

# Popular Culture

Fall 2011

UNST 254, CRN 14222

Thursday 11:00-1:45

Cramer Hall – Room 228

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## Course Description

We live in a society that is saturated in the media generated by popular culture. The average individual encounters 3,000 advertisements per day. A young person growing up in America over the last several decades had already viewed 10,000,000 advertisements by the time they turned 18. Americans spend over six hours every day watching TV, surfing the internet or accessing videos on mobile devices. This rate has been on an upward trajectory as new technology has allowed access of high quality streaming audio and video almost anywhere in urban environments. The web of information from science fiction that is both ubiquitous and instantly accessible is in many ways a reality.

Popular culture is often absorbed without thinking critically about its content or consequences. This is remarkable given the enormous impact it has on our lives, our identities and our consciousness. We often do not stop to think or question the underlying assumptions of popular culture, nor do we think about for what or whom such assumptions or content may support. Questions of power and ideology are deeply interwoven in popular culture despite their seeming absence. Additionally, popular culture has an incredible impact on how we view ourselves as individuals and in relation to others.

Popular culture has shifted radically over the last several decades. Indeed, the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been marked by a continuous and arguably accelerating shift in cultural practices and the mental environment. Somewhat counter intuitively the nature of this shift has masked the stark nature of the changes in the cultural landscape. What does it mean to spend over a third of our waking hours absorbing media that did not exist for our grandparents in their youth? How does social networking shift the nature of our social interactions? How has this affected the mental environment? What impact has this had on our society and social relations? How, if at all, has this privileged certain groups of people or changed power relations? Have these changes had a democratic or anti-democratic effect?

These are examples of the types of questions that this class will examine as we engage in critical thinking about popular culture. We will explore the discipline of cultural studies and different approaches to examining popular culture. These tools will allow us to begin to unpack the underlying assumptions of the popular culture we consume on a daily basis and begin to examine underlying issues of power and ideology. Lastly, it will allow us to reflect upon the contemporary state of popular culture, its change over the decades and what impacts this has had on us both individually and socially.

### Teaching/Learning Philosophy

I strive to create a participatory learning community in the classroom. I believe that all participants in a course, not only the instructor, have valuable knowledge, insight and analysis to contribute as co-learners. Furthermore, I believe that students should be part of selecting the topics of inquiry in collaboration with the instructor. This insures that not only do we pursue topics which the class is interested in and passionate about but also that we are selecting topics that are relevant and important based on the perspective of all participants in the course.

I have structured the course in an intentional fashion in order to foster this learning community. The course will not only be discussion driven, but the shape and form of the discussion will be directed by students as much as possible. Additionally, with the student topic selection and final presentations the students will select almost three entire weeks of subject matter. Lastly, course assignments will encourage a reflective learning practice that facilitates a deeper processing of course concepts and which encourages connection to real world issues. This structure is reflective of a commitment to the values of democracy, decentralization and a rich form of participation, which I hope will provide for a dynamic learning experience.

### Course learning objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Explain different understandings of culture and popular culture.
2. Describe the intersection of corporations, consumerism and culture.
3. Reflect upon the individual and social consequences of both popular culture and technologically driven cultural changes.
4. Analyze a variety of different theoretical approaches to popular culture, in particular those relating to Antonio Gramsci.
5. Understand political and ideological dimensions of popular culture.
6. Comprehend concepts of globalization, race, class and gender as they relate to popular culture.
7. Apply course components to critical thinking about the popular culture experienced in your day-to-day existence.

### University Studies Goals

University Studies has four principal learning goals: inquiry and critical thinking, communication, the diversity of human experiences and ethics and social responsibility. These learning goals seek to empower students as active, self-motivated learners, who have a dynamic capacity for communication. They further aim to foster understanding of the rich complexity of human experience in all its manifestations and better comprehension of the effect of individual

and social choices on others and on society. This course will engage these learning goals over the course of the term. More information can be found at the University Studies webpage (<http://www.pdx.edu/unst/>).

### Grading Criteria

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| Attendance and Participation in Class and Mentor Sessions | (15%) |
| Online Discussion/Mentor Session Presentation             | (10%) |
| Reading Quizzes and Reading Responses                     | (20%) |
| Writing/Assignments/Quiz                                  | (30%) |
| Participation assignments (self-guided tour, etc.)        |       |
| Ideology and popular culture                              |       |
| Quiz – popular culture foundation                         |       |
| Topic selection blog entry                                |       |
| Interview   |       |
| Final reflection  |       |
| Topic Selection Process                                   | (10%) |
| Topic selection paper                                     |       |
| Topic presentation  |       |
| Final Presentation  | (15%) |

The standard 90/80/70/60 grading scale will be used.

