Course Objectives

This course is dedicated to investigating popular culture, its nature and role in our lives, and its broad effects on American society and culture, as well as its global effects. All of you come to the class with some knowledge of the subject under investigation, and this course is designed to take advantage of that fact.

We’ll be looking at a variety of sociological perspectives to examine the role of media and popular culture in everyday life, with a particular emphasis on the organization of the mass media industry, the relationship between cultural consumption and social status, and the social significance of leisure activities from sports to shopping. We will explore definitions of “popular culture,” as well as those who create it and consume it. We’ll look at gender, race and ethnicity as they are expressed in mainstream popular culture and subculture. You’ll also have chances to explore aspects of popular culture of particular interest to you.

As this is a core course, we will be looking at the sociology of popular culture with an eye towards the following concerns:

1) **The Perennial Questions**: What is culture and what is “popular culture”? How is it shared among different people? Why is popular culture so essential to our identity as Americans? Who controls culture?

2) **Cultural Diversity**: A number of readings will address the issue of cultural diversity in 21st century society, in order to appreciate the great variety of ethnic, racial, cultural perspectives and influences.

3) **Historical Perspective**: We’ll look at popular culture in a historical context, especially with regard to the development of cultural theory and the evolution of various types of popular culture.

4) **Methodology**: We’ll pay attention to the various ways popular culture can be studied, including thick description, interview, and content analysis. You’ll learn how to study popular culture from a sociological perspective.
5) **Writing Component**: There is a strong writing requirement in this course. You’ll be expected to react to the works we read and be able to perform your own analyses of popular culture, as well as integrate the cultural perspectives considered in class.

6) **Creating a Personal Philosophy**: You’re encouraged to develop your own philosophy about the importance and relevance of popular culture, both in your life and in an academic sense. Popular culture was undoubtedly a part of your life before your class. Hopefully, you will view it with a new lens by the end of the course.

Course Requirements

*Please silence your cell phones before class!*

1) **Class Attendance and Participation**: Everyone is expected to attend class and participate in discussions and exercises. I also encourage you to bring in relevant material/articles for discussion, i.e. that connect what we are learning to current pop culture issues.

2) **Assigned Reading**: You should come to class having read all assigned material.

3) **Weekly Reactions**: You will be expected to contribute well-thought-out reactions to the WebCT class discussion list. You must contribute at least 8 times throughout the semester.

4) **Papers**: There will be 2 paper assignments throughout the semester. These will be an opportunity for you to critically connect concepts introduced in class with topics of interest to you. More detailed assignments will be given out when the time comes. Late papers will be penalized.

5) **Exams**: There will be a final in-class exam which will cover the core material of the course.
Weekly Responses:

This class deals with ideas that require regular completion of reading and regular attendance. To encourage reading and thought, you are required to write eight thought-pieces (at least 200 words each) on the week’s readings, to be posted on the class WebCT website.

Thought pieces should be posted as a reply to the appropriate date within the discussion group. They should discuss the readings assigned to that date in the context of the class, or connected thoughtfully to issues of interest to you. These writings can be quite informal, but thoughtless, cursory or late pieces will not receive credit. Three of the eight postings should respond, or at least make reference, to comments previously posted by classmates. Reactions must be posted by midnight before the class for which the reading is assigned (that is, by 12am on Tuesdays and Thursdays). Only one posting a week will be counted as part of the required eight.

These pieces will be graded check-plus, check or check-minus, with the rough translation being (check plus = 100), (check = 90), and (check minus = 80). Every missing thought-piece at semester’s end will cost you ten percent of this portion of your course grade, so make sure you pace yourself with these responses so you will not come up short at semester’s end. These responses are worth 20% of your grade. I will update you at midterm as to how many you have done and your current grade. You may also ask me at any time.

Grading

Your grade will be based on the following elements:

1) Class Attendance and Participation 10%
2) Weekly Responses 20%
3) Paper 1: 5-6 pages 20%
4) Papers 2: 7-8 pages 25%
5) Final Exam 25%
Total: 100%

Academic Honesty

You are responsible for adhering to the statement of academic honesty in your Student Handbook.

