

HONR 3007

Popular Culture Studies

“Ignorance of your culture is not considered cool.”

-- avant gardian band The Residents, 1978

“I never knew there was so much world in the world.”

--from the film *The Borrowers*

“All understanding begins with our not accepting the world as it appears”

–social critic/essayist Susan Sontag

*“Stare: It is the way to educate your eye. Stare, cry, listen, eavesdrop.
Die knowing something. You are not here long.”*

--photographer Walker Evans

“...And I say to myself, ‘what a wonderful world.’”

–lyric by George D. Weiss and Bob Thiele



MW 2:00-3:15 Haley Center TBA

dr. george plasketes

Professor of Media Studies & Popular Culture

Office: School of Communication & Journalism Tichenor Hall 226

Hours: MWF: 12-1:00 (or by appointment or better time)

Contact: e-mail: plaskgm@auburn.edu phone: 844-2760 or smoke signal



COURSE DESCRIPTION...

Popular culture—our “whole way of life” and “everydayness”—including all mass media, is *the* major cultural environment which almost all individuals can relate to and have experienced during the twentieth-plus century. Consequently, our cultural heritage, orientation and individual and collective cultural identity are vitally linked to and shaped by popular culture.

This course and its interdisciplinary scope is designed to facilitate the recognition, understanding, utilization, and appreciation of the basic theories, approaches, concepts, topics, and issues within popular culture, and their critical connections to the various communication processes.

Particular emphasis will be placed on identification and analysis of materials and texts which largely define the people, places, things and activities that are a composite of contemporary American culture--*myths, icons, stereotypes, rituals, heroes and celebrities, and formulas/genres*-- as they are presented as meaningful *texts* within radio, television, film, music, advertising, and other mass mediated, interpersonal, and high tech modes of communication. Other areas of emphasis include taste and technology.

The class format includes (occasionally) riveting lectures, engaging discussion and exchange, five star screenings from television, film, the Internet, and suggested (unauthorized, unsupervised) cool field trips of your own design (and cost).

SOME LEARNING OBJECTIVES and COURSE COMPETENCIES:

Among the overarching aims of this educational endeavor are to:

- 1) heighten cultural conceptualization, consumption and awareness;
- 2) develop critical and analytical skills through reading, writing, observation, and participation; and
- 3) integrate individual cultural experience into the learning process.

TEXT, REQUIRED READINGS AND ACTIVITIES.

- Primary Text: *Signs of Life in the USA...Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, newest edition; eds. Solomon and Maasik
- Selected readings from the following sources (on Canvas):
The Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture, ed. Thomas Inge;
The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America Daniel Boorstin
Popular Culture: An Introductory Text Jack Nachbar & Kevin Laue
Journals: *The Journal of American Culture*; *Journal of Popular Culture*;
Studies in Popular Culture
- Additional readings, essays, chapters will be assigned (available on Canvas, and/or distributed) throughout the semester.
- *CBS Sunday Morning* 8:00-9:30 a.m. CBS (and or the show archive at www.cbsnews.com)
- *Ted.com* lectures
- *Culture*. Your/our *everydayness* may be your most valuable learning tool/resource
• Consume everything. Read, look, listen, observe, think, think critically, process information, participate in the “stuff” that surrounds you as a “whole way of life.”

ATTENDANCE

Consider showing up performance enhancer since the class structure includes video screenings, discussions, and lectures not in the book. Attendance maximizes mind and monetary investments. Dress casual. Snacks optional, as long as it is not a food truck distraction, Dominos delivery or dining experience akin to the clueless, self-centered air traveler who carries take-out Chinese from the Airport food court aboard the flight and is seated in the row in front of you.

A FEW WORDS FROM OUR SPONSOR ABOUT PLAGIARISM.

Don't. Get an *honest* education. There's enough disregard for the truth, cheating, lying and deception going on in The World at large. Cheating in *any* fashion or form, including non-attribution of any sources, particularly those available on the Internet, is frowned upon, (as it contributes to Grand Canyon like grooves in faculty foreheads) and will not be tolerated. Offenders will be dealt with appropriate severity short of waterboarding. Please consult your attorney (from one of those 'if you've been hit by a big truck' local TV ads) or AU undergraduate school website for university policies. Remember, it's *your* karma.

(ANTI) SOCIAL NETWORKING

Though painful and twitchy, please be polite and unplug. Please, no cell phones, blackberries or blueberries, texting, snapchatting, selfies, photobombing behind my back, tweeting or tumbling (unless turning a cartwheel over knowledge) during class. If there is an emergency or communication necessity (flash mobs do not qualify), please calmly leave class to address the situation. Laptops and/or iPads are acceptable, and should be used *only* for educational purposes during class (note taking, Googling information), *not* Facebook updates, viral videos on YouTube or Harlem Shake flash mobs .

