

Americans Dreaming (HP 265)

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Wednesday, 4pm-6pm
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Seminar Description

Have Europeans made the most prominent contributions to modern theories of dreaming? Then Americans alone have transfigured the experience of dreaming into a source of collective power and identity. This seminar studies the history of dreaming as an interpretive science, a source of religious inspiration, and a literary metaphor, but also as a national symbol.

Through the dream-lives of notable theologians, scientists, poets, and prophets, we consider themes ranging from the Puritan attempt to stamp out erotic dreams to the current presidential campaign, a prolonged divination of suppressed wishes featuring John McCain's nightmares and Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. Readings are drawn from letters, diaries, autobiographies, essays, treatises, short stories, and vignettes and aphorisms--forms that mirror the discontinuous and fragmentary quality of our subject. We also view two films.

What are the causes and meanings of dreams? Does their interpretation disclose connections between personality and society? What is the relationship between political freedom and divination? How does dreaming figure in the feeling of self-estrangement? To these ancient questions we add others focused on American intellectual history. How did the decline of the old theology and the reorganization of knowledge in the nineteenth century alter the understanding of dreams? How did they influence the emergence of the surreal and the sublime as motifs in poetry and photography? If cinema originated as a simulacrum of dreaming, may we speak of the Hollywood dream-factory as representing an American unconscious?

Writing

As the main goal of the seminar is to enlarge and refine your means to self-knowledge, so the main assignment calls for a weekly dream-journal composed of responses to the readings as well as musings of your dreams. Please submit your journal every week. You may write as little or as much as you wish on any given week, so long as your journal totals no fewer than 30 pages by the end of the semester.

Readings

A series of short readings are available on reserve at the library. You should purchase or borrow the following seven books:

Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (Crown, 2007).

Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (Vintage, 1999).

Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Avon, 1980).

J. Allan Hobson, *Dreaming as Delirium* (MIT Press, 1999).

Delmore Schwartz, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories* (New Directions, 1978).

Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust and the Dream Life of Balso Snell* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2000) .

Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shail, *Acid Dreams*, rev. ed. (Grove Press, 1994).

Schedule

I. A Political Unconscious

Sept. 3: Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream” (1963); Ward Hill Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (1895), chapter 7; and excerpts from *Dreams of Bill: A Collection of Funny, Strange, and Downright Peculiar Dreams about our President, Bill Clinton*, ed. Julia Anderson-Miller and Bruce Joshua Miller (1994).

Sept. 10: Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), esp. 118, 128-129, 220, 372; and John H. Summers, “In Dreams Begin Politics” (2008).

Sept. 17: Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (1965).

II. Sex, Drugs, & Science

Sept. 24: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899).

Oct. 1: Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shail, *Acid Dreams* (1994).

Oct. 8: J. Allan Hobson, *Dreaming as Delirium* (1999).

III. Demonologies

Oct. 15: Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (1969), chapter 3. Excerpts from: *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657*; *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*; and Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (1853).

Oct. 22: William James, “A Suggestion about Mysticism” (1910); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1668), part 1, chapters 1 and 2; Thomas Paine, “An Essay on Dream” in *The Age of Reason* (1795); and *The Universal Interpreter of Dreams and Visions* (1795), chapters 1 and 2.

Oct. 29: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Demonology” (1839) and “Experience” (1844).

IV. Daydreams & Nightmares

Nov. 5: Walt Whitman, “The Sleepers” (1881); Ambrose Bierce, “Visions of the Night” (1887); and excerpts from *Mark Twain’s Notebook* (1897).

Nov. 12: Buster Keaton, “Sherlock Jr.” (1924); and Delmore Schwartz, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (1938).

Nov. 19: “The Wizard of Oz” (1939); and Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939).

V. Dream On

Nov. 26: No class. Thanksgiving

Dec. 3: TBA