

EN 6611 3.0: Imperial American Culture: The Long 1990s

Art Redding aredding@yorku.ca

Winter 2024; Thursday 8:30-11:30

Calendar (Short) Course Description:

Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, during what historian Gary Gerstle terms the “unipolar moment” of 90s the United States found itself in the unique position of world imperial supremacy. This course considers the relations between that globalizing political power bloc deemed the “neoliberal order” during the “long 1990s” and the culture wars of the decade. As an English course, The Long 1990s will focus primarily on American literary production as well as theoretical developments, but will consider film, television, music, digital culture, politics, etc., en route.

Expanded Course Description:

Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, during what historian Gary Gerstle terms the “unipolar moment” of 90s the United States found itself in the unique position of world imperial supremacy. This course considers the relations between that globalizing political power bloc deemed the “neoliberal order” during the “long 1990s” and the culture wars of the decade. As an English course, The Long 1990s will focus primarily on American literary production as well as theoretical developments, but will consider film, television, music, digital culture, politics, etc. en route.

As Chuck Klosterman notes in his recent survey, *The Nineties*, it was the decade of Blockbuster videos, of email, Napster, Nintendo, Y2K, and the rise of gaming. Along with the cementing of digital culture in daily life, rollbacks of the gains of the Civil Rights movement, multiculturalism, and women’s liberation (which proceeds apace today), the emergence of globalization technology (string theory, computers, Human Genome Project), the decade was marked by the global prominence of American culture. With the Gulf War of 1991, President George Bush announced a New World Order with America ascendant, a proposition bolstered by such ideologues as Francis Fukuyama, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Globally, the zenith of neoliberalism involved efforts to open new markets and bolster market-friendly democracy and cultural consumerism abroad: hip hop became a global phenomenon, and also country and western music.

Culturally, the decade casts a long shadow. Frank Guan, in his *New Yorker* review of Klosterman’s book (February 7, 2022, 66-69) noted that the 90s was “the first decade without an aesthetic distinction between mainstream and marginal popular cultures.” The definitive cultural productions included such unreadable epic novels as *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *Underworld* (1997). It was everywhere a literature of bloat: dirty realism, multiculturalism, postmodernism. Onscreen, popular television serials proved variously inane—*Friends* (1994-2004)—cynical—*Seinfeld* (1989-1998)—or satirical—*The Simpsons* (which began in 1989 and still runs today). Hollywood offerings included such soporific films as *Titanic* (1997), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and *Braveheart* (1995). Other touchstone films from the era, including *Silence of the*

Lambs (1991), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *The Matrix* (1999), can all productively be read as allegories about the ethics of unprecedented, even totalizing power; it is no coincidence that the contemporary superhero film, ushered in by Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) was ascendant in this decade, largely supplanting the western as the genre symbolically interrogating American power in the world.

The academy (our field) during the age of the tenured radical witnessed the institutionalization of a once more or less avant-garde complex of earlier critical theories; accordingly, the age of "theory" came to be infiltrated by a somewhat Americanized version of "Cultural Studies." Other "institutionalizing" interventions included Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1992) and Jane Gallop's *Around 1981* (1991), arguing that feminism had become effectively (professionally) ensconced within the academy for a decade, as well as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) along with Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Leo Bersani's *Homos* (1995) and other works legitimizing queer theory.