**Welcome, Whys & Hows**

**Video Script**

**Fa20/Sp21**

**Welcome! Everything is fine!**

Hello everyone, and welcome to RTF 308: Development of Film & Media.

Everything is fine! (Lol.)

While I’m sad we won’t be learning face-to-face (because I really love being in the classroom!)

I’m happy this online class is one way you can stay as safe and healthy as possible during the pandemic.

Before we get started, I want to extend an especially warm welcome to two groups of students.

First, a shout-out to all first-year students who are beginning their college experience

In a way they probably weren’t dreaming about while they were working so hard in high school.

Not a whole ton of higher education movies look like this.

Very little Zoom in *Animal House.*

Not a ton of mandatory masks in *Legally Blonde*, although I’m sure Elle would have made it fashion.

While many aspects of college life have been sadly curtailed, please know at least that this one

—this class—

Has every bit of heart and care and effort poured into it as it would if we were meeting on campus.

Second, I wanted to give a high five to all the first-generation college students in our (virtual) midst.

Everyone’s route to college is full of bumps, but you found your way without a map

And that deserves a moment of reflection and praise.

**Introduction slide (Melies moon gif)**

Okay! Let’s head on into our welcome lecture, then,

Which I’ve called “Whats, Whys and Hows.”

**Agenda**

Here’s what we’ll be covering today:  
First, who the heck am I, your disembodied instructor, and who are the other folks teaching this class?

Then, I’d like to try to answer a few questions about what we’re all here to do,

Which is to learn the history of media in the United States.

What even *is* history?

What’s historiography, and why should we think about both of those things?

How should we go about critiquing media history?

Is there a way we can do that which leaves some room for our pleasure and joy?

Why should we think about history as a plural—so, media *histories* instead of one media history?

And finally, how the heck can we *possibly* learn history in just fourteen screenings??

**Kathy’s photo**

So, let’s start with the easy stuff—here’s me! And my pup, Popeye.

I’m the instructor for your class, and I’m also a fourth-year PhD student here in RTF at UT

And I also hold a Master’s degree from the City University of New York Graduate Center

In Liberal Studies with a concentration in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

I study women and comedy—specifically, how women joke about violence and trauma.

I wanted you to see my face so you know that I’m a real human person who’s here to teach and to help,

and who is preparing this course for you in real time.

I swear, there’s a real instructor behind the screen!

And while our lectures will mostly be my voice over slides

You’ll see me in weekly announcement videos, explaining assignments, and in drop-in hours.

Two common questions I get are: what do I call you and how do I say your name?

So please, please call me Kathy in emails, during drop-in hours, or if you see me around in HEB.

And my last name is kuh-KAYS.

Check and check.

**Teaching Assistants**

We are stratospherically lucky to have four of the best teaching assistants to grace this or any department

Along for our adventure in online learning.

For first year students who might not have interacted with a teaching assistant before, think about

Me and the TAs as a team. We run this course together--we just have different responsibilities.

I mainly work on the content, so: choosing readings and writing lectures and designing assignments.

Your TAs are there for *you*. They’ll grade your work, give you feedback and run your discussion boards.

They should be your first point of contact when you have questions, because they will know you best!

You can see that you’re assigned to a TA based on your section number

Which is info you can find by checking your registration.

All of their contact information is on the syllabus.

**Film stock/history**

Now, that we know who’s here, let’s turn to some of our questions about *why* we’re all here.

If we were meeting in the lecture hall, this is the point at which I’d ask someone to take a stab

**[ANIMATION]**

At defining the word history.

So, just think for a moment to yourself – what is history?

**[ANIMATION]**

The definition I like to use is “the story of what happened.”

History isn’t a record of everything that ever occurred, but a story we’ve made from some occurrences.

Media history, then, is the story we build from media objects that we’ve saved or otherwise remembered.

Let’s look at a couple of pieces of media history.

**The Kiss**

This is a still from an 1896 film called *The Kiss.*

It stars May Irwin, a vaudeville comedian and blackface minstrel—though here she is out of makeup—

The film is just a few seconds long, and depicts a piece

of a very popular 1890s stage show called *The Widow Jones.*

Thomas Edison, famed American inventor

—I wish you could see me because I’m putting very sarcastic quote fingers around inventor

and we’ll talk about why in the next few days—

He saw *The Widow Jones* and wanted to use his new motion picture technology to record a little taste.

