UIUC Department of History  
Graduate Preliminary  
Print and Popular Culture Minor Exam

Directions: Please choose one question from each of the following three pairs and answer in essay form. Be sure that your essays have a clear line of argument and engage comparatively with both the relevant history and historiography. Discuss specific scholars and texts. The time available for the examination is five hours.

State of the Field/ Contemporary Debates

A. The “cultural turn” opened the path to whole new areas of historical inquiry. What was the “cultural turn” and what is its relationship to the history of popular culture? In what ways has theoretical work on media and communications influenced this body of historical scholarship? In your response, identify at least two significant theoretical approaches to the history of popular culture and discuss their approaches to issues of social identity, cultural agency and/or power and resistance. Be sure to note whether and how the history of popular culture is related to cultural studies.

B. Even before Jürgen Habermas published his important work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, historians have grappled with the relationship between public and private worlds. In what ways is popular culture understood as navigating these boundaries? What changes and variations in the location of these boundaries have historians identified across specificities of time and place? Is participation in popular culture counted as participation in the public sphere? Discuss the relationship between popular culture and the public sphere with reference to such factors as race, class, gender and age.

Historiographical / Empirical

A. The history of the media is a burgeoning historical field. Such histories frequently address questions of nationalism and national identity. How does media history change how we think about and write histories of nationalism/national identity? Are these changes evident in different ways across historiographies of distinctive national identities? What historical developments have had the largest impact on this scholarship? In your answer, identify at least three texts and discuss the historiographical arguments and the histories with which they engage.

B. Historians present conflicting evidence regarding the significance of popular culture for dominant hierarchies of race, class and gender, arguing in some cases that popular culture plays a significant role in constructing and reproducing dominant cases and in other cases that popular culture provides arenas for resistance and critique. Choosing three examples that reflect these debates comparatively—and reflecting on the influence of transnational or postcolonial studies in at least one example—compare and contrast their approaches to issues of identity, ideology, domination and resistance. Consider distinctions of national
historiography, theoretical presuppositions, and analytical focus (e.g. from “above” or “below,” on institutions or practices, producers or consumers) in your comparisons.

Conceptual / Pedagogical

A. You have been asked to teach an undergraduate course called “Twentieth Century Popular Culture in the West.” What themes and/or historical moments will you emphasize? What concepts and historical insights do you expect students to master through focus on these particular themes and events? Specify which six books you are including on the syllabus and why. What other modalities will you utilize in the teaching of this class? Give an example of one assignment you would set for your students, explaining also what they will learn conceptually and historically by completing the assignment.

B. Write an opening lecture on commodification, consumerism and spectacle for an undergraduate survey course on the history of popular culture. What are the key arguments that you need to communicate to your students? In your lecture, be sure to discuss the relationship between modernity, capitalism and mass society. Draw on the scholarship in these fields to support your perspective. Choose specific examples from American and European history to support your arguments.