Popular Culture

Fall 2013
UNST 254, CRN 14917
Monday and Wednesday 12:30 – 1:45
Cramer Hall – Room 228

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

Mentor: Virginia Luka
Email: vluka@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 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 that has had on us both individually and socially.

Agency, Anti-Oppression and Education: Participatory Teaching and Learning Philosophy

"Answers are the way out. Answers are not what we are here for. When we look for answers, we're looking to change the pattern. When we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation. The good energy is all in the questions, seldom in the answers."
>   - Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*

"To learn which questions are unanswerable, and *not to answer them*: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness."
>   - Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

"If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers.
>   - Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

I strive to create a participatory learning community in the classroom in which students can claim agency over their education. Agency in the context of education means that students recognize that they can and should be the ones shaping their educational experience in collaboration with others involved in the university such as instructors and act accordingly. As part of this 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.

Part of this requires that we name, acknowledge and intentionally engage the systems of oppression and domination that exist in our society and which shape our lived experiences, our interactions with each other, what we know and how we hold that knowledge. We must be thoughtful about how we engage each other in the classroom so as not to replicate patterns of oppression. Given these realities, among others, creating a truly participatory and egalitarian learning environment is not possible, however, it is a goal to which we still strive toward. In intentionally engaging and acknowledging these realities we can move as close as possible to creating a participatory learning environment. If there are ever ways that I can create an anti-oppression environment in the class beyond what I try and do please do not hesitate to let me know.

I have structured the course in an intentional fashion in order to foster this learning community and student agency in claiming your education. 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. Students will be deeply involved in assessing their performance and learning over the course of the term and selecting their grade. 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, horizontalism in the classroom, decentralization and a rich form of participation, which I hope will provide for a dynamic learning experience.

Course learning objectives
1. By the end of this course, you should be able to:
2. Explain different understandings of culture and popular culture.
3. Describe the intersection of corporations, consumerism and culture.
4. Reflect upon the individual and social consequences of both popular culture and technologically driven cultural changes.
5. Analyze a variety of different theoretical approaches to popular culture, in particular those relating to Antonio Gramsci.
6. Understand political and ideological dimensions of popular culture.
7. Comprehend concepts of race, class and gender as they relate to popular culture.
8. 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
In line with the aim of taking agency over your education you will determine your own grade at the end of term, with input from the mentor and I. Along the way, I'll offer you engaged, qualitative feedback on your assignments. At the end of the term, I'll give each of you an itemized handout of all aspects of your participation in the class, and you will use this to decide what grade you have earned over the course of the term.

Full involvement in this course―in other words, an absolutely clear and incontrovertible "A"―looks like this:
• You've come to at least 90% of our classes on time (and stayed the full time), prepared to participate in our work for the day and you've been present during that time (meaning: no texting or other distractions to yourself and/or others).
• You've completed all of the required assignments, including those which are self-chosen.

- You've committed yourself to working in the spirit of this course—including the claiming of your own education—in accordance with the "Agency and Education" section above.

In addition, we'll co-create a flexible rubric to provide an additional framework for your decision-making about your grade. These parameters will align with the "spirit" of the grading system more than with a rigid quantitative breakdown:

A = Outstanding; consistently did your best work/made your best effort
B = Good; regularly did your best work/made your best effort
C = Average; occasionally did your best work/made your best effort
D = Below average; rarely did your best work/made your best effort
F = Little or no effort put forth

There's one caveat here: I reserve the right to require you to negotiate your final grade with me if your assessment in your self-evaluation seems either artificially high or artificially low. We will try and make this meeting happen before grades are due. In the event that this isn't possible, you will receive an "M" grade at the end of the term (which stands for "missing" and will remain on your transcript until we have negotiated your final grade). These meetings may not end up in a change of the grade you assigned yourself, but will at least allow us to dialogue about the grade and the diversity of our perspectives.

Please keep all of the work you produce in this course until at least the end of the term. You will use these documents in the preparation of your final reflection work.

By remaining in this course, you agree to the conditions set forth here, including the course requirements and the terms for self-grading outlined above.

The following components of the course are offered as a guide to the assignments of the course and to give a general sense of the course components:

Attendance and Participation at Class and Mentor Sessions
Mentor Session Presentation
Reading Quizzes and Reading Responses
Writing/Assignments/Quiz
      Participation assignments (self-guided tour, etc.)
      Popular culture reflections and short presentation
      Ideology and popular culture
      Quiz – Popular culture foundation
      Literature review and reflections on dystopian representations
      Popular Culture Interview
      Final reflection
Topic Selection Process
      Topic selection blog entry
      Topic curriculum/presentation
Final Presentation

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 you 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.

