

Department of English & Writing Studies

Reading Popular Culture

English 2017 (002)

Fall/Winter 2019-20

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Wenaus
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UC 1421

Course Location: Somerville House 3345

Course Date/Time: Wednesday 6:30 pm-9:30 pm

Course Description

This course examines the concept, practice, and critique of popular culture. The **concept** of popular culture has often been understood in opposition to “high culture.” So, rather than the kind of “high culture” we would find exhibited in a museum, pop culture generally refers to folk culture, “low culture,” or mass-produced texts/objects. As a result, pop culture is also often thought of as the **practice** of mass production, commodity culture, and consumer capitalism characterized by standardization and the maximization of profit. The **critique** of pop culture, however, splits into two major camps: first, that which maintains a distinction between high culture and pop culture based on high culture’s perceived superior aesthetic quality. The second major mode of critique challenges this elitist position. Rather than thinking of the distinction between “high” and “low” culture, this mode aims to unpack the ideological, institutional, and class-based biases that inform the way different groups negotiate the value of a text. These two branches of critique largely inform what has come to be known as the field that informs the course: **cultural studies**. In short, we will consider the ways cultural critiques negotiate between acceptance, resistance, and ambivalence towards pop culture. To do so, we will engage with foundational academic texts that will provide context and concepts to think seriously about pop culture. These academic works are then used in a practical and exciting way to give us tools, concepts, and frameworks to think differently about the popular texts with which so many of us are already very familiar: film and streaming television, comics and manga, social media, Tinder, fan culture, music videos, superheroes, video games, vaporwave, memes, TikTok, identity politics, and selfies. In the spirit of pop culture, the course will appeal to all students regardless of discipline since, at the end of the day, our overarching questions will be: who, where, what, when, why, and how is *cultural meaning* created, sustained, and challenged. All in all, the course will be engaging and enjoyable while taking seriously *what it*

Course Materials

Books (Required)

Ballard, J.G. *Kingdom Come*. Fourth Estate (2014). **ISBN-10:** 9780007232475

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*. Pantheon (2008). **ISBN-10:** 0375714723

Participation - Value 10%

You will find Discussion topics on OWL that will correspond with the discussions we'll have in class. Over the course of the year, you will be required to follow up with five discussions by providing a short (though thoughtful) written response on OWL. Each response will be worth 2%. More details to follow.

Late Submissions

Essays are due on the specified date. They are to be handed in at the beginning of class. Late essays will be penalized **3% per day** including weekends. Essays submitted more than a week (7 days) late will receive a grade of 0/F. If you cannot submit your essay on time due to illness or on compassionate grounds, you will need a letter from a physician or academic councilor of your home faculty indicating that you were ill or unable to attend to your work during the time in question.

Accommodation

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The

Plagiarism Checking:

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Subsequent offences will result in failure for the course.

Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

	(1936) Debord, Guy. "The Commodity as Spectacle." (1970)
Week 5 Oct. 9 SHORT ESSAY DUE	Socio-Economics, Class, and Popular Culture Readings: Gramsci, Antonio. From <i>The Prison Notebooks</i> Cashmore, Ellis. "America's Paradox." (1997).
Week 6 Oct. 16	What is Taste? Readings: Fiske, John. "Popular Discrimination." (1991) Willis, Paul. "Symbolic Creativity." (1990)
Week 7 Oct. 23	What is Place? Readings: Augé, Marc. From <i>Non-Places, introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.</i> Ballard, J.G. "The Future of the Future." (1977) From <i>A User's Guide to the Millennium</i> 224-227. Anderson, Benedict. From <i>Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism</i> Ballard, J.G. <i>Kingdom Come</i>
Week 8 Oct. 30	Ballard, J.G. <i>Kingdom Come</i> (Continued)
FALL READING WEEK	No Class
Week 9 Nov. 13	Voices and Identity Readings: Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'Black'" in Black Popular Culture?" (1992) W.E.B. Du Bois. 1995. "The Conservation of Races." (1897). (In In David Levering Lewis, ed. <i>W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader.</i> Henry Holt and Company: 20-33.)
Week 10 Nov. 20	Superheroes Morrison, Grant. "Introduction." <i>Supergods.</i> xiii-xvii Bukatman, Scott. "Why I Hate Superhero Movies." Nama, Adilifu. "Color them Black." From <i>The Superhero Reader</i> (ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester. P. 252-268. Screening: <i>Black Panther</i> (Dir. Ryan Coogler)

Week 11 **Subculture**

Nov. 27 Readings:

