

Popular Culture
Fall 2010
UNST 254, CRN 14095
Monday/Wednesday 3:30-4:45
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. Today a young person growing up in America 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 about how we view ourselves as individuals and in relation to others.

Popular culture has shifted radically over the last several decades. Indeed, the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have been marked by a continuous and arguably accelerating shift in cultural practices and the mental environment. Somewhat counter intuitively this shift has been gradual enough to mask 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 effected 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 that has had on us both individually and socially.

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. Understand a variety of different theoretical approaches to popular culture, in particular those relating to Antonio Gramsci.
5. Analyze political and power dimensions of popular culture.
6. Comprehend concepts of cultural resistance and social change perspectives within 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 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/>).

Course Blog

I have created a blog for this course (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, writing prompts 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 one blog entry to share with the class (described below).

Course Activities

Class Session – The two weekly class sessions will consist largely of discussions about the course material. I will occasionally lecture about the readings or other relevant information, however this will often be used as a means to start large and small group discussions. There will also be at least one guest speaker over the course of the term.

Mentor Sessions – You will meet weekly with the course mentor to continue discussions of the course components in smaller groups.

Culture Tour – During the third week of course we will tour the area surround Portland State University to explore popular culture within and around the university while applying ideas from the course.

Films – There will be four films that will be required viewing throughout the course. The films will be available on reserve at the library for viewing and are widely available from other sources. Students are encouraged to watch the film in groups to ease accessibility to the library copies and to foster discussion of the content.

Course Assignments

Reflective Writing Papers

These 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 double-spaced pages. You will only be graded on 6 of the 7 papers and may either skip one or drop your lowest score. The papers will be graded on the following 10-point scale:

Paper responds completely to the writing prompt:	2 points
Paper is well-organized and free of grammatical or spelling errors:	2 points
Paper demonstrates critical analysis:	4 points
Paper demonstrates synthesis with other course components, other relevant courses or your life experience:	2 points

Reading Responses

Several times throughout the course you will be asked to respond to the reading with short in-class writings. These will not be announced ahead of time. They will focus specifically on the assigned readings for the week.

Course Blog Entry

You will be asked to submit one entry to the course blog. This assignment will in many ways mirror your reflective readings, 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 submit the text and links to the accompanying media to me. I will then post this information to the blog. You are encouraged to view the entries by other students throughout the term and discuss them in class and mentor sessions.

Mentor Session Presentations

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.

Midterm Exam

There will be a midterm exam in week 7. This exam will cover the course material up to that point. The exam will consist of ten essay questions. You will be required to choose three to respond to during the class period. The essay questions will require critical thinking and connecting course material. Applying learning from the course to popular culture experienced in your life and not directly covered in the course is highly encouraged.

Final Paper

A final paper will be assigned in lieu of a final exam. The paper should be no fewer than 8 and no more than 12 double-spaced pages. This paper will be due by 5:00 on the Wednesday of finals week (December 8th). For the paper you will be asked to demonstrate your understanding of the course materials through their application to popular culture. You may choose anything you wish as the object of your study. Ideally, this would be popular culture with which you are already familiar. You will apply the theories and methods of analysis covered in the course to this topic. Furthermore, you will explore ideas beyond the assigned reading list and will be required to cite five sources for this paper. The paper will be graded in a similar manner as the reflective writing papers and will be broken down as follows:

Paper effectively utilizes the required number of sources	10%
Paper is well-organized and free of grammatical or spelling errors:	10%
Paper demonstrates critical analysis:	40%
Paper demonstrates synthesis with other course components, other relevant courses or your life experience:	40%

Grading Criteria

Grades will be measured by:

Attendance at class and mentor sessions	(20%)
Participation in class and mentor session activities	(20%)
Presentations in mentor sessions	
Participation in class and mentor sessions	
Completion of the blog assignment	
Reflective Writings/Reading Responses	(20%)
Midterm Exam	(20%)
Final Paper	(20%)

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

Late Assignments

Reflective essays are due at the beginning of the assigned class period. The final paper is due before 5:00 on 12/8 and is to be delivered to my mailbox in the University Studies office (Cramer 117). Reflective essays or the final paper will receive a reduced grade (20%) for each day that it is late. The final paper will not be accepted past Friday, December 10th. 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.

