

Selected Topics in Popular Culture

CIED 1001A (0.5 credits) Winter 2016 Course Preview

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Course office hour: Thursday 1:30-2:30 or by appointment susan.burhoe@carleton.ca

Class time: Thursdays 2:30-5:30 pm

Class Location: TBA

Overview

This course will explore popular culture in late 20th and early 21st century America. Each week, we'll investigate case studies that highlight different aspects of modern culture. In this course, you will be introduced to basic cultural theory and learn how scholars approach cultural "texts". How do we "read" the world around us? How do movies, TV shows or comics reflect our cultural anxieties? How can magazines, fashion and films embody power relationships? You will be encouraged to consider the relationship between history and culture, and how various mass cultural products and movements have shaped and reflected our ideas about gender, race, normality, and identity throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries.



Course Objectives

The goal of this course is to provide you with the skills and knowledge to:

- Define key concepts related to semiotics and basic cultural theory.
- Discuss these concepts critically and apply them to cultural "texts" such as advertising, TV, comics, movies, fashion, music and social media.
- Analyze pop culture texts to assess how they reinforce or challenge norms of their particular social and historical moment, with particular attention to ideas about race, gender and class.
- Practice analysis in oral and written form through class discussions, group work, and written assignments.
- Identify and describe key concepts and ideas from the class on the final exam.
- Identify a topic of interest for a personal research project about some aspect of popular culture that you feel strongly about.
- Use class and supplementary readings in the development of your research question or thesis.
- Communicate in writing the results of your learning in an observation report and a research essay.

Textbook

Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers. 7th ed. Ed. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon. Boston: Bedford, 2012. Available at the Carleton University Bookstore.

Other readings will be made available on CuLearn.

Weekly Topics

Weekly readings TBA

- Intro to Popular Culture
- The Magic Kingdom: Cultural Theory & Disney
- Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend? Hollywood Glamour
- Buying-in: Marketing & Identity
- "Oh... the HORROR!" Comic Books and Moral Panic in the 50s
- Rapper's Delight: Hip hop, Race and Culture
- Watching the Detectives: Hero and Anti-Hero in Crime Shows on TV
- I Cast "Detect Evil": Role Playing Games and Moral Panic
- It's the End of the World As We Know It: Zombies and the Apocalypse
- Epic Fail: TV, the Web & Irony in Modern Culture
- Miley, Twerking, and the Politics of Race

Course Evaluation

Component	Percent of grade assigned
Essay 1	15%
Essay proposal	10%
Essay 2	30%
Pop quizzes	15%
Midterm test	30%
Total	100%

Essay #1: Consumer Culture

15%

Choose one of the following assignments. Write a 3-4 page (750-1000 words) analysis, drawing on the relevant readings from "Chapter 1: Consuming Passions" in *Signs of Life in America* and/or the PBS movie *Cool Hunters*, available here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view/>. Also consult pgs. 23-64 "Writing about Popular Culture" in *Signs of Life* for advice on writing papers about popular culture and citation rules.

- **Option One: Shopping and Space:** Visit a popular retail store such as Urban Outfitters, Banana Republic, The Gap, Forever 21, Apple Store, Toys R Us. Study the ways in which the store uses spatial design in order to try to influence your behavior and buying habits.
- **Option Two: Cool hunting:** Visit a Web site of a major retailer (such as www.bercrombieandfitch.com, www.ralphlauren.com, www.gap.com, www.diesel.com, www.h&m.com, www.silverjeans.com, www.nike.com, www.adidas.com, www.seanjohn.com, or another retailer aimed at the youth market). How does the online "store" attempt to associate their product with "cool" and to encourage youth consumption?

- **Option Three: What's in a Package?** Visit a popular retail store such as Starbucks, Toys 'R Us, Forever 21, H&M, Apple Store or the Body Shop and write a semiotic analysis of the packaging you see in the store.

Essay#2: Reading Pop Culture

Proposal 10%

Essay 30%

Topic chosen from suggested list or propose your own topic.

More details on the expectations for each component will be provided in class.

- **Essay Proposal:** Write a 1^{1/2} to 2^{1/2} page (300-625 words) proposal for your final paper. Be sure to include a bibliography.
- **Essay:** Write a ___ page analysis of some aspect of popular culture. You can choose to analyze a movie, TV show, magazine, website, youtube video(s) or other pop culture phenomenon.
- Be sure to consult pgs. 23-64 "Writing about Popular Culture" in *Signs of Life* for advice on writing papers about popular culture and citation rules.

Pop Quizzes 15%

Four Pop Quizzes based on the week's readings on the following dates: **TBA**. Your highest three grades will be used (three x 5% each). These will be brief quizzes consisting of multiple choice and/or true or false questions.

Midterm test 30%

The test will be held (**TBA**) and will consist of some multiple-choice questions, short answer questions and an essay question.

Each week, students will have the opportunity to write brief summary notes at the end of the class. I will collect these notes in a folder that you will receive back at the test. You can use them for reference **during** the test.