### Course Components

#### *Attendance and Participation*

Attendance in both the main and mentor sessions is important to your learning experience over the course of the term. Engagement with the lectures, films, discussions and other activities is a critical component of this course. A sign-in sheet will circulate at the beginning of both the main and mentor session. It is important that you arrive on time so as not to disturb your fellow classmates. If you are late you will miss the attendance points for the day.

It is also important that you participate in both the main and mentor session discussions. As co-learners we each hold knowledge that can add to our collective inquiry into popular culture. In the smaller and more intimate environment of the mentor session it is critical that you engage in the discussions each week. In particular this session allows for a rich discussion with your peers.

#### *Online Discussion/Mentor Session Presentation*

As discussed above we will seek to create a learning community in which all participants in this course relate to one another as co-learners. Part of this will be submitting and responding to weekly discussion questions.

Once during the term you will submit one question about the readings and ideas that will be discussed that week. As appropriate these questions can and should connect to previous class

concepts and/or popular culture. These questions will need to be posted to Desire2Learn by noon on the day of your mentor session.

This question will be based on the week's reading material and will also connect to a brief presentation you will do in mentor session. You will sign up to facilitate a discussion during one of your mentor sessions. This will involve preparing discussion questions, introducing the topics and facilitating the discussion. The student mentor will assist you in preparing for these presentations.

Over the course of the term you will need to write at least three responses to questions posted by your peers. These may either respond to the original question or, when appropriate, to another student's response. One should come in the first half of the course, one in the second and the other at a point of your choosing.

When appropriate these questions will be used in class to organize and direct the discussion component of the main and mentor sessions. Furthermore, over the course of the term the responses will allow for an extra layer of discussion to occur. The goal of this component is to make the learning organic and responsive to the interests of the participants of this learning community.

### *Reading Quizzes and Reading Responses*

The assigned readings are critical to your learning experience in this course. They both complement the in-class lectures and discussions and lay a foundation for accessing other concepts. Great care has been taken to make the reading load as light and reasonable as possible. You are expected to do all of the readings.

Reading quizzes will be the primary form of accountability for the readings. At the beginning of most class periods there will be a very brief quiz on the content of the reading. They will be designed to be very easy so that if you did the reading you will have no problem answering the questions. Also, your lowest score will be dropped at the end of the term.

Reading responses will allow you to apply the concepts presented in the readings to your life and the popular culture in which you are immersed. Twice during the term you will need to write a short reflection on a reading and its connections to contemporary popular culture. This should be an opportunity to explore ideas that you find exciting. Where do you see these academic concepts in the films, fashion, music or other popular culture that you are familiar with? How do these ideas change your thinking about popular culture?

### *Writing Assignments*

The writing assignments will engage the course material in a way that allows for an exploration of these ideas with the popular culture experienced in your everyday existence. These short papers should be about 2-3 double-spaced pages. The papers will be graded on the following 20-point scale:

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| Paper follows the assignment guidelines:   | 4 points |
| Paper is well-organized and well-written:  | 6 points |
| Paper demonstrates critical thinking and analysis:   | 6 points |
| Paper demonstrates synthesis with other course components, other relevant courses or your life experience: | 4 points |

### *Course Blog Entry*

You will be asked to submit several entries to the course blog. This assignment will in many ways mirror your writing assignments, only you will be asked to make this available for other students to see. You will also be asked to accompany the entry with some media (video, audio, images, etc.). You should discuss popular culture that you are engaging in the normal course of your life. You will need to upload the content yourself, which we will learn how to do in both the main and mentor session. If you need additional assistance please visit me during office hours *before* the assignment is due. These entries will be graded with the same criteria used for the writing assignments.

You are encouraged to view the entries by other students throughout the term and discuss them in class and mentor sessions.

### *Final Presentation*

You will complete a final presentation on a topic of your choosing in a small group. Each mentor session will divide into two small groups for the purposes of this presentation. You will have the opportunity to share ideas and self select into a group that shares common interests. Over the course of the term you will have the opportunity within the mentor session to work with your group to develop your presentation. However, successful completion of this assignment will require additional meetings outside of class. Your presentation should take the ideas and concepts that we have been engaging over the course of the term and apply them in an academic inquiry of popular culture. This could take the form of analyzing a TV show, music album, film genre, internet sub-culture, artistic style, mode of transportation, food practices, etc.