Core Text:

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

Additional Course Reading List:

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.

Klein, N. (1999) *No Logo*. New York: Picador USA.

Lasn, K. (1999) *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge – And Why We Must*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Morris, E. (2008, August 11). Photography as a Weapon [Electronic version]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on September 26, 2010, from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/11/photography-as-a-weapon>.

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.

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

Additional chapters, articles or web links for reading assignments will also be assigned throughout the course.

Online Course Reserves

The first several weeks of reading are available on the online course reserves provided by the library. Additional readings may be added there throughout the term. These are 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, reflective writing prompts and additional resources will be made available on-line through Blackboard. To access this information, you must have a PSU ODIN account. Your Blackboard 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.

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 an absence.

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.

Weekly Schedule

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

Course Schedule, Fall Term 2010 Popular Culture

Week 1 – Introduction to Popular Culture

9/27

Introductions, course overview

Assignment: Short writing response – what is popular culture?

9/29

What is popular culture?

Week 2 – Images, Power and Politics

10/4

Looking at images

Readings: Storey, J. *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Chapter 1 – What is Popular Culture? (Pg. 1-19)

Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Chapter 1 (10-42).

Morris, E. (2008, August 11). Photography as a Weapon [Electronic version]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on September 26, 2010, from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/11/photography-as-a-weapon>.

Reflective writing due

10/6

Photographic truth, ideology and values

Week 3 – Meaning, Power and Knowledge

10/11

Who makes meaning?

Readings: Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Chapter 2 (45-70), Chapter 3 (72-82, 93-106).

Morris, E. (2008, August 11). Thought Experiment Number 1, and More Inappropriate Alarm Clocks. [Electronic version]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on October 5, 2010, from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/09/thought-experiment-no-1-and-more-inappropriate-alarm-clocks/>.

Reflective writing due

10/13

Presentation by filmmaker Matthew Lessner (www.montelomax.com) on his films, the use of popular culture, being part of popular culture and challenging popular culture.

Film for next week: *Merchants of Cool*

Week 4 – Branding and Corporate Culture

10/18

Branding, advertising and corporate culture

Readings: Klein, N. *No Logo*. Chapter 2 – The Brand Expands (Pg. 27-62)

Lasn, K. *Culture Jam*. Ecology of the Mind. (Pg. 10-27)

Sisario, Ben. (2010, October 6). Looking to a Sneaker for a Band's Big Break. [Electronic version]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on October 13, 2010, from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/arts/music/10brand.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&sq=converse&st=cse&scp=1

Assignment: Walk route (provided in class) ahead of time and make note of advertising and other culture. Be prepared to share observation during our tour in the next class session.

Reflective writing due

10/20

Culture tour and the mental environment

Walking tour of PSU area – bring jacket in case of rain and wear shoes that are comfortable to walk in for 30-45 minutes.

Film for next week: *Network*

Week 5 – The Mass Media and the Public Sphere

10/25

Mass media, the culture industry, McLuhan and the spectacle

Readings: Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Chapter 5 (151-186).

Barry, Ellen. (2009, April 7). Protests in Moldova Explode, with Help of Twitter. [Electronic version]. *New York Times*. Retrieved on October 20, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/world/europe/08moldova.html>

Stone, Brand and Cohen, Noam. (2009, June 15). Social Networks Spread Defiance Online. [Electronic version]. *New York Times*. Retrieved on October 20, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/world/middleeast/16media.html>.

