

Popular Culture
Winter 2011
UNST 254, CRN 43867/43891
Monday and Wednesday 5:30-6:45/7:00-8:15
Cramer Hall – Room 225

Instructor: David Osborn
Portland State University – University Studies
101 Cramer Hall
Portland, OR 97212
Phone: 503.208.6775
Email: dosborn@pdx.edu
Office Hours: Monday 3:00-5:00, Tuesday 2:00-4:00 and by appointment

Section 1 – MW 5:30-6:45

Mentor: Chris Strand
Email: cjstrand@pdx.edu
Office Hours: By appointment

Section 2 – MW 7:00-8:15

Mentor: Jason Baidenmann
Email: jbaiden@pdx.edu
Office Hours: By appointment

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 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 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 that 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 the students through the creation of discussion questions. Furthermore with the topic selection paper and final presentations the students will select two entire weeks of subject matter. Lastly, the reading journal and writing 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 at class and mentor sessions	(15%)
Participation in class and mentor session activities	(15%)
Participation in mentor sessions	
Participation assignments	
Completion of the blog assignments	
Weekly Discussion Questions	(15%)
Reading Journal	(15%)
Writing Assignments	(25%)
Topic selection paper	
Reflective writing - communication	
Psycho-geographical exploration	
Reflective writing – culture and ecology	
Local culture/sub-culture exploration	
Popular culture case study	
Final reflection	
Final Presentation	(15%)

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

Course Components

Attendance

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 you fellow classmates. If you are late you will miss the attendance points for the day.

Participation in Mentor Sessions

It is 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. Each mentor session you will receive one point for speaking at least once during the discussion portion of the class. If you do not speak during the discussion portion you will not receive this point for the day.

Participation Assignments

Over the course of the term there will be a variety of short, simple assignments. These assignments will be graded simply on the basis of completion. If you complete and turn in the assignment you will receive full credit.

Course Blog Entry

You will be asked to submit two 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.

You are encouraged to view the entries by other students throughout the term and discuss them in class and mentor sessions. We will intentionally use these entries as a subject of discussion at least twice during the term.

Weekly Discussion Questions

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.

Prior to most class sessions you will be required to submit one question about the readings and ideas that will be discussed that day. As appropriate these questions can and should connect to previous class concepts and/or popular culture. These questions will need to be posted to blackboard by noon for any class session in which they are assigned.

Each week you will need to write a response to two questions from that week. These may either respond to the original question or, when appropriate, to another student's response. You cannot respond to your own question. However, one of these may respond to another student's response to your question. Both responses must be submitted by noon of the following Monday, however, you are highly encouraged to respond prior to that.

These questions will then 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. I hope to use the discussion questions as one of several means by which to allow you to direct the focus of the class within each individual topic that we are exploring.

Reading Journal

You will need to acquire two spiral bound notebooks for this course, which I will alternate collecting every Monday. After each assigned reading or other media you will need to write a short, informal response. These journals will serve to keep you accountable to the readings and create a practice of reflection. It is important to stop for a moment and think, process and reflect upon new ideas. Your entries may be short and may take the form of a summary, a connection to another idea, reading or assignment, an application to popular culture in your life, etc. Each response will receive either 1 or 0 points. In terms of grading I will be solely looking for evidence that you completed the assigned reading or other media. However, I would encourage you to use this exercise as a way to more fully

process the material engaged in this course.

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. You will only be graded on 4 of the 5 papers (both the topic selection and final reflection papers are required and may not be dropped) and you may either skip one or drop your lowest score. 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

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.

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.

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 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.

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, 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 two 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 beginning of the assigned class period unless otherwise indicated. Reading journals are due every Monday. Assignments and the reading journal 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.

Course Schedule, Winter Term 2011 Popular Culture

Week 1 – Introduction to Popular Culture

1/3

Introductions, course overview

1/5

What is popular culture?

Assignment Due: Popular Culture – Self Guided Tour

Readings: Course syllabus

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

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

1/10

Looking at culture

Readings: TBD

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>.

1/12

Topic Selection

Assignment Due: Topic selection paper due

Week 3 – The Culture Industry vs. Celebratory Popular Culture

1/17

Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday – NO CLASS

1/19

Culture Industry vs. Cultural Populism

Readings: TBD

Week 4 – The Mass Media, Democratic Potential and the Public Sphere

1/24

Film: *Digital Nation*

1/26

Mass media, the culture industry, McLuhan and the spectacle

Readings: Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (TBD).

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.

Brandzel, B. (2010) What Malcolm Gladwell Missed About Online Organizing and Creating Big Change [Electronic Version]. *The Nation*. November, 15, 2010. Retrieved on December 29, 2010 from <http://www.thenation.com/article/156447/aiming-hydrant-what-malcolm-gladwell-missed-about-online-organizing-and-creating-big-?rel=emailNation>.

Assignment Due: Reflective Writing – Communication

Week 5 – Antonio Gramsci, Ecology and the Virtual

1/31

Antonio Gramsci: popular culture as a site of negotiation

Readings: 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)

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

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.

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

Television Clip: “Banksy Opening.” *The Simpsons*. Fox. 10 October 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX1ip1QQJTo&feature=player_embedded

Assignment Due: First blog entry

2/2

Ecology and the Virtual

Assignment Due: Reflective Writing – Culture and Ecology

Week 6 – Corporations, Celebrity, Advertising and Youth Culture

2/7

Corporations, advertising and youth culture

Readings: TBD

2/9

Representation of students and the university

Assignment Due: Psycho-geographical tour

Week 7 – Race, Class and Gender

2/14

Film: *Reel Bad Arabs*

2/16

Gender and Feminism

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

Week 8 – The Local and the Global: Globalization, Local Culture and Sub-cultures

2/21

Globalization and localization

Readings: TBD

Assignment Due: Second blog entry

2/23

Local culture and sub-cultures

Assignment Due: Local culture/sub-culture exploration

Week 9 – Topics TBD

2/28

Topics TBD

3/2

Topics TBD

Assignment Due: Popular culture case study

Week 10 – Group Presentations and Conclusions

3/7

Final presentations

3/9

Final presentation and conclusions

Finals Week

3/14

Assignment Due: Final reflection