Popular Culture

Matthew Backes
American Studies 050:259
Fall 2008

Office Hours: Tues. 3:30-5:30 (and by appt)
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RAB 205-E

This class provides an introduction to the study of American popular culture. We consider some of the defining theoretical approaches in the field and briefly survey the history of popular culture in the United States. The class then explores themes and problems in contemporary American popular culture with special attention to the problem of values, broadly defined, in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Contest over values—moral, aesthetic, political, social—in the realm of popular culture has long been a central feature of American cultural and intellectual life. Using a wide range of scholarly writings and primary sources, we will try to make sense of this problem of values as we build a critical context for discussing the production, consumption, and varied meanings of popular culture in the United States.

Required Texts
Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz, eds., Popular Culture: A Reader (2005)
Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (1992)

These books are available at the Douglass Co-op bookstore. Additional required readings (marked by “*” in the syllabus) will be available through Sakai. You must print out Sakai readings and bring them to class.

Course Requirements
Class Participation: You must attend class consistently and come prepared to engage actively with the course materials. A pattern of absences will result in a lower grade. You are expected to complete the assigned readings by the date on which they appear on the syllabus. Though much of our class time will be devoted to lectures, there will be plenty of discussion as well. So come to class with ideas. There will also be in-class assignments (dates TBA) in which you will respond to some aspect of the weekly readings.

Analytical Paper: You will write one short paper (5-7 pp) analyzing some aspect of contemporary popular culture in light of the themes of the class. I will provide details in class.
**Midterm Exam:** A combination of objective questions, identifications, and essay questions pertaining to the readings and lectures from the first half of the semester. **October 16th in class.**

**Final Exam:** A combination of objective questions and identifications from the second half and essay questions pertaining to the readings and lectures from the entire semester. **December 19th, 8:00-11:00 AM.**

**Grading**
I will use the following percentages as guidelines in determining final grades.
- Participation: 15%
- Paper: 30%
- Midterm: 25%
- Final: 30%

**Plagiarism**
Your work on papers and exams must be your own. The words and ideas of others (if used in any form) must receive proper citation. Cheating on an assignment will result in failure on that assignment and most likely in the class. I will report any such cases to the Office of Judicial Affairs. Consult the American Studies department’s guidelines on citing sources: http://amerstudies.rutgers.edu/documents/AcknowledgingSources_000.pdf
I will discuss this topic further in class, but if you are uncertain at any time about what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty, you must come talk with me.

**Schedule of Meetings and Topics**

**I. Theory**

**Week One: Introductions and Definitions**
9/2: Class Introduction

9/4: The Meaning of Popular
- *Popular Culture*, 1-18
  - Raymond Williams, “‘Culture’ and ‘Masses’,,” in Popular Culture, 25-32

**Week Two: Mass Culture, Culture Industry, and Commodification**
9/9: Critiques of Mass Culture
- *Popular Culture*, 19-24
  - F.R. Leavis, “Mass Civilization and Minority Culture,” in Popular Culture, 33-38
9/11: Hegemony, Spectacle, and Beyond
Guy Debord, “The Commodity as Spectacle,” in Popular Culture, 109-114
Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” in Popular Culture, 64-71

**Week Three: The Crisis of Modernity and Postmodernism**
9/16: Feminism, Post-structuralism, and Critical Race Theory
Tania Modleski, “Femininity as Mas[s]querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture,” in Popular Culture, 47-54
* Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” from Storey, Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, 254-270

9/18: Guest Lecture, Prof. Michael Rockland: “Popular Culture: or Why Study ‘Trash’?”
[Note: These readings are not connected with Prof. Rockland’s lecture. We will discuss them during the next class on 9/23]

**II. History**

**Week Four: Nineteenth Century**
9/23: Birth of the Popular
* Michael Deming, “The Figure of the Dime Novel in American Culture,” from Jim Cullen, ed., Popular Culture in American History (Malden, MA, 2001), 80-89
* Fanny Fern, selections from Ruth Hall (1854)

9/25: Culture Wars Nineteenth-Century Style
* Lawrence Levine, “William Shakespeare in America,” from Cullen, Popular Culture in American History, 32-49
On the web: “Remembering New York City’s Opera Riots”

**Week Five: Consumerism and Culture Industry 1890-1945**
9/30: Consumption and Leisure in the Gilded Age
*Thorstein Veblen, from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)

10/2: Mass Media between the wars
*Susan Smulyan, “Arguments over Broadcast Advertising,” from Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*
*Excerpt from “Sponsoritis” (1930) from Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*

**Week Six: Post-War Moment**
10/7: The Pleasures and Agonies of Mass Culture
Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV*, 1-72

10/9: Youth Culture from Elvis to LSD
Film: *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955, 111 min.)

**Week Seven: Counterculture, Subculture, and Pop Radicals**
10/14: Queers, Punks, and the Underground
*Lester Bangs, from *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, ed. by Greil Marcus (New York, 1987)*
*Nan Goldin, images from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986)*

10/16: **Midterm Exam**

**III. Themes and Analysis: The Problem of Values**

**Week Eight: Aesthetic Values and Social Power**
10/21: The High Highs, the Low Lows
John Fiske, “Popular Discrimination,” in *Popular Culture*, 215-222
*Allan Bloom, from *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987)*

10/23: Special screening of Headlong Dance Theater’s *Britney’s Inferno* and discussion with Headlong choreographer/dancer Amy Smith.

**Week Nine: Aesthetic Values and Social Power (cont’d)**
10/28: Markets and Public Spheres
Reading TBA
10/31: National and Post-National Identities
Henry Yu, “How Tiger Lost His Stripes: Post-nationalist American Studies as a History of Race, Migration, and the Commodification of Culture,” in Popular Culture, 197-210

Week Ten: Family and Sex
11/4: Visions of Family
Spigel, Make Room for TV, 73-187

11/6: Youth and Generations

Week Eleven: Family and Sex (cont’d)
11/11: Sexualities
Cynthia Fuchs, “If I had a Dick: Queers, Punks, and Alternative Acts,” in Popular Culture, 417-428

11/13: Indecency, Censorship, etc.
Laura Kipnis, “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler,” in Popular Culture, 223-240

Week Twelve: Religion and Morality
11/18: Religion as Popular Culture
Lyden, Film as Religion, Part I

11/20: Besieged Moralism
Lyden, Film as Religion, Part II
*Michael Medved, from Hollywood vs. America (New York, 1993)

Week Thirteen: Religion and Morality (cont’d)
11/25: TBA
11/27: No Class

Week Fourteen: Identity and Self
12/2: Making Race and Ethnicity
Popular Culture, 279-284
Stuart Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular culture?” in Popular Culture, 285-293
Gyatri Gopinath, “‘Bombay, UK, Yuba City’: Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora,” in *Popular Culture*, 294-308

12/4: Valuation of the Self
José Esteban Munoz, “Pedro Zamora’s Real World of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self,” in *Popular Culture*, 324-337

12/9: Conclusions