

M.A. Seminar
Leisure and Its Discontents: The American Gilded Age
HS 2016, Thur. 16.15-18.00
Prof. Elisabeth Bronfen

The period between the end of the Civil War and America's entrance into World War One has come to be known as the Gilded Age. The fact that this designation only came into use in retrospect, during the 1920s and 1930s, even while it was taken from the novel, *The Gilded Age*, by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, offers an insight into the way this historical moment of transition is best re-imagined by tracking the cultural resonances it has subsequently had. It was known for rapid economic growth but also social inequality, for its massive industrialization, the rise of monopolies, as well as the corruption of urban political machines. Stories by Ambrose Bierce along with Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, will form part of our discussion about the traumatic traces of the war. Novels of moral imagination by William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, Henry James, and Kate Chopin explore the hopes and failures of those who subscribe to the American Dream, even while the "new women" they portray challenge Victorian bourgeois values. Finally, texts by Mary Antin, Jacob Riis and Anzia Yezierska will help us discuss immigration and Americanization: All subjects that continue to haunt the current American culture. Indeed, an implicit wager of the course is that we are currently finding ourselves in a second gilded age.

(0./ 22 Sep): no class

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

(1./ 29 Sep): Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Progress of Culture"* (1867) and Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas"* (1871)

(2./ 06 Oct): Ambrose Bierce, "Soldiers"* from *In the Midst of Life* (1891)

(3./ 13 Oct): D.W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

THE GENDER OF PROSPERITY

(4./ 20 Oct): Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), chapters 1-6

(5./ 27 Oct): William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)

(6./ 03 Nov): Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (1912)

(7./ 10 Nov): Henry James, *Washington Square* (1881)

(8./ 17 Nov): Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)

(9./ 24 Nov): Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1921)

THE CHALLENGE OF AMERICANIZATION

(10./ 01 Dec): Jacob A. Riis. *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)

(11./ 08 Dec): Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912)

(12./ 15 Dec): Anzia Yeziarska, "Hunger"* , "The Lost 'Beautifulness'"*, and "How I found America"* from *Hungry Hearts* (1920)

(13./ 22 Dec): Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

Background reading:

Steve Fraser. *Every Man a Speculator. A History of Wall Street in American Life*. New York: HarperCollins 2005.

Jackson Lears. *Rebirth of a Nation. The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*. New York: HarperCollins 2009.

Paul, Heike. *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014.

Tindall, George Brown and David E. Shi. *America. A Narrative History*. Fifth Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999: chapters 19-23.

Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America. Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

Twain, Mark and Charles Dudley Warner. *The Gilded Age* (1873). London: Penguin, 2002.

Requirements for the class:

- All students must prepare a one-page preliminary discussion for each class session. These are to be posted on Olat (course forum) by Wednesday, 9 am of the respective week. This can entail a thesis, a series of questions, comments or associations. This will count towards your class participation. Writing this preliminary discussion is, thus, compulsory for each session. **Neglecting to hand in 12 thesis papers will result in a fail.**
- So as to keep a collective 'log book' of class discussions, all students must compile written minutes (*Sitzungsprotokoll*) for one of the class sessions (to be sent to my assistant Sabin Jeanmaire sabin.jeanmaire@es.uzh.ch one week after the respective session at the latest).
- Finally, students taking the class for 9 KP must write an essay to be handed in on **February 20, 2017** (hard copy in my pigeonhole in the secretary's office, and a pdf version to my assistant Sabin Jeanmaire). It is wise to use the class discussions to test your ideas for this written assignment.
- Plagiarism is a serious offense and pertains to all assignments.
- All texts marked with * will be on OLAT.