Disability Statement

If you have a disability, please let me know about it at the beginning of the semester so that appropriate accommodations can be made.
Keeping in Touch with Me

I encourage you to drop by during my office hours if you have any questions about the readings, assignments, or concepts in general. I can also make appointments outside of these hours if you check with me. The best way to contact me is through my email listed at the beginning of the syllabus. I check my email frequently and will get back to you as soon as possible.

Required Readings

- Online Course Reserves and WebCT Readings
  - (*) Indicates reading is in the library’s online course reserve system
  - WebCT: Reading is on course’s WebCT page
Course Schedule

PART I. WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

Week 1: Introductions
Jan 15 Introduction

Jan 17 What is Culture and Popular Culture?
    • Raymond Williams, “‘Culture’ and ‘Masses’” p. 87-93 and p. 192-197

Week 2: Theories of Popular Culture
Jan 22
    • WebCT: Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” p. 64-71

Jan 24 The Elite and the Masses
    • Paul DiMaggio, “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America” from Rethinking Popular Culture: p. 374- 397

PART II. MASS MEDIA AND ADVERTISING

Week 3: Mass Media and Advertising
Jan 29 Consumer Society
    • Thorstein Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption,” from The Theory of the Leisure Class: p. 43-62

Jan 31 The Business of Media
    • Croteau & Hoynes, “The New Media Giants” and “How the Media Business Influences Society” from The Business of Media: p. 71-107, 183-206

Week 4: Mass Media and Advertising, a Critical Approach
Feb 5
    • Naomi Klein, No Logo: Ch. 1-4

Feb 7
    • Klein, No Logo: Ch. 6, 8, 12
PART III. VIEWS OF FILM, TV AND PRINT

Week 5: Television
Feb 12  TV: For Better or Worse?
   •  *Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Ch. 6, 10
   •  *Steven Johnson, Everything Bad is Good for You: “Television”: p. 62-116

Feb 14  News and a Culture of Fear
   •  *Barry Glassner, The Culture of Fear: Intro and Ch. 2, p. xi-xxviii and 23-49

Week 6: Queer Culture and Film
Feb 19
   •  View The Celluloid Closet in class
   •  WebCT: Judith Halberstam, “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance,” p. 429-440

Paper 1 due

Feb 21
   •  *Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism” from Out in Culture: p. 484-500

Week 7: Feminist Views
Feb 26  Shopping, Gender and Resistance

Feb 28  Pornography
   •  WebCT: Laura Kipnis, “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler” p. 223-240

********SPRING BREAK: March 3 – 7***************

Week 8: Reading the Romance
Mar 11
   •  Radway, Reading the Romance: Chapters 2-4

Mar 13
   •  Radway, Reading the Romance: Chapters 6-7
PART IV. YOUTH CULTURE AND SUBCULTURE

Week 9 -10:
Mar 18
• *Paul Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions” from Rethinking Popular Culture: p. 313-334
• *Harris Friedberg, “‘Hang Up My Rock and Roll Shoes’: The Cultural Production of Rock and Roll,” p. 154-164

Mar 20:  NO CLASS, EASTER BREAK

Mar 25 Skateboarding and Subculture
• View Dogtown and Z-Boys in class

Mar 27
• TBA

Week 11: Hip-Hop Music
April 1
• Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Ch. 1-4

April 3
• Rose, Black Noise: Ch. 5

PART V. OTHER AREAS OF POPULAR CULTURE

Week 12: Celebrity and Fandom
Apr 8
• Joshua Gamson, Claims to Fame: Introduction and Ch. 3-4

Apr 10
• Gamson, Claims to Fame: Ch. 6 and Conclusion

Week 13: New Technologies and Popular Culture
Apr 15 The Importance of Medium
• *Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
Apr 17  The Internet
  *Nakamura, “Head-hunting on the Internet: Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing in Textual and Graphical Chat Spaces” p. 520-533*

Week 14: Globalization and Popular Culture
Apr 22
  *Henry Yu, “How Tiger Woods Lost his Stripes: Post-Nationalist American Studies as a History of Race, Migration, and the Commodification of Culture,” p. 197-209*

Apr 24  Japan

Week 15: Future of Popular Culture
Apr 29
  TBA

Paper 2 due

May 1  Conclusion
  * Wrap up and Review

FINAL EXAM: Tues, May 6  12:30 p.m.