

Department of English & Writing Studies

Reading Popular Culture
English 2017 (002)
Fall/Winter 2018-19

Instructor: Dr. Nigel Joseph

Course Date/Time: Wednesday 6.30-9.30 pm

Course Location: Spencer Engineering
Building 1200

Course Description

In this course, we pay attention to the way pop culture can address our deepest desires as well as trigger our deepest fears: often both at once. We explore conservative condemnations of the “trashiness” of pop culture as well as analyses that emphasize its democratic potential and capacity to defuse conflict, and we examine the way pop culture alienates us as well as draws us into new communities. The course encourages us to look at representations (films, books, advertisements) as well as practices (shopping, modifying our appearance). We look at the contemporary obsession with an ideal bodily type characterized by slimness, at arguments that lay the blame for this obsession with advertising, and others that claim that the causes lie much deeper. We look at the ideological underpinnings of a typical suspenseful Hollywood action blockbuster; we explore the reasons for the popularity of the relatively new genre of the superhero film; and we look at some influential theorists’ arguments about how we watch films and why we get the kinds of pleasure we do from watching them. We explore the new kinds of connectivity as well as the new forms of alienation and separation made available through the new social media; we look at the way new forms of distraction and new patterns of civility and incivility are emerging from our shared experiences on the Internet; and we explore new styles of listening to music, together and alone.

Objectives:

By the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Identify and paraphrase arguments made by notable defenders and critics of popular culture
- Offer a range of explanations for the growth and development of popular culture
- Analyze and identify the different ideologies that permeate the productions of popular culture

Course Materials

Coursepack (will be available at Western Book Store; last year’s coursepack can also be used). **Please bring the coursepack to every class.** Note: A lot of the material will be presented in class on Powerpoint, and later on OWL. However, **not all** the material that is presented on Powerpoint will appear on OWL, so regular attendance is strongly recommended.

Methods of Evaluation

The grade for the course will be arrived at as follows:

Final exam	35%
Mid-year exam	30%
In-class assignment	15%
Assignment	15% (1000 words)
Attendance and participation	5%

The two exams will require you to write short essays on topics discussed in class as well as answer a multiple choice question. Tests and exams must be written by hand. No laptops/electronic devices will be permitted, except with special permission. No notes or notebooks may be consulted during the examination.

The in-class assignment should be completed in one hour. The assignment will consist of a short essay and an objective-type (multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, match-the-following etc) test. For the take-home assignment you can use material from the coursepack. Essays must be handed in before or on the due date; no extensions will be granted unless discussed with the instructor at least a week **before** the date on which the essay is due. Please retain a copy of the final draft of each essay; if a submitted essay is lost, you will be asked to submit the duplicate for grading.

Students are fully responsible for looking at and being familiar with the information posted on the department website at <http://www.uwo.ca/english/undergraduate/Student%20Information.html>.

Additional Information

Late assignments:

A penalty of one mark per day (including weekends) will be imposed for late essays beginning the first day after the deadline. No essays will be accepted after the tenth day. Essays submitted after that day will be accepted only on (a) humanitarian grounds, or (b) medical grounds, for which written proof must be provided to the Office of the Academic Dean. No essay will be accepted after the last day of classes unless (a) or (b) above apply, or the student has received prior permission from the instructor. **Late essays not handed in at class may be dropped off in the mailbox outside the English department office.** All essays dropped off after 4:00 p.m. on a Friday will be date-stamped the following Monday. Essays should be placed in an envelope and addressed to the professor.

Use of laptops in the classroom: I have no objection to laptop use in general; however, if you are using laptops to text friends, to view material unrelated to the course, or in a manner that is distracting and offensive, you will be asked to leave the classroom.

Attendance and participation:

Attendance will be taken at every class. The UWO calendar states: "Any student who, in the opinion of the instructor, is absent too frequently from class... in any course, will be reported to the Dean of the Faculty offering the course (after due warning is given). On the recommendation of the department concerned, and with the permission of the Dean of the Faculty, the student will be debarred from taking the regular examination in the course..." Class attendance is important: 5% of the overall grade is set aside for this component. Participation, in the form of classroom discussion, is encouraged, and may improve your grade.

Timetable

Sep 12	Introduction: Popular and “high” culture, critiques of popular culture and defences; pop culture and technology; elitism and democracy
Sep 19, 26, Oct 3	Adorno, Benjamin, Healy: High culture/low culture; conservative critique of popular culture; radical defences of popular culture; television viewing and its effects on reading skills;
Oct 17, 24, 31, Nov 7, 14	Ideology and pop culture; ideological analyses of music videos and popular films; individualism, averageness, taciturnity, class, American exceptionalism and vigilantism in action blockbusters In-class assignment Oct 24 (15%)
Nov 21, 28, Dec 5	Pop culture and the beautiful body; time at the gym, bodybuilding, cosmetic surgery, today’s visual culture; being looked at and everyday narcissism. Slimness, advertising, self-control, and anorexia; the aesthetic of the slim body; Bordo , Kilbourne (anorexia and deep ideology, or just advertising?)
	Mid-term exam period: (date of exam TBA)
Jan 9, 16, 23, 30	The movies: theories about why and how we watch films; Mulvey and the male gaze; the “female” gaze?; Creed , abjection, and horror;
Feb 6, 13,	Chick-flicks, gendered appeal and the romantic narrative as revolutionary; the superhero film: politics, ideology, pleasure; the uncanny double and the modern superhero. Hulk, Spider Man, Dark Knight, X-Men, Avengers
	Reading Week Feb 18-22
Feb 27, Mar 6,	The superhero film (continued); The mall: (Rushkoff) shopping malls and planned seduction;
Mar 13	Privatized music and the fragmentation of taste; headphones and listening together alone; Adorno, Kassabian, Rey Chow; Assignment due March 13th (15%)
Mar 20, 27, April 3	Being looked at, capitalism and internalized discipline, anxious narcissism; reading prose; texting, social media, conversation, machines, isolation, corporeal interaction. The Internet and other new media: profound distraction or new routes to community? Dreyfus and others on remoteness, distraction, and the disembodied tele-teacher. Does Google make you stupid? New kinds of cyber-intelligence; the texting generation; multi-tasking, productive distraction, diminished attention spans, the new literacy; the presentation of the online self; civility on the Net

Accommodation

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and further information regarding this policy can be found at http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf.

Downloadable Student Medical Certificate (SMC):

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf

Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism:

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.

Plagiarism Checking:

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Subsequent offences will result in failure for the course.

Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western: <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.