

## 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)  
John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (2003)

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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup>, 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](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

Morag Shiach, "The Popular," in *Popular Culture*, 55-63

##### **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

Dwight McDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in *Popular Culture*, 39-48

Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *Popular Culture*, 103-108

9/11: Hegemony, Spectacle, and Beyond

\*Antonio Gramsci, "Hegemony, Intellectuals, and the State," from John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Harlow, England, 2006), 85-91

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

\*Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," from Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 293-302

\*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'?"

\*Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," from Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 389-396

\*Patricia Williams, "American Kabuki," from Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky Locour, eds., *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case* (New York, 1997), 273-292

[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

\*Mary Kupiec Cayton, "The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987)

\*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"

<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5402902>>

### **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)
- \*Kathy Peiss, "Dance Madness," in Cullen, *Popular Culture in American History*, 97-122

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

- \*Elaine Tyler May, "Containment at Home: Cold War, Warm Hearth," chap. 1 from *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold-War Era* (New York, 1988), 10-29
- 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

- Dick Hebdige, "Subculture," in *Popular Culture*, 355-371
- \*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
- Joan Hawkins, "Sleaze Mania, Euro-Trash and High Art," in *Popular Culture*, 263-277
- \*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

\*"Ralph, Fred, Archie, and Homer: Why Television Keeps Re-Creating the White Male Working-Class Buffoon," from Claire Dines and Jean McMahon Humez, eds., *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2003), 575-585

11/6: Youth and Generations

Michael Nevin Willard, "Séance, Trickology, Skateboarding, and the Space of Youth," in *Popular Culture*, 462-478

**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

Judith Halberstam, "Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance," in *Popular Culture*, 429-440

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 Muñoz, “Pedro Zamora’s Real World of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self,” in *Popular Culture*, 324-337

George Lipsitz, “Diasporic Noise: History, Hip Hop, and the Post-Colonial Politics of Sound,” in *Popular Culture*, 504-519

Lisa Nakamura, “Head-Hunting on the Internet: Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing in Textual and Graphic Chat Spaces,” in *Popular Culture*, 520-533

12/9: Conclusions