Cohen, Noam. (2009, June 20). Twitter on the Barricades: Six Lessons Learned. [Electronic version]. *New York Times*. Retrieved on October 20, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/21/weekinreview/21cohenweb.html>.

Goodman, Amy. (2009, October 6). Twitter Crackdown: NYC Activist Arrested for Using Social Networking Site during G-20 Protests in Pittsburgh. [Electronic version]. *Democracy Now!*. Retrieved on October 20, 2010, from http://www.democracynow.org/2009/10/6/twitter_crackdown_nyc_activist_arrested_for

Esfandiari, Golnaz. (2010, June 7). The Twitter Devolution. [Electronic version].

Foreign Policy. Retrieved on October 20, 2010, from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/07/the_twitter_revolution_that_wasnt.

Gladwell, M. (2010) *Small Change*. New Yorker. October 4, 2010.

Reflective writing due

10/27

Will the revolution be tweeted? The public sphere and the democratic potential of mass media

Week 6 – Antonio Gramsci and Cultural Theory

11/1

Feminism, Pop Culture, and Bitch Magazine Presentation – Andi Zeisler and Kelsey Wallace

Readings: Bordo, S. (1993) "Hunger as an Ideology." *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Storey, J. *Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Chapter 1 – What is Popular Culture? (Pg. 10-11, review Storey's 5th definition of popular culture)

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

Gramsci, A. (2002) "From the Prison Notebooks", in Duncombe, S. (ed). *Cultural Resistance Reader*. New York: Verso.

Gramsci, A. (1998) "Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State", in Storey, John (ed). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

Bennett, T. (1998) "Popular Culture and the 'turn to Gramsci'", in Storey, John (ed). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

Hunt, J. (2010, October 22). An Ineffective Truth. [Electronic version]. *Vanguard*. Retrieved on October 26, 2010, from <http://www.psu Vanguard.com/arts-culture/an-ineffective-truth-1.2377889>.

Television Clip: "Banksy Opening." *The Simpsons*. Fox. 10 October 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX1iplQQJTo&feature=player_embedded

Reflective writing due

11/3

Antonio Gramsci, hegemony and his influence in cultural theory

Week 7 – Consumer Culture and the Manufacturing of Desire

11/8

Consumption and Choice

Readings: Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Chapter 6 (189-235).

11/10

Midterm Exam

Week 8 – Postmodernism and Popular Culture

11/15

The hyperreal and postmodernism

Readings: Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Chapter 7 (237-277).

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

Reflective writing due

11/17

Simulation and Simulacra

Week 9 – The Virtual, Social Media and Popular Culture

11/22

Film: [Digital Nation: Life on the Virtual Frontier](#)

Readings: Collins, S. (2008) “Making the Most out of 15 Minutes: Reality TV’s Dispensable Celebrity.” *Television and New Media*. 9:2, 87-110.

Stefanone, M., Lackaff, D. & Rosen, D. (2010) “The Relationship between Traditional Mass Media and ‘Social Media’: Reality Television as a Model for Social Network Site Behavior.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. 54:3, 508-525.

Vaidhyanathan, S. (2010) “Naked in the ‘Nonopticon’.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 54:23.

Glass, I. (Executive Producer). (2010, September 10). “Right to Remain Silent.” [This American Life](#). Chicago: Chicago Public Media.

Greenfield, S. (2008). *Debate in the House of Lords*. Retrieved November 9, 2010, from

Stein, J. (2010, May 28). College Students May be Lacking in Empathy, Study Finds [Electronic Version]. *The Los Angeles Times Blog*. Retrieved November 15, 2010 from

Reflective writing due

11/24

Celebrity, social media and online worlds

Week 10 – Globalization and Popular Culture

11/29

Popular culture in a global world

Readings: Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Chapter 9 (315-345).

12/1

Popular Culture and Social Change, Conclusions

The final paper is due on 12/8 by 5:00 to be delivered to my mailbox in the University Studies office in Cramer 117.