### Course Packet:

The readings for this course are being prepared by Odin Ink as a course packet and will be available at the PSU Bookstore (1715 Southwest 5th Avenue). The packet should be available during the first week of class. Engaging the readings in this course packet will be critical to your successful completion of this course. If you are having any sort of trouble with the course packet please see the instructor or the student mentor as soon as possible.

### Useful Texts:

The following texts provide broad overviews of popular culture as a topic of academic inquiry. We will be reading excerpts from some of these texts over the course of the term. They are provided here as additional resources for background information or additional research.

Crothers, L. (2007). *Globalization and American Popular Culture*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Danesi, M. (2008). *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Duncombe, S. (2002). *Cultural Resistance Reader*. New York: Verso.

Storey, J. (2009) *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. San Francisco: Pearson Longman.

Storey, J. (1998) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Atlanta: The University of Georgia Press.

Sturken, M. & Cartwright, L. (2003). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Magazines, Journal and Websites

Here are four interesting places that you might want to poke around in to find critical inquiries and analysis on popular culture:

[Adbusters Magazine: Journal of the Mental Environment](#)

[Bitch Magazine: A Feminist Response to Popular Culture](#)

[Cultural Studies Association](#)

[Portland Center for Public Humanities](#)

### Online Course Reserves

Over the course of the term some readings may be made available via the online course reserves provided by the library. Any readings will be found on the course reserves section on the library webpage (<http://psu-eres.lib.pdx.edu/eres/courseindex.aspx?&page=search>). After searching by instructor name, course number, etc. you will find the readings for the course. The password for the readings is my last name.

### On-line Access to Course Information

The course syllabus, handouts, assignments, selected readings and additional resources will be made available on-line through Desire2Learn. To access this information, you must have a PSU ODIN account. Your Desire2Learn ID will be the same as your ODIN username and your password will be the last four digits of your PSU Student ID number. You will log into the course by going to <http://www.psuonline.pdx.edu> and entering your id and username in the “Online Course Login” section to the right of the page.

### Course Blog

I have created a blog for this course ([www.psupopculture.wordpress.com](http://www.psupopculture.wordpress.com)). This will be a place where I will post images, audio and video that are shown in class so that you can easily access them as needed. Assignments, the syllabus, and other course relevant information can be found

here in addition to Blackboard. It will also include additional information and links for you to explore for those topics that are of particular interest to you. Lastly, each student will be required to complete blog entries to share with the class (described above).

### Student Conduct and Technology

It is strongly encouraged that you read the Student Conduct Code (<http://www.pdx.edu/dos/student-code-conduct>). It details your rights and responsibilities as a student and as a member of the Portland State community. To foster a positive, respectful environment, free of distractions for all participants, there is a zero-tolerance cell phone policy. When you enter the classrooms, turn off or silence your phone and put it away. Similarly, laptops and other hand-held devices are not to be used during class, unless you have an exemption cleared with the professor and the mentor. Additionally in mentor sessions, checking email or using the internet is considered non-participation and will be marked as such.

### Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who may require accommodations are encouraged to contact the PSU Disability Center (<http://www.drc.pdx.edu/>) and the instructor at the beginning of the term.

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the act of claiming someone's work as your own through copying it without giving the creator of the work credit. Plagiarism can also include using another person's theories, ideas, or phrases without proper attribution. The simplest way to avoid plagiarizing is to always cite the sources from which you gather information or develop arguments. Plagiarism is a serious issue and is a violation of the PSU Student Conduct Code. University policy calls for severe sanctions for any form of academic dishonesty.

### Late Assignments

Writing and participation assignments are due at the end of the assigned class period unless otherwise indicated. Assignments will receive a reduced grade (10%) for each day that it is late. Assignments will not be accepted by email. However, if you are absent you may send me a copy of the assignment so that I know you have completed it. You must then bring a printed copy when you come to the next class session.

### Weekly Schedule

Our tentative weekly schedule is included below. Please note that the schedule is subject to change.

