

High Art and Popular Culture: Short paper topic
"The heroism of modern life"

The first paper topic will involve your visiting the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art or viewing one of the following films. As you go over which of the topics you would like to write about, please keep the following in mind:

- **The museum has an erratic daily schedule and is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays.** Please keep this in mind when you arrange your visit/s, as the "I-tried-to-go-to-the-museum-but-it-was-closed" excuse is not an option.
- **I will keep copies of each film on reserve in the library,** but there will surely be a run on them as the due date gets closer. These films generally aren't available at the corner Blockbuster Video. In any case, keep in mind that if you wait until the night before the paper is due to check out/rent a film for this paper, chances are good that it will be gone. Plan ahead!
- **Your paper must be written in the following format:** Typed or computer printed, double-spaced, with no larger than one-inch margins and 12-point fonts. "Illustrations" are allowed, but they will be subtracted from your total page count. (In other words, papers where the author has tried to use computer-magic to, say, spread five sentences across three pages are unacceptable.) All sources will be correctly cited according to the Chicago Manual of Style, a cribsheet of which will be handed out to you in class and linked to our website. **PLEASE NOTE: Those who fail to correctly cite their sources according to the Chicago style will automatically have 10 points docked off the top of their paper grade.**
- **This is a research paper, and I will expect you to cite at least five published (ie. "paper:" book, newspaper, or scholarly journal) sources that you consulted in putting the paper together.** There is useful information available on both films' DVD commentary, and probably interesting reference material for all the topics on the Web. However, to do justice to the paper topics, you will need to conduct additional research not only with our library's collection and resources (including the Mobius inter-library loan system), but ideally perusing the resources at larger libraries such as UMKC, KU, or the KC Public Libraries. (Links to all these resources are available on our website.) Again, all papers will be expected cite any information used extensively from one's research, **including websites and audio/visual sources,** according to the Chicago style. This said, I will remind everyone that students caught using sources without the appropriate citation will receive an automatic "zero" on the assignment, reported to the College for plagiarism, and punished to the fullest extent of our Academic Dishonesty code.
- **Don't forget to describe!!** (Sure, I have already seen the films/artworks you'll be talking about; but write about them with the passion and well-observed detail that you would use explaining it to someone who has never seen them. I guarantee that this will help you in your analyses of those works!) Also, **please remember that (like book titles) the titles of artworks, films, and exhibitions must either be underlined or *italicized* in your essay.**
- As always, please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or problems that you are having in your research or writing. **(In fact, rough drafts are not just welcome, but *happily recommended*. You should e-mail the drafts to me as Word document attachments at least three days before the due date, which I can then correct and e-mail back to you. Remember: turning in a final paper that is based on changes made to a corrected rough draft practically guarantees you a good grade!)**

Papers will be turned in/discussed at the start of class on **Tuesday, September 23rd,** and no late papers will be accepted.

PAPER TOPICS:

Choice A: Art in the Age of Steam

As the newly-opened Nelson-Atkins exhibition *Art in the Age of Steam* demonstrates, few subjects captured the idea of “the heroism of modern life” as succinctly as the steam train. But—much like the idea of the Industrial Revolution itself—artists’ perspectives on the “heroism” of the train appears to shift dramatically from the 19th century into the 20th. Select two works from the exhibition that you feel best represent each era’s romantic vision of the train: one from the 19th century, and one from the 20th. After describing the works/artists you’ve chosen, write an **8-10-page essay** that addresses the following:

- How are the subjects in the works you’ve chosen similar and/or different? What do they reveal to the viewer about the place of the Industrial Revolution in everyday life? Does each subject strike you as “everyday” at all?
- How do the techniques with which the artists depict their subjects differ? Might these differences reflect creative and/or technological advancements in the gallery art and/or popular culture of the day?
- How might all these differences reflect each period’s different interest in industry’s relationship to art? Or industry’s relationship to everyday life?

Choice B: Preston Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels*

Preston Sturges’ 1941 film *Sullivan’s Travels* was made at the tail end of the Great Depression (right before America’s entry into World War II), and is truly a film about the “heroism of modern life” in an age of social and political upheaval. But, it is also a film that suggests the limitations of popular culture to truly capture that heroism in an artful way. Interestingly, the film appears at different times to claim that efforts to make art out of pop culture will fail, even as the film itself arguably contradicts that very claim. This topic will ask you to take one of the many sides of this argument presented in the film. After screening Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels*, write an **8-10 page essay** that addresses the following:

- A brief biography of the film’s director and an overview of the film’s plot.
- Discuss ways that you feel that the film reflects some of the period’s debates about the power and problems of popular culture (in such writers as Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno, or Greenberg).
- Discuss which side (if any!) you feel the film ultimately takes on the possibility of a popular political film.

Choice C: Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*

Filmed in 1959, *Breathless* was created at a time when many European artists (like their American counterparts) had grown bored of the pretentious limitations that many Modernists had placed on the creation of art after World War II. As such, many became interested in objects/ideas from “vulgar” popular culture—rock and roll, *film noir*, comics, pulp fiction, and advertisements—to reinvigorate their work, resulting in movements like *Nouveau Realisme* and Pop Art. Watch *Breathless* and, in an **8-10-page essay**, please address the following:

- A brief biography of the film’s director and an overview of the film’s plot.
- Discuss how Godard’s use of ideas/imagery/genres from popular (and particularly American) youth culture rather than “high art” are prevalent throughout the film. (Feel free to cite artists and objects we’ve studied in the postwar period that you feel share Godard’s strategies.)
- Discuss as well how the film’s male and female protagonists are—like the film itself—scandalously modern by 1950s standards but—like much of the era’s culture—still reflect some old-fashioned clichés.