SC 076 Sociology of Popular Culture  
Spring 2009  
MWF 1, Carney 103

Instructor: Johanna Pabst  
Office: McGuinn 410C  
Office Hours: MW 12-1 and by appt

E-mail: pabstjo@bc.edu

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 take daily attendance. More than 3 unexcused absences will affect your grade. Each additional unexcused absence will lower your final grade by one point. Excused absences, including approved athletic events, medical appointments, and absences cleared by the dean will not lower your grade. I also expect you to arrive to class on time. Repeatedly late arrivals to class are disrespectful to everyone and will also affect your grade.

   a. A portion of this grade will come from discussion groups throughout the semester. Everyone will be responsible for preparing discussion within a small discussion group once during the semester, and will turn in their preparation materials to me the day they lead discussion. Attendance on these days is mandatory for everyone.

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 10 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 Reactions

This class deals with complex ideas that require regular and thorough completion of reading, and engagement with ideas. To ensure that you do the reading, you are required to complete ten (10) responses on course readings, to be posted on the class Blackboard Vista site. Guidelines for responses are as follows:

- They must be posted as a reply to the appropriate posting on the course website.
- They must be at least 200 words in length (and aren’t expected to exceed 300 words).
- They are due by Friday, 8 p.m. Late responses will not receive credit.
- These writings can be quite informal, but thoughtless or cursory thought-pieces will not receive credit. They must be in your own words, and must respond to the readings. You are also encouraged to respond to other students’ posts in your postings. Your postings should not just repeat points that other students have already made.
- These responses are worth 20% of your grade. Only one posting a week will be counted as part of the required ten. You may respond at any point during the week, but you must show that you are engaging with the readings you respond to.
- These responses will be graded check-plus, check or check-minus, with the rough translation being (check plus = 10), (check = 9), and (check minus = 8). Every missing thought-piece at semester’s end will cost you 10% 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.
  - √+: An excellent response. You clearly understand and engage with the readings and focus on major points/arguments from them. You are able to cohesively tie the readings together (if there is more than one). You make sophisticated connections from the readings to the real world. This is reserved for truly excellent responses.
  - √: A good response. Most responses will receive this grade. You make a good attempt to engage with and understand the readings, to tie them together and to address major arguments, or points of interest. You may also make good connections from the readings to the real world. Your analysis remains more of a surface reading/summary than a plus response.
  - √-: A fair response. You seem to have done some of the reading but do not demonstrate a clear understanding of the major points/arguments. There may be some factual errors/misunderstandings that could have been avoided from more focused reading. You don’t really engage with the reading.
  - No grade: You will NOT receive credit for responses that are less than 200 words (so check your wordcount!). You will not receive credit for responses that do not clearly show that you have done the reading. I will not automatically tell you if you did not receive credit for a response, so be conscientious!
• There will be **no makeups** available for responses, so keep track of how many you have to do! I will update you at mid-term 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 and at [www.bc.edu/integrity](http://www.bc.edu/integrity)

**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
  - **Vista:** Reading is on course’s Blackboard Vista page
Course Schedule

PART I. WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

Introductions

W Jan 14  Introduction

F Jan 16  What is Culture and Popular Culture?
  •  *Raymond Williams, “‘Culture’ and ‘Masses’” p. 87-93 and p. 192-197

M Jan 19  NO CLASS

Theories of Popular Culture

W Jan 21

F Jan 23  The Elite and the Masses

Social Class and Cultural Consumption in America

M Jan 26  High Culture Institutions and Class Boundaries in Boston
  •  *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

W Jan 28  Who Likes Abstract Art?
  •  *Halle, David, “Abstract Art” from Inside culture: art and class in the American home, Ch. 4

F Jan 30  The Emergence of the Cultural Omnivore

PART II. MASS MEDIA AND ADVERTISING

Mass Media and Advertising

M Feb 2  Consumer Society
  •  *Thorstein Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption,” from The Theory of the Leisure Class: p. 43-62
W Feb 4  Consumer Society

F Feb 6  The Business of Media
• *Croteau & Hoynes, “The New Media Giants” from The Business of Media: p. 71-107

Mass Media and Advertising, a Critical Approach
M Feb 9
• Naomi Klein, No Logo: Ch. 1-3

W Feb 11
• Klein, No Logo: Ch. 5

F Feb 13
• Klein, No Logo: Ch. 12
• Discussion Groups

PART III. VIEWS OF FILM, TV AND PRINT

Television
M Feb 16  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

W Feb 18  The News Industry
• *Croteau and Hoynes, “The Organization of Media Work,” from Media/Society, p. 124-135

F Feb 20  A Culture of Fear
• *Barry Glassner, The Culture of Fear: Introduction, p. xi-xxviii

Queer Culture and Film
M Feb 23
• Vista: Judith Halberstam, “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance,” p. 429-440
• View The Celluloid Closet in class

Paper 1 due

W Feb 25
• *Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism” from Out in Culture: p. 484-500
• The Celluloid Closet, cont’d

F Feb 27
• Discussion of film and readings

**********March 2-6: SPRING BREAK**********

**Feminist Views and Active Audiences**

**M Mar 9**  Shopping, Gender and Resistance

**W Mar 11**

**F Mar 13**  Pornography
  • *Sarracino and Scott, “Would you like porn with that burger?” from The Porning of America, Ch. 5

**Reading the Romance**

**M Mar 16**
  • Radway, Reading the Romance: Chapters 2-4

**W Mar 18**
  • Radway, Reading the Romance: Chapter 6

**F Mar 20**
  • Radway, Reading the Romance: Ch. 7
  • Discussion Groups

**PART IV. YOUTH CULTURE AND SUBCULTURE**

**M Mar 23**  Organizational Filters in the Culture Industries
  • *Paul Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions” from Rethinking Popular Culture: p. 313-334
  • Vista: Griswold, “The Production of Culture” from Cultures and Societies in a Changing World, p. 75-84

**W Mar 25**  Fads
  • View Dogtown and Z-Boys in class

**F Mar 27**  Skateboarding and Subculture

**Blues and Authenticity**

**M Mar 30**
• David Grazian, *Blue Chicago*

**W April 1**
• Grazian, *Blue Chicago*

**F Apr 3**
• Grazian, *Blue Chicago*
• Discussion Groups

**PART V. OTHER AREAS OF POPULAR CULTURE**

**Celebrity and Fandom**

**M Apr 6**
• Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame*: Introduction and Ch. 3-4

**W Apr 8**
• Gamson, *Claims to Fame*: Ch. 6

*******Apr 10-13: EASTER BREAK*******

**W Apr 15**
• Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, Ch. 8 and Conclusion
• Discussion Groups

**New Technologies and Popular Culture**

**F Apr 17**  The Importance of Medium
• *Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”*
• *Croteau and Hoynes, “Media Technology and Social Change,” from Media/Society: p. 261-275*

**M Apr 20: NO CLASS**

**W Apr 22**  The Internet

**Globalization and Popular Culture**

**F Apr 24**

**M Apr 27 Japan**

*Paper 2 due*

**W Apr 29** Conclusion
• Wrap up and Review

**FINAL EXAM: Wed, May 6** 9 a.m.