The performers came to his studio in New Jersey, called the Black Maria, and filmed this. Let’s watch.

**The Kiss (2)**

**[FILM PLAYS SILENTLY.]**

This film is famous, as very old films go.

It was selected for preservation by the Library of Congress decades ago

And it is widely thought to be the first on-screen kiss.

**Something Good (still)**

As you’ll read in the short article I asked you to check out for this lecture,

There’s a similar film from 1898.

It’s called *Something Good.*

It stars two Black performers—Saint Suttle and Gertie Brown—who are wearing minstrel-style costumes.

This film was utterly lost, and thus forgotten, until just a few years ago. Let’s watch it.

**Something Good (2)**

**[FILM PLAYS SILENTLY.]**

Take a moment and think about what you saw.

Does this film feel different than *The Kiss*?

To me—it *does.*

The actors leap off the screen in a way that the ones in *The Kiss* just don’t.

Now, would it change your understanding to know that *Something Good* might have been a racist joke?

*The Kiss* was a very famous film in an era with very few films,

and *Something Good* might have been made as a parody—

it would have been “funny” to see a version with Black performers.

The truth is, historians just don’t know much about this film or what it meant.

**Film stock/historiography**

We have very little historical information about it.

But its discovery served as a little fissure in the seemingly complete story of media history,

Where some light can shine in.

There’s another concept that will help us understand things like *Something Good*,

Which make us reevaluate how we saw the past.

**[ANIMATION]**

That concept is historiography.

Or, to phrase it as simply as I can

**[ANIMATION]**

The study of how we tell the story of what happens, who gets to tell it, and what gets left out.

The picture on this slide actually a pretty good metaphor for what I’ve been talking about.

This is a piece of silver nitrate film.

It was what the earliest motion pictures were recorded on, and it was extremely dangerous.

It caught on fire and exploded, and rots into a goo that kind of smells like farts if it gets wet.

Sometimes, all film historians have of a silent film is a fragment that looks like this.

Silver nitrate film is a great way to think of history—

It degrades, it’s full of holes, it gets lost, and it’s hard to read.

But sometimes, we find new pieces.

And from them we can cobble together a more complete view of the past.

**Something Good (questions)**

If we wanted to ask some questions about the *history* of *Something Good*, we might ask:

**[ANIMATION]**

Who made this film? Where? When? For how much money? On what kinds of equipment?

How did people view this film? Where? When? What did they think?

Was it received differently by Black audiences than by white audiences?

How can we reconstruct this information?

What do we know about these two performers?

**Something Good (more questions0**

And if we wanted to ask some historiographical questions about *Something Good*, we might ask:

**[ANIMATION]**

Why was *The Kiss* continuously preserved and *Something Good* lost for a century?

How should film history be rewritten to reflect the existence of this film,

its viewers, and these performers?

**Film stock/Reparative Reading**

I think we can all guess that a film of two Black performers might not have been valued

In the same way as a film of a famous White vaudevillian

And that racism might have had something to do with *Something Good* being lost for so long.

This is a critique that’s important to bring to the table

when we’re thinking about the history of U.S. media.

While there’s so much to love about film and television and radio,

So much wonderful work I’m excited to introduce to you, it’s also true that

People have been left out of the story.

People’s work has been devalued for many reasons related to their identity.

People have been sidelined from ever making media at all—and we *need* to call this out.

We’ll be looking all semester at how media emerges from and reflects U.S. history and culture,

And part of U.S. history is its racial and social politics.

However—I want to offer to those who might find it useful a strategy to use *alongside* critique.

Think of this as a little bit of scholarly self-care for your brain and your heart.

There was a literature scholar and queer theorist named Eve Sedgwick

who wrote a pretty complicated theoretical paper

That I will not in any way make you read

Although it has the wonderful title “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid

You Probably Think This Essay Is About You”

[**ANIMATION]**

In that essay, she introduces her idea of reparative reading – or in our case, reparative watching.

She argues that critiquing literature and media is important,

But that we can learn just as much by looking for value and joy—

Even if the joy a particular media object offers is very limited.

Reparative reading means to watch with hope, to allow yourself pleasure wherever you find it

And to keep yourself open to surprises.

**[ANIMATION]**

She says “what we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves

And communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture

Whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”

What she means by that, I think, is by looking at how even at very flawed films and television shows

Might mean something or provide entertainment to the people they marginalize

What you might stumble on is a strategy of finding joy in unlikely places that can help you survive.