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 in mentor session.

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 emailed to your peers at least 24 hours prior to the start of 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.

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 a 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/responses will be the primary form of accountability for the readings. At the

beginning of some class periods there will be a very brief quiz or reflective writing question on the content of the reading. They will designed so that if you did the reading you will have no problem answering the questions. You may also be asked to provide a quote from the reading and a short response to the reading.

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 should be well-organized and well-written, demonstrate critical thinking and analysis, demonstrate synthesis with other course components as well as other relevant courses or your life experience.

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.

You are encouraged to view the entries by other students throughout the term and discuss them in class and mentor sessions. If you are ever uncomfortable having your work displayed comfortably please speak with me and we can easily arrange to have you turn in the assignment privately.

Book Group

During weeks 6-8 we will divide into four book groups and engage in a focused study of dystopian and apocalyptic popular culture. You will choose to read either *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, *The Hunger Games* by Susan Collins, *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood or *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy.

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 will be in a course packet 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 me 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). 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. Timely completion of assignments is important to consider in the self-grading process and will be indicated in the feedback provided by me. 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.

<u>Weekly Schedule</u>
Our tentative weekly schedule is included below. Please note that the schedule is subject to change.

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Course Schedule, Fall Term 2013
Popular Culture

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Week 1 – Introduction to Popular Culture

<u>9/30</u>
Introduction to the course

<u>10/2</u>
Thinking about culture: popular culture, capitalism and mass society

Readings: Course syllabus

<u>Assignment Due:</u>   Popular Culture – Self Guided Tour
Media Use Survey

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

<u>10/7</u>
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]**

<u>Assignment Due:</u>   Individual Course Plan and Learning Goals

<u>10/9</u>
Social representation – gender
Film: *Killing Us Softly 4*

Reading: Bordo, S. (1993) "Hunger as an Ideology." Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body. Berkeley: University of California Press. **[Course Packet – Pg. 99-110 – 12 pages]**

Week 3 – Three "Ways of Looking": Theory and Popular Culture

10/14
Consumption-centric and production-centric views
Finalize book groups
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]**

Assignment Due: Ideology and advertising

10/16
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 5th 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]**

Week 4 – Technology, Mass Media and Social Media

10/21
Topic selection discussion

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

Assignment Due: Blog Entry - Topic Selection

10/23
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

10/28
Social media and social change
The intersection of virtual reality and reality
Quiz – Theory and Popular Culture: "Ways of Looking"

Readings: Gladwell, M. (2010) Small Change. *New Yorker.* October 4, 2010. **[Course Packet – 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. **[D2L – 18 pages]**

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]**

10/30
Social representation – race
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 6 – The Future as a Metaphor: Apocalyptic and Dystopian Popular Culture

11/4
Introduction to dystopian popular culture
(Post-) Postmodernism, collective imagination and transformative times

Readings: Le Guin, Ursula (1987) "Introduction" *The Left Hand of Darkness.* (xi-xvi). **[Course Packet – 6 pages]**

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

11/6

Book groups
Dystopian popular culture continued

Readings: TBD

Week 7 – Apocalyptic and Dystopian Popular Culture

<u>11/11</u>
NO CLASS – FEDERAL HOLIDAY

<u>11/13</u>
Book groups
Dystopian popular culture continued

Readings: TBD

<u>**Assignment Due:**</u>   Literature Review and Reflections on Dystopian Representations

Week 8 – Apocalyptic and Dystopian Popular Culture

<u>11/18</u>
Book groups
Dystopian popular culture continued

Readings: TBD

<u>11/20</u>
Book groups
Conclusions dystopian popular culture

Readings: TBD

<u>**Assignment Due:**</u>   Popular Culture Interview

Week 9 – Student Selected Topic and Social/Cultural Change

<u>11/25</u>
Topic TBD

Readings: TBD

<u>11/27</u>
Topic TBD

Social change and cultural change

Readings: TBD

<u>Assignment Due:</u>   Topic blog entry

Week 10 – Group Presentations and Conclusions

<u>12/2</u>
Final presentations

<u>12/4</u>
Final presentation and conclusions

Finals Week

<u>12/11</u>
<u>Assignment Due:</u>   Final Reflection