

Department of English & Writing Studies

Reading Popular Culture**English 2017 (002)**

Fall/Winter 2019-20

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Wenaus
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UC 1421

Course Location: Somerville House 3345

Course Date/Time: Wednesday 6:30 pm-9:30 pm

Course Description

This course examines the concept, practice, and critique of popular culture. The **concept** of popular culture has often been understood in opposition to “high culture.” So, rather than the kind of “high culture” we would find exhibited in a museum, pop culture generally refers to folk culture, “low culture,” or mass-produced texts/objects. As a result, pop culture is also often thought of as the **practice** of mass production, commodity culture, and consumer capitalism characterized by standardization and the maximization of profit. The **critique** of pop culture, however, splits into two major camps: first, that which maintains a distinction between high culture and pop culture based on high culture’s perceived superior aesthetic quality. The second major mode of critique challenges this elitist position. Rather than thinking of the distinction between “high” and “low” culture, this mode aims to unpack the ideological, institutional, and class-based biases that inform the way different groups negotiate the value of a text. These two branches of critique largely inform what has come to be known as the field that informs the course: **cultural studies**. In short, we will consider the ways cultural critiques negotiate between acceptance, resistance, and ambivalence towards pop culture. To do so, we will engage with foundational academic texts that will provide context and concepts to think seriously about pop culture. These academic works are then used in a practical and exciting way to give us tools, concepts, and frameworks to think differently about the popular texts with which so many of us are already very familiar: film and streaming television, comics and manga, social media, Tinder, fan culture, music videos, superheroes, video games, vaporwave, memes, TikTok, identity politics, and selfies. In the spirit of pop culture, the course will appeal to all students regardless of discipline since, at the end of the day, our overarching questions will be: who, where, what, when, why, and how is *cultural meaning* created, sustained, and challenged. All in all, the course will be engaging and enjoyable while taking seriously *what it means* to be entertained.

Objectives:

Successful students who complete the course will be able to:

- Achieve an understanding of popular culture as a concept and practice;
- Achieve a sense of the historical significance of popular culture and cultural critique;
- Develop skills for effective critical analysis, close reading, and textual interpretation;
- Develop skills for writing logical, organized, and clear arguments;
- Expand skills for engaging in secondary sources as a means of informing, interrogating, and engaging in cultural debate.

Courses will be lecture style. However, please be prepared to engage in discussion at each class.

Course Materials

Books (Required)

Ballard, J.G. *Kingdom Come*. Fourth Estate (2014). **ISBN-10:** 9780007232475

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*. Pantheon (2008). **ISBN-10:** 0375714723

Films (To be screened in-class)

Black Panther. Dir. Ryan Coogler

Disinformation. Dir. Richard Metzger and Craig Melville

The Matrix (Dir. Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski)

Videodrome (Dir. David Cronenberg)

Kill Bill Vol. 1 (Dir. Quentin Tarantino)

They Live (Dir. John Carpenter)

Methods of Evaluation

Assignment	Due Date	(%)
Short Essay	Week 5 in class	10
Mid-Term Test	Week 12 in class	20
Research paper (5-8 pages)	Last Day of Class	30
Participation	Ongoing - in class and on OWL	10
Final exam	TBA	30

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>.

Short Essay - Value: 10% Due: Week 5 (9 OCTOBER) in class Length: 2-3 pages

In consultation with me, you will develop a topic that engages with the idea of popular culture.

The purpose of this exercise is to guide your thinking toward the experience and interrogation of a popular genre/mode of which so many of us are already familiar. Think of this assignment as a launching pad for thinking about pop culture in a more scholarly way. While this short essay will not be a research paper, it must be a formal academic treatment of a specific concern. More details to follow.

Mid-Term Test - Value: 20% Length: In Class

This will be held in class on **4 DECEMBER** and will be 1 hour in length. It will consist of a series of identifications followed by a section of terms/definitions.