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

Please inform me (in person) if you require any special assistance or classroom accommodations of any kind. (Note from management: This does not include window seat, aisle, smoking, non-smoking, microwave, fridge, continental breakfast, complementary snack and beverage.) Please include any appropriate documentation and instructions (beyond what is available on-line) as outlined by Steve Guice and the good folks over in The Haley Center. This should be completed during the first week of class. Every effort will be made to provide the necessary arrangements.

DIVERSITY

"Come on people now/Smile on your brother/Everybody get together/Try to love one another right now" --"Get Together," the Youngbloods, circa late 1960s.

Represent. The scope of this course and content is inherently diverse. We are the world,. Everyone, every preference and point of view, every expression are encouraged and welcome with open minds. The Big Tent (not as in circus.) No walls or borders here. Express yourself.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Two exams:	Mid-term essay	(100 points)
	Final essay (comprehensive).	(100 points)
Semester long journal project:		
	<i>Pop Portfolio/Culture Composition Book:</i>	(100 points)
Presence and participation		(100 points)
	Total.....	400 points

(LOOSE) JOURNAL PARAMETERS AND GUIDELINES :

Bare Minimum Mendoza Line is in 20-page range. Beyond the initial sticker shock, that mileage is not that staggering when projected over the course of a semester. The page length will be less intimidating if you treat this project for what it is--*a journal*—(maybe think blog) and *routinely* make entries as the classes, days, and weeks roll by. Just like Doogie Howser did at the end of every show, and he was a teen doctor, or Carrie on *Sex in the City*! Maybe even J.D's (Zach Braff) episodic Sacred Heart intern observations on *Scrubs*. This approach, as opposed to cramming, should optimize the learning process. In order to swwaayy such progress, there may be journal checkpoints throughout the semester.

Format and style is up to you. Lists, notes, essays, quotes, pictures, fragments, scraps, sketches, paragraphs and pages—whatever is comfortably challenging. Just give it some thought and expressed in some form or fashion. Always look for connections, patterns, meanings and interpretations. That's what "reading a text" or criticism is in part about-- Articulating why something matters. Some subjects may resonate deeper than others and thus, require more space. Go with the flow.

CONTENTS:

- Title (something to characterize the essence of the volume)
- Table of contents (an organizational necessity for you and me)
- Glossary. (List of key cultural concepts and terms with brief definition. These will be identified during class lectures and in readings. By compiling a glossary, you will have a handy study guide for exams.)
- Six topic abstracts (also to be briefly identified/presented during class)
Again, for each of the six areas –*myth, icon, stereotype, ritual, formula, hero/celebrity*--identify a subject or issue in that area. In the vicinity of one page, identify the text and explain how you might research/ approach or critically examine/interpret it. It may be something from your own experience. We will share these subjects during class sessions when we complete a section in order to generate

perspective and ideas. Ideally, one of these can be the premise for expansion into a more in depth, article/chapter-length study, such as those in the book, journals or magazines.

- *CBS Sunday Morning* (CBS) log. (Minimum 8 entries)
Perhaps as much as any magazine show on television, *CBS Sunday Morning* (Channel 3 8-9:30 a.m. CDT) provides a weekly sampling of American popular culture (with slight leanings toward the high end of the cultural spectrum). I would like you to spend some time watching the show and briefly responding to the segments with log-like entries within your larger journal. Minimum *eight* segments (*not shows*)—features, movie reviews, passage, opinion/commentary, etc.
- *Two* Ted.com lectures
Your choice, as long as the Ted Talks are relevant to some aspect of culture (which basically means just about anything qualifies). Same deal, brief commentary/critique/response/reaction.
- *One (minimum)* response/review to an article, chapter, essay from any relevant outside reading source—article, chapter, essay, column, review, et. al.
- (At least) *One* field trip/participant observation to any cultural event or place. Document your experience appropriately within the context of our studies. (Museum, tailgating, Toomer’s Corner, Starbucks, family reunion, Mardi Gras, annual festival, a city, small town, karaoke night, a funeral, state or national park, ceremony, et.al)
- Consider music critic/historian Robert Palmer’s wondering from *Deep Blues*:
“*How much history can be communicated by pressure on a guitar string?*”
Now, do some wondering of your own about the relationship between culture and History, and adapt Palmer’s perspective into one of your own: “How much history can be communicated by _____ (*you fill in the blank*)_____”. Please include brief commentary or context.
- Taste Test. Play with the following four point scheme to compile a brief a list (concise commentary always welcome) that will likely give some insight into your taste preferences:
Stuff (person, place, thing etc.) that I like and am supposed to/should like.
Stuff that I like and am *not* supposed to/should not like.
Stuff that I don’t like and am supposed to/should like.
Stuff that I don’t like and am *not* supposed to/should not like.
- Miscellaneous Media-tations (*three* would be a good *minimum*)
Rants, riffs, reactions, readings, responses, reflections on screenings, lectures, observations, experiences, scraps, images, anything and everything et al.
- A Quote or two (minimum one, multiple strongly encouraged)
Provide a few quotes (and who said them) Any source, any subject. A

