**SC 076 Sociology of Popular Culture**  
Spring 2010  
Gasson 310, T Th 9am

**Instructor:** Johanna Pabst  
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**Office Hours:** T Th 10:15am-12pm and by appt

**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.

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. Excused absences, including approved athletic events, medical appointments, and absences cleared by the dean will not lower your grade as long as they are properly documented. 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.

2) **Assigned Reading**: You must come to class having read all assigned material and be prepared to discuss it. Quizzes or in-class writing assignments may be given to assess reading.

3) **Journal Responses**: You will be responding weekly to readings and topics by keeping a journal which will be handed in 3 times throughout the semester. More detail about the structure of the journal will be provided.

4) **Papers**: There will be 2 essay assignments and 1 final paper assigned during the semester. These will be an opportunity for you to critically connect concepts introduced in class with your own experiences, and to conduct research. 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.
Grading

Your grade will be based on the following elements:

1) Class Attendance and Participation 10%
2) Journal Responses 25%
3) 2 essays/exercises (4 pages) 10% each
4) 1 paper/project (8 pages) 20%
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 http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/polisci/integrity.html. I take plagiarism very seriously and the discovery of any violations will be reported and will likely lead to failure of the class.

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

- Coursepack (sold in bookstore- PLEASE NOTE: If you prefer to not buy the coursepack, the readings will also be available on course reserve. You can print them yourself if you find this more economical.)
- 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
PART I. WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

Week 1: Introductions

T Jan 19  Introduction

Th Jan 21  Why a Sociology of Popular Culture?

T Jan 26  What is Culture and Popular Culture?
  - *CP*: Raymond Williams, “Culture’ and ‘Masses’” p. 87-93 and p. 192-197

Th Jan 28  Theories of Popular Culture

T Feb 2  The Establishment of Cultural Boundaries

Th Feb 4
  - *CP*: Halle, David, “Abstract Art” from *Inside culture: art and class in the American home*, Ch. 4

T Feb 9  The Emergence of the Cultural Omnivore

Th Feb 11  Sport as Ritual
  - *H.G. Bissenger, Friday Night Lights*, 1990: Chs. 2 and 8
PART II. MASS MEDIA AND ADVERTISING

T Feb 16  The Business of Media
• *Croteau & Hoynes, “The New Media Giants” from The Business of Media. 2006: p. 75-115
• Journal Submission 1

Th Feb 18
• Naomi Klein, No Logo: Ch. 1-2

T Feb 23
• Naomi Klein, No Logo: Ch. 3, 4, 8
• Essay 1 due

Th Feb 25
• Naomi Klein, No Logo: Ch. 12, 15

*************SPRING BREAK: March 1 – 5**************

T Mar 9  TV as Technology: A Debate
• CP: Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Ch. 4, 6
• *Steven Johnson, Everything Bad is Good for You: “Television”: p. 62-116

Th Mar 11  The Internet
• *Henry Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?: Digital Cinema, Media Convergence and Participatory Culture,” from Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide, 2006: Ch.4
• *Bill Wasik, “My Crowd: Experiment: The Mob Project,” from And Then There’s This, 2009: Ch. 1, pp. 16-44

PART III: GENDER AND ACTIVE AUDIENCES

T Mar 16
• CP: John Fiske, “Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance,” from Reading the Popular, p. 13-42

Th Mar 18
• CP: Susan Bordo, “Hunger as Ideology,” from Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, 1995

T Mar 23  Women and romance novels
• CP: Janice Radway, “The Readers and Their Romances,” Reading the Romance, Ch. 2
• Journal Submission 2
Th Mar 25
- CP: Janice Radway, “The Act of Reading the Romance,” Reading the Romance, Ch. 3

T Mar 30  Masculinity
- Essay 2 due

Th April 1  EASTER BREAK

T Apr 6  The Mainstreaming of Pornography
- *Katherine N. Kinnick, “Pushing the Envelope” From Pop-porn: Pornography in American Culture, 2007: Ch. 1
- *Sarracino and Scott, “Would you like porn with that burger?” from The Porning of America, Ch. 5

PART IV. SUBCULTURE AND COMMODIFICATION

Th Apr 8  The Production of Culture
- CP: Paul Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions” from Rethinking Popular Culture
- CP: Wendy Griswold, “The Production of Culture” from Cultures and Societies in a Changing World

T Apr 13  Skateboarding and Subculture
- Watch Dogtown and Z-Boys in class

Th Apr 15  The Blues, Race and Authenticity
- David Grazian, Blue Chicago: Intro and Ch. 1, p. 1-59

T Apr 20
- Blue Chicago: Ch. 4-5, p. 125-196

Th Apr 22
- Blue Chicago: Ch. 7, p. 229-242

T Apr 27  Celebrity and Fandom
- Joshua Gamson, Claims to Fame: Introduction and Ch. 3-4
Th Apr 29
- Gamson, *Claims to Fame*: Ch. 6

T May 4
- Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, Ch. 8 and Conclusion
- Final Paper due

Th May 6
- Wrap-up and review for final

*Final Journal Submission: Friday May 7 at 5pm*

FINAL EXAM: Tue, May 11 12:30 p.m.