointment



*Hugo Gellert, "The Transformation of Money into Capital," 1934*

"The human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting!--Which it never can be...."

- Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

## Course Description

This course surveys the cultural, economic, political, and social significance of markets, and how Americans consume goods and services. We'll examine how the production and consumption of goods organize social relations; the impact that consumption has on the environment and different ecologies; how consumerism has empowered, exploited, and governed ideas about race, gender, and sexuality; how consumption has changed in response to developments such as the growth of the advertising industry and online retail; and how Americans navigate the politics and economics of debt. This class will model an interdisciplinary approach to the study of consumption, and the cultural and social practices that have emerged around purchasing things.

This course qualifies for the Certificate in Curation and Cultural Programming. Additional information on the certificate can be found at: <https://amerstudies.rutgers.edu/academics/undergraduate/certificates>.

## Required Readings

- ❖ Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown* (Pantheon, 2020), ISBN#: 9780307948472.
- ❖ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, 2019), ISBN#: 9781612198552.

These books are available through the Rutgers bookstore or through other online vendors.

I recommend buying the hard copy version of these two books, but if you buy an e-version, please note that for assignments, you are responsible for making sure that citations of the text correspond to the page numbers found in the hard copy version. (You can google how to do this for your device.)

You will also be reading articles and chapters that are available as .pdf files on our Canvas site, unless otherwise noted.

## Remote Format

Classes will take place Mondays on Zoom, from 10:55AM to 1:55PM. **Please use this link to access class:** <http://bit.ly/3s5AknZ>. We will be using this same link the entire semester.

I will record all classes and make them available via Canvas after they take place. You should watch video from class in cases where you have a legitimate reason for missing class. What constitutes a legitimate reason will be based on the honor system.

Because this will be a small, discussion-focused seminar, my expectation is that you will have your video on while present on our Zoom calls. If there are circumstances that make this difficult, please email me so we can discuss how to proceed.

### **Assignment and Grading Summary:**

- Essay #1: Due Friday, February 26 (20%)
- Essay #2: Due Friday, April 16 (20%)
- Class Presentations: In-Class, April 26 & May 3 (25%)
- Course Exam: Date and Time TBA, (25%)
- Participation (10%)

### **Grading Scale:**

92-100=**A**; 87-91=**B+**; 81-86=**B**; 77-80=**C+**; 70-76=**C**; 60-69=**D**; 0-59=**F**

**Note:** there are no minus grades at Rutgers.

### **American Studies Department Learning Goals Met by this Course:**

Students will learn to synthesize interdisciplinary sources and methods of analysis and to conduct investigations into American culture and history. Students will learn to use scholarship in history, politics, literature, and art to analyze and interpret the varied experiences, perspectives, and events that define American life. Students will be able to write well; speak articulately; and think critically, analytically, and creatively.

### **Class Policies:**

#### **Class Announcements:**

Please make sure that you are receiving and checking Canvas announcements. All important information related to class will be disseminated through this system. You are responsible for knowing the information and instructions posted to Canvas.

#### **Technology Requirements/Financial Need:**

For this course, you will need the ability to attend class on Zoom, and to access Canvas features related to instruction. We will also, on occasion, use the internet during class.

Please visit the Rutgers Student Tech Guide page for resources available to all students: <https://it.rutgers.edu/technology-guide/students/>.

If you do not have the appropriate technology for financial reasons, please email Dean of Students [deanofstudents@echo.rutgers.edu](mailto:deanofstudents@echo.rutgers.edu) for assistance. If you are facing other financial hardships, please visit the Office of Financial Aid at <https://financialaid.rutgers.edu/>.

The American Studies Department also has a commitment to ensuring that students are not prevented from learning due to financial reasons (being able to afford books, for instance). Please email me privately if this is an issue, so I can work with you to access departmental resources.

### **Special Accommodation Requests:**

All special accommodation requests should be brought to my attention during the first two weeks of class. Full policies and procedures are available for review at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu>.

### **Covid-19/ Missing Class:**

Obviously, these continue to be uniquely difficult times in respect to Covid-19 and its impacts. As mentioned earlier in the syllabus, I expect you to attend class if you can, but if you cannot, there will be recordings available to make up missed work.

I promise to be understanding and flexible if larger issues arise preventing you from completing classwork. I just ask that you communicate with me so we can come up with a plan that helps you finish the course and receive credit.

### **Academic Integrity Policy:**

<https://nbprovost.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-students>

The principles of academic integrity require that a student:

- properly acknowledge and cite all use of the ideas, results, or words of others.
- properly acknowledge all contributors to a given piece of work.
- make sure that all work submitted as their own in a course or other academic activity is produced without the aid of impermissible materials or impermissible collaboration.
- obtain all data or results by ethical means and report them accurately without suppressing any results inconsistent with their interpretation or conclusions.

- treat all other students in an ethical manner, respecting their integrity and right to pursue their educational goals without interference. This requires that a student neither facilitate academic dishonesty by others nor obstruct their academic progress.
- uphold the canons of the ethical or professional code of the profession for which they are preparing.

Any violation of academic integrity is a serious offense and is therefore subject to an appropriate sanction or penalty. If you are unsure about whether something might violate Rutgers' academic integrity policy – please ask me for clarification!

### **Intellectual Property:**

Lectures and materials utilized in this course, including but not limited to videocasts, podcasts, visual presentations, assessments, and assignments, are protected by United States copyright laws as well as Rutgers University policy. As the instructor of this course, I possess sole copyright ownership over recorded class sessions and the material that we create in discussions. You are permitted to take notes for personal use or to provide to a classmate also currently enrolled in this course.

Under no other circumstances is distribution of recorded or written materials associated with this course permitted to any internet site or similar information-sharing platform without my express written consent. Doing so is a violation of the university's Academic Integrity Policy. Similarly, these copyright protections extend to original papers you produce for this course. In the event that I seek to share your work further, I will first obtain your written consent to do so.

### **Honor Pledge:**

I pledge on my honor that I will adhere to all aspects of the Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy and to Rutgers policies concerning bullying, intimidation, and harassment (<https://policies.rutgers.edu/10211-currentpdf>).

By accepting this syllabus and enrolling in this course, you assume responsibility for knowing the above policies and the possible penalties – including suspension and expulsion – should you violate them.

## **Union Message:**

*As a member of Rutgers AAUP-AFT, I stand in solidarity with all laid-off workers at Rutgers. They have been sacrificed to management's unnecessary austerity measures, which were carried out unilaterally and without transparency. I believe that the administration has an obligation to respect and protect its lowest-paid, most vulnerable employees. For more information on this subject, please visit: <https://www.rutgersaaup.org/how-were-confronting-the-crisis/>.*

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## **Class Schedule and Assigned Readings**

### **January 25 - Introductions**

- Sharon Zukin and Jennifer Smith Maguire, "Consumers and Consumption," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 173-197.

#### **In-Class Reading:**

- Elliot B. Weininger and Annette Lareau, "Cultural Capital," *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (2007)

### **February 1 - The Social Relations of Production and Consumption**

- David Harvey, "Money as the Representation of Value," in *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* (2017), 51-71.
- Katrine Marçal, "In which it becomes apparent that economic man is not a woman," in *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner* (2016), 29-41.
- Sidney Mintz, "Time, Sugar, and Sweetness," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (1980): 56-73.

#### **In-Class Reading:**

- Excerpts from Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776).

### **February 8 - Consumption and the Production of Race, part one**

- Eric Lott, "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture," *Love and Theft* (1993), 15-37.

#### In-Class Reading:

- Yu, *Interior Chinatown*, Acts I-II.

### **February 15 - Consumption and the Production of Race, part two**

- Lisa Aldred, Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *American Indian Quarterly* (2000): 329-352.
- Patrick LeBeau, "Identity, Mascots, and Playing Indian," *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements* (2004), 739-43.

#### In-Class Reading:

- Yu, *Interior Chinatown*, Acts III-IV

### **February 22 - Consumption and the Production of Race, part three**

- Hua Hsu, "Chinese Food and the Joy of Inauthentic Cooking," *New Yorker*, November 23, 2015.

#### In-Class Reading:

- Yu, *Interior Chinatown*, V-end

**\*\*\*\*\* Essay #1 due Friday, February 26 \*\*\*\*\***

### **March 1 - Advertising, Brainwashing, and Resistance**

In-class screening: Director John Carpenter, *They Live* (1984)

#### In-Class Reading:

- Steven Hyden, John Carpenter's 'They Live' Was Supposed to Be a Warning. We Didn't Heed It. We Didn't Even Understand It," *The Ringer*, October 4, 2018,

<https://www.theringer.com/movies/2018/10/4/17933020/they-live-john-carpenter-america-donald-trump>

### **March 8 – Consumption in the Digital Age, part one**

- Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, chs. 1-2
- Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese, “It’s a Prime Day for Resistance To Amazon’s Ruthless Exploitation of Its Workers,” *Jacobin*, October 13, 2020

In-Class Activity: Online Shopping, Autoethnography

### **March 22 – Consumption in the Digital Age, part two**

- Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, chs. 3-4
- Pun Ngai and Jenn Chan, “Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience,” *Modern China* 38 (2012): 383–410.

In-Class Activity: Opting Out?

### **March 29 – Consumption in the Digital Age, part three**

- Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, chs. 5-6
- Excerpts from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

**\*\*\*\*\* Individual Meetings to Discuss In-Class Presentations \*\*\*\*\***

### **April 5 – Politicizing Consumption**

- Lawrence Glickman, “The American Tradition of Consumer Politics,” *Organization of American Historians Magazine*, May 2017
- Carol Faulkner, “The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820-1860,” *Journal of Early Republic* 27 (2007): 377-405.
- Alexis Shotwell, “Complexity and Complicity,” in *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (2016)

In-Class Activity: Consumer Manifestos

## **April 12 - Sex Sells: Gendering Consumption**

In-class screening: Director Andrew Bujalski, *Support the Girls* (2018)

In-Class Reading:

- Alissa Wilkinson, "Support the Girls, set in a Hooters-style bar, is an outstanding, quietly feminist comedy," <https://www.vox.com/summer-movies/2018/8/24/17761418/support-the-girls-review-regina-hall-andrew-bujalski>

\*\*\*\*\* Essay #2 due Friday, April 16 \*\*\*\*\*

## **April 19 - Illegal Markets**

- Peter Andreas, "Rumrunners and Prohibitionists," *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (2014), 227-49.
- Jennifer Percy, "Trapped by the Walmart of Heroin," *New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/magazine/kensington-heroin-opioid-philadelphia.html> [READ ONLINE]
- Jasper Gilardi, "Ally or Exploiter? The Smuggler-Migrant Relationship Is a Complex One," [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org), Feb. 5, 2020.

In-Class Activity: Legalization and Liberalization, Defining Parameters

## **April 26 - In-Class Presentations**

## **May 3 - In-Class Presentations**