Like I said – this is dense.

But I wanted to offer it at the beginning of the class for students who feel like critiquing media

In all the ways it *should* be critiqued

Might leave them with nothing to love about it.

I promise, there’s room for you to find some joy here too.

**Seidelman/Media Histories**

We have fourteen chances this semester—fourteen screenings—to show you media of the past.

Media that hopefully will make you think critically and bring you joy in equal measure.

But there’s no way I can show you *all* of media history in 14 screenings!

That’s something I probably shouldn’t admit to you as your instructor—but I *will* fail at this!

It’s impossible! Why have they asked me to do this?!

Here’s the best I can offer. It starts with Susan Seidelman, the woman in this picture.

She’s a director of movies like *Smithereens* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*

And she actually gave an interview…

**Quote**

…about how *bad* film classes are at teaching media history!

She talked about her time at NYU in the ‘70s, when she had very few female colleagues

And learned about even fewer female filmmakers.  
So, as the article says, she was “on her own.”

**Seidelman (histories)**

I don’t want to leave you on your own, like poor Susan!

I’ve tried to design screenings that cover lots of ground, but also, more importantly,

Serve as pathway into a world of media you can keep exploring if it moves you.

Each screening is a piece of its own history—because history is a PLURAL.

Histories are collections. What you collect and how you put it together creates a system of value.

So let’s spend the rest of this lecture thinking a little bit about how different institutions

Create histories with different values.

**Academy Film Archive**

This is a picture of the Academy Film archive—the Academy, like as in the Academy Awards.

They’ve been collecting films since 1929 and their collection

Contains more than 85,000 titles, with more than 190,000 items,

Including movies, documentaries, make-up and sound tests, trailers, and Oscars telecasts.

This is Hollywood History with two capital Hs.

This is a lot of the film that might be considered “canon,”

or the so-called “must-watch,” “best of the best.”

**Herstory/Something Weird**

But there are many other kinds of archives, and other kinds of histories!

[**ANIMATION]**

For example, the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City has a media collection

That they say “exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that

Future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives”

And so they can “uncover and collect a history denied” to them.

This collection of media tells the story of a particular community.

It contains things like poetry readings by Audre Lord

Or recordings of AIDS activist group ACT-UP.

These are objects you won’t find in the Academy archive, and it’s not Hollywood history,

but these things *do* comprise a media history.

**[ANIMATION]**

A very different kind of archive that tells a very different kind of history

Is the Something Weird collection, housed in the American Genre Film Archive here in Austin.

As they describe Something Weird, “In the early 1990s, Mike (the founder) had the idea to find

And release as many lost low budget oddball films as he could, focusing on Sexploitation Cinema,

Seventies Sleaze, Roadshow Rarities, Nudie Cuties, and Burlesque; as well as Horror

And drive-in classics.”

What kind of history is this? What does it value?

Among other things, I think it values weirdness and rarity

It represents the history of a mode of production—that is, low budget--

*And* it represents the history of a taste community—people who delight in schlock.

**Rancho Obi-Wan**

This is a photograph of Rancho Obi-Wan,

A “museum that contains the world’s largest privately-owned Star Wars collection”

Built over 37 years by a collector named Steve Sansweet.

It’s housed in an old chicken farm!

This is a media history too—both a very narrow, and a very deep one.

It’s the history of the movement of a film through culture, industry, and time.

And, it’s the history of a fan community.

**Seidelman**

So, let’s return to Susan Seidelman for a moment.

Here she is, a young woman studying film in the 1970s,

Devouring the history her professors presented to her.  
I think, no matter how hard I try, your experience will sort of resemble hers.

Sometimes, she found things that sparked her imagination.

And sometimes, when she looked for her own perspective, she couldn’t find it.

**Desperately Seeking Susan (GIFs)**

So she took what she learned and made her own films,

And they became part of many media histories:

Films by female directors, 1980s filmmaking, films about New York City, and so on.

My hope is that, from the glimpses that you’ll get this semester of many media histories,

That you begin to build a canon that speaks to you.

**Desperately Seeking Susan (Static Image)**

I hope that what you take away from this course isn’t that the set of films and television we’ll watch

IS media history. It’s not.

What I hope you’ll take away is a set of skills to unearth,

from the millions and millions of media artifacts we’ve produced,

**[ANIMATION]**

The history that resonates with you.

I can’t wait to learn with you for the rest of the semester.