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## **Course Schedule, Fall Term 2011 Popular Culture**

### **Week 1 – Introduction to Popular Culture**

#### 9/29 (First Half)

Introduction to the course

9/29 (Second Half)

Thinking about culture: popular culture, capitalism and mass society

**Readings:** Course syllabus

**Assignment Due:** Popular Culture – Self Guided Tour

## **Week 2 – Looking vs. Seeing: Representation, Images, Ideology, and Meaning**

10/6 (First Half)

Developing a “practice of looking”

**Readings:** Storey, J. (2009) *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Chapter 1 – What is Popular Culture? [**Course Packet – 19 pages**]

Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. (2009) *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (9-16, 22-33). [**Course Packet – 20 pages**]

**Assignment Due:** Media Use Survey

10/6 (Second Half)

Social representation – gender

Film: *Killing Us Softly 4*

## **Week 3 – Three “Ways of Looking”: Theory and Popular Culture**

10/13 (First Half)

Consumption-centric and production-centric views

Film Excerpts: *Merchants of Cool*

**Readings:** O’Brien S. and Szeman, Imre (2004) “The Culture Industry Thesis.” *Popular Culture: A User’s Guide*. [**Course Packet – 12 pages**]

10/13 (Second Half)

Gramsci and a negotiated understanding

**Readings:** Storey, J. *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Chapter 1 – What is Popular Culture? (Pg. 10-11, review Storey’s 5<sup>th</sup> definition of popular culture) [**Course Packet (Week 2) – 2 pages**]

Storey, J. *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Chapter 1 – What is Popular Culture? (Pg. 79-82, section on hegemony) [**Course Packet – 3 pages**]

Bennett, T. (1998) "Popular Culture and the 'turn to Gramsci'", in Storey, John (ed). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. [Course Packet – 7 pages]

**Assignment Due:** Ideology and advertising (written and blog version) – to be uploaded in mentor session

#### **Week 4 – Technology, Mass Media and Social Media**

10/20 (First Half)

Topic selection discussion

**Readings:** Review topics on syllabus that will *already* be covered

**Assignment Due:** Blog Entry - Topic Selection

10/20 (Second Half)

Understanding media

**Readings:** Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. (2009) *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (223-226). [Course Packet – 14 pages]

Digital Nation (film) [Online – 90 minutes]  
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/>)

#### **Week 5 – Democratic Potential, the Mental Environment and Virtual Realities**

10/27 (First Half)

Social media and social change

**Quiz** – Theory and Popular Culture: “Ways of Looking”

**Readings:** Gladwell, M. (2010) Small Change. *New Yorker*. October 4, 2010. [Online/D2L – 8 pages]

Gladwell, M. (2011) Egypt [Electronic Version]. *New Yorker Blog*. February 2, 2011. Retrieved on February 22, 2011 from <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/02/does-egypt-need-twitter.html>. [Online – 1 page]

Lasn, K. (1999) *Culture Jam*. Ecology of the Mind. [Course Packet – 18 pages]

10/27 (Second Half)

The intersection of virtual reality and reality

Independent midterm feedback

**Readings:** Suellentrop, C. (2010, September 8). War Games [Electronic version]. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved September 11, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/2012/magazine/12military-t.html>. (**Online – 9 pages**)

## **Week 6 – Social Representation: Gender and Race**

11/3 (First Half)

Continuation of the representation of gender

**Readings:** Bordo, S. (1993) “Hunger as an Ideology.” *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (**Course Packet – 26 pages**)

11/3 (Second Half)

Racial representation in popular culture

Film: *Reel Bad Arabs*

**Readings:** Oregon Public Broadcasting. (2010, December 21) Contrasting Coverage. [Electronic Version] *Think Out Loud*. Retrieved on February 7, 2011, from <http://www.opb.org/thinkoutloud/shows/contrasting-coverage/>. [**Online – 50 minutes**]

## **Week 7 – Virtual Realities and Student Selected Topic**

11/10 (First Half)

Massive multiplayer online player games

Film excerpt: *Second Skin*

Student selected topic

**Readings:** TBD

11/10 (Second Half)

Student selected topic

**Readings:** TBD

**Assignment Due:** Topic blog entry

## **Week 8 – Imagination and the Future as Metaphor: Utopias and Dystopias**

11/17 (First Half)

(Post-) Postmodernism, collective imagination and transformative times

**Readings:** Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. (2009) *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (307-321). [Course Packet – 16 pages]

TBD

11/17 (Second Half)

Utopias and dystopias in film and literature

**Readings:** TBD

**Assignment Due:** Popular Culture Interview

**Week 9 – No Class Held this Week**

11/24

**NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY**

**Week 10 – Group Presentations and Conclusions**

12/1 (First Half)

Final presentations

12/1 (Second Half)

Final presentation and conclusions

**Finals Week**

12/5

**Assignment Due:** Final reflection