Research Paper - Value: 30% Due: 1 APRIL in class Length: 5-8 pages

You will engage with secondary source material as a means of intervening and offering insight into an established critical debate. Be eccentric and daring! And, yes, you can choose a topic/text that we haven't covered in class, if you'd like. However, if you choose a text outside of our reading/viewing list, you **must** consult with me first so that we can discuss the topic for approval (rest assured, though, I'm open to most suggestions). Just be sure that your writing is clear and lucid, your flow of ideas is logical, and you stress the significance of your argument through close reading and critical analysis. More details to follow.

Participation - Value 10%

You will find Discussion topics on OWL that will correspond with the discussions we'll have in class. Over the course of the year, you will be required to follow up with five discussions by providing a short (though thoughtful) written response on OWL. Each response will be worth 2%. More details to follow.

Late Submissions

Essays are due on the specified date. They are to be handed in at the beginning of class. Late essays will be penalized **3% per day** including weekends. Essays submitted more than a week (7 days) late will receive a grade of 0/F. If you cannot submit your essay on time due to illness or on compassionate grounds, you will need a letter from a physician or academic councilor of your home faculty indicating that you were ill or unable to attend to your work during the time in question.

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.

Timetable

WEEK	TOPIC / READINGS
Week 1 Sept. 11	Course Introduction How should we define popular culture? What does it mean to study culture?
Week 2 Sept. 18	Culture, culture, Mass Culture, Popular Culture What's the difference? Who decides? Readings: Williams, Raymond. "Culture' and 'Masses'" (1976) Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry" (1944)
Week 3 Sept. 25	A Little More about Culture Readings: Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular.'" (1981) Adorno, Theodor "Culture Industry Reconsidered" (1991)
Week 4 Oct. 2	Commodification Readings: Mark, Karl. "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof." (1867) Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

	(1936) Debord, Guy. "The Commodity as Spectacle." (1970)
Week 5 Oct. 9 SHORT ESSAY DUE	Socio-Economics, Class, and Popular Culture Readings: Gramsci, Antonio. From <i>The Prison Notebooks</i> Cashmore, Ellis. "America's Paradox." (1997).
Week 6 Oct. 16	What is Taste? Readings: Fiske, John. "Popular Discrimination." (1991) Willis, Paul. "Symbolic Creativity." (1990)
Week 7 Oct. 23	What is Place? Readings: Augé, Marc. From <i>Non-Places, introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.</i> Ballard, J.G. "The Future of the Future." (1977) From <i>A User's Guide to the Millennium</i> 224-227. Anderson, Benedict. From <i>Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism</i> Ballard, J.G. <i>Kingdom Come</i>
Week 8 Oct. 30	Ballard, J.G. <i>Kingdom Come</i> (Continued)
FALL READING WEEK	No Class
Week 9 Nov. 13	Voices and Identity Readings: Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'Black'" in Black Popular Culture?" (1992) W.E.B. Du Bois. 1995. "The Conservation of Races." (1897). (In In David Levering Lewis, ed. <i>W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader.</i> Henry Holt and Company: 20-33.)
Week 10 Nov. 20	Superheroes Morrison, Grant. "Introduction." <i>Supergods.</i> xiii-xvii Bukatman, Scott. "Why I Hate Superhero Movies." Nama, Adilifu. "Color them Black." From <i>The Superhero Reader</i> (ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester. P. 252-268. Screening: <i>Black Panther</i> (Dir. Ryan Coogler)

<p>Week 11</p> <p>Nov. 27</p>	<p>Subculture</p> <p>Readings: Hebdige, Dick. "Subculture." (1979) Thorton, Sarah. "The Distinction of Cultures without Distinction" (from <i>Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital</i>. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 1-25.)</p>
<p>Week 12</p> <p>Dec. 4</p> <p>MIDTERM TEST IN CLASS</p>	<p>Gender and Sexuality</p> <p>Readings: de Beauvoir, Simone. "Introduction." (from. <i>The Second Sex</i>). (1941). Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse" (From <i>Feminism/Postmodernism</i>). Connell, R.W. "Defining Masculinity" From <i>Masculinities</i> (67-86) (2nd Edition).</p>
<p>Week 13</p> <p>Jan. 8</p>	<p>What is Postmodernism, anyway?</p> <p>Readings: Lyotard, Jean-François. "Introduction" (from <i>The Postmodern Condition</i>) xxiii-xxv. Jameson, Frederic. (from <i>Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism</i>) Storming the reality studio McCaffery, Larry. "The Desert of the Real: A Brief History of the Postmodern Universe" Storming the reality studio 2- 9</p>
<p>Week 14</p> <p>Jan. 15</p>	<p>No, seriously: What is Postmodernism?</p> <p>Screening: <i>The Matrix</i> (Dir. Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski)</p>
<p>Week 15</p> <p>Jan. 22</p>	<p>Fan Cultures</p> <p>Readings: Coppa, Francesca. "A Brief History of Media Fandom." Radway, Janice. From <i>Reading the Romance</i>. Jenkins, Henry. <i>Textual Poachers</i> ("Scribbling in the Margins: Fan Readers/Fan Writers")</p>
<p>Week 16</p> <p>Jan. 29</p>	<p>Bricolage, Remix, Mash up</p> <p>Readings: Burroughs, William S. "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin" Hebdige, Dick. "Bricolage." From <i>Subcultures: The Meaning of Style</i> Lessig, Lawrence. From <i>Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy</i> Miller, Paul D. "Introduction." <i>Rhythm Science</i>.</p>
<p>Week 17</p> <p>Feb. 5</p>	<p>Screening <i>Kill Bill Vol. 1</i> (Dir. Quentin Tarantino)</p>
<p>Week 18</p> <p>Feb. 12</p>	<p>MEMES!</p>

	<p>Readings: Dawkins, Richard. "Memes: The New Replicators." From <i>The Selfish Gene</i> chapter 11. Rushkoff, Douglas. "The Nature of Infection." From <i>Media Virus!</i></p>
SPRING READING WEEK	NO CLASS!
<p>Week 19 Feb. 26</p>	<p>Pop Music</p> <p>Readings: Adorno, Theodor. "On Popular Music." <i>Studies in Philosophy and Social Science</i>, New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941, IX, 17-48. Riesman, David. "Listening to Popular Music." (1950)</p>
<p>Week 20 Mar. 4</p>	<p>Hauntology, Nostalgia, Cancelled Futures, Vaporwave, lofi hip hop chill anime beats to relax/study to</p> <p>Readings: Fisher, Mark. Hauntology, Nostalgia, and Lost Futures: Interviewed by Valerio Mannucci and Valerio Mattioli For <i>Nero</i> (2014) (K-Punk p.683-689). Tanner, Grafton. "Lost Futures and Consumer Dreams: Hauntology and the Sounds of Capital." (Chapter 3 <i>Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts</i>)</p>
<p>Week 21 Mar. 11</p>	<p>Hauntology Continued:</p> <p>Screening: <i>Ready Player One</i> (Dir. Steven Spielberg)</p>
<p>Week 22 Mar. 18</p>	<p>Comics and Sequential Art</p> <p>Readings: McCloud, Scott. From <i>Understanding Comics</i> Burns, Charles. <i>Black Hole</i></p>
<p>Week 23 Mar. 25</p>	<p>Burns, Charles. <i>Black Hole</i> (continued)</p> <p>Seeing Ourselves: Social Media and the Question of Narcissism and Narcosis</p> <p>Readings: McLuhan, Marshall. "The Gadget Lover, Narcissus as Narcosis." From <i>Understanding Media</i> Flusser, Vilém. "The Technical Image." Marinetti, F.T. Emilio Settimelli, and Bruno Corra. "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre." (1915)</p>
<p>Week 24 Apr. 1 RESEARCH PAPER DUE</p>	<p>Conclusion, Questions, Wrap-up</p>