

# REL 590.001

## Capstone Grad Seminar: The Problem of Origins Spring 2022 • Thursday 1:30-3:20 • PRH 210

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Office Hours: by appointment

### **Description**

This required seminar is devoted to the topic of origins, i.e., the manner in which either the recent or the distant past is used to authorize contemporary forms of social life. Complicating how scholars talk about the past and its foundational role in the present requires a shift in viewpoint, constantly examining the discourse on origins rather than purported origins themselves. Using contemporary scholarship to develop this critical posture and illustrating it via a series of recent films (on such topics as authenticity, narrativity, and nostalgia, etc.), the course concludes by inviting students to apply this critical shift to better understand an ongoing debate in contemporary US culture and politics.

### **Readings**

Students are expected to obtain a copy of the 4 required books for the course; the articles will be provided as PDFs.

#### **Books**

Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indiana UP, 1991 [1995])  
Russell T. McCutcheon (ed.), *Fabricating Origins* (Equinox 2015)  
Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (British Film Institute, 2001)  
Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995)

#### **Articles**

Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, "Origin," in *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary*, 181-186. Routledge, 2021.  
Bruce Lincoln, "Mythic Narrative in and Cultural Diversity in American Society," in *Myth and Method*, 163-176. University of Virginia Press, 1996.  
Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Magic of the Melancholy: Shifting Gears in the Study of Religion," in *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common e.g.*, 141-160. Walter de Gruyter, 2018.  
J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 66- . University of Chicago Press, 1995.  
Brian Sponner, "Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, 195-235. Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7/1 (1980): 5–27.

Vaia Touna, "Traditioning Acts of Identification: The Case of Greek 'Traditional' Villages," in *Fabrications of the Greek Past: Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*, 116-139. Brill, 2017.

### **Films**

Avalon (1990)	Rashomon (1950)
Blow Up (1966)	Wag the Dog (1997)
Marjoe (1972)	The Wizard of Oz (1939)
Midnight in Paris (2011)	

### **Requirements**

1. Weekly attendance and informed participation based on adequate preparation is expected.
2. All throughout the course students are expected to be reading *Fabricating Origins*, and to be prepared, on the designated days (see \* on the schedule) to discuss entries in the book that drew their attention. Students must keep track of chapters already addressed in class.
3. Each student will take the lead on summarizing and then discussing and applying/analyzing one main reading in the course, for a 30-minute seminar (see schedule); presenters must be sure to incorporate new information while also ensuring that the argument of the reading in question is understood by the class and that the reading sheds light on the course as a whole.
4. For the final assignment students must write an approx. 2,000-word essay applying the course's approach to better understand the current controversy in the U.S. over The 1619 Project. This final assignment will be discussed more in class; it will require students to be thoroughly familiar with the work of The 1619 Project as well as the backlash that has greeted it. This is due (double-spaced, 12 pt. Times Roman, with one-inch margins) at noon on the Wednesday of final exam week. **Although informed by previous course participation and presentations, the final grade in this seminar is based on the quality of this final assignment and how it conveys evidence of applying the method of the course.**

### **Tentative Schedule**

	<b>Introduction to the Course</b>
Jan 13	Hughes and McCutcheon, "Origin"; watch an episode of PBS's Finding Your Roots (sign-up for seminar presentations)
	<b>I. Authenticity</b>
Jan 20	<i>Film</i> : Wag the Dog (1997)
Jan 27	* Baudrillard, <i>The Gulf War Did Not Take Place</i> ( <b>Joe</b> )
Feb 3	<i>Film</i> : Marjoe (1972)
Feb 10	* Spooner, "Weavers and Dealers..." ( <b>Sonya</b> ) and Touna, "Traditioning Acts of Identification" ( <b>Jacob</b> )

## II. Narrativity

Feb 17 \* Miller, "Narrative" (**Kyle**) and White, "The Value of Narrativity..." (**Peyton**)

Feb 24 **Film:** Rashomon (1950)

Mar 3 \* Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (**Marco**)

Mar 10 **Film:** Blow Up (1966)

Mar 17 **Spring Break** (begin researching The 1619 Project and responses to it)

## III. Nostalgia

Mar 24 **Film:** Avalon (1990)

Mar 31 \* Lincoln, "Mythic Narrative and Cultural Diversity in American Society" (**Judah**)

Apr 7 **Film:** The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Apr 14 \* Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (**Erica**)

Apr 21 **Film:** Midnight in Paris (2011)

## Conclusion to the Course

Apr 28 McCutcheon "Origins Today" from *Fabricating Origins*

May 4 **Final Essays Due by Noon** (in the professor's mailbox)



*"I aspired to authenticity, but I never got beyond verisimilitude."*