line you read, heard, spoke, listened to, tweeted, posted, or recall from whatever, whenever, wherever. Just something that is etched, struck a chord, nerve, funny bone or ignited a spark, activated your thinking cap, raised your ire or opened or closed your eyes. Include brief commentary for context if necessary.

- Closing comments or parting shots
Provide a 25-words-or-less (give or take a few) essay on popular culture as a discipline, interdiscipline, or lack of discipline. In other words, is there any value in studying this stuff in an upper level course, no less, and receiving college credit for it.
- * Important note from The Management
Whether you butter up, brown nose or bash, your grade will not be affected by any position or view expressed on any subject matter in the journal. It's all good.

POST SCRIPT: ATTITUDE AND LATITUDE.

Amidst the necessary project parameters, you do have some latitude. Approach things how you are at once comfortable and challenged, a decent combination in my estimation. Keep in mind “informal” does not mean “shallow” or lacking substance and insight. Your journals should demonstrate a keen eye, open mind and thoughtful grasp and application of the elements of popular culture. I’m primarily concerned with you reading, listening, observing, participating, thinking critically and then expressing some of your thoughts. In the process, hopefully you’ll develop a keener awareness of our culture, its heritage and yourself. This is not meant to be torture; you are not a POWs–Prisoner of Writing. Remember, Kids, popular culture (and learning) can be fun, and so can thinking and writing about popular culture, our “whole way of life.”!

Enjoy the ride. Enjoy the view. YOLO.

Topical Class Schedule and Overview (Approximately)

A few scheduling notes:

- * This Master Plan is subject to mild modification and morphing along the way
- * Accompanying readings will be specified during seminar.
- * Reminder: Everyone will informally share their topic abstracts (also to be included in Journal) for each of the six main areas—myth, icon, stereotype, ritual, hero/celebrity, formula/genre.-- when we complete lecture/discussion/screening in each of the six sections, (which will be approximately every two weeks)

Week One: Pop Prelude: Introduction to popular culture
Why study Popular Culture? Misconceptions of popular culture
Methodology (or lack thereof): Discipline, Interdiscipline or no discipline?

Text, context and polysemy: reading and criticism (Marcus)
Readings: (Inge, Nachbar)

Weeks Two-Three: Postmodernism

Folk, Popular and High Culture

“Taste” and cultural consumption (Readings : Gans; Himmelstein;
Anderson, Tweek Revolution, etc)

Communication & Culture “Mutuality:” Time, space, place

The Graphic Revolution (Boorstin)

Weeks Four-five: Myths: The foundation of popular culture (values, ideals, belief systems)

Myth and History (Mythohistory)

Screenings: *Assume the Position 101 and 201* (HBO)

* Journal draft check in (Act I)

Weeks six-seven: Icons: Living in the Material World: The Triumph of “Stuff”

Objects, Sacred Artifacts, and Places in Culture

Screenings: “Movie Palace,” “Airstreamer,” “Drive-in” (*CBS Sunday Morning*); George Carlin routine: “Stuff”

Harley Davidson documentary (TBS)

“New family car” *Wonder Years* episode (ABC)

* Mid term exam

Weeks eight-nine: Rituals: events, activities and patterns in popular culture

Rites of Season, Unity, Passage, Displacement, Reversal, Spectacle

Screenings: “Collecting,” (*CBS Sunday Morning*)

“Mardi Gras” *American Chronicles*

Weeks ten-eleven: Stereotypes: Categorizing and classifications in cultural experience

Screenings: “Typical” scene from *The Laroquette Show* (NBC)

“Identity” episode: *3rd Rock from the Sun* (NBC)

“Southern stereotype” episode: *Dharma & Greg* (ABC)

“Irish and African-American stereotypes episode:

Andy Richter Controls the Universe (FOX)

“Heritage” *Black-ish* (pilot episode) (ABC)

*Journal draft (Act II) check in

Weeks twelve: Formulas and genres: The popular arts

The importance of repetition. The importance of repetition.

Convention and invention

Screening: Science fiction genre documentary:

Look to the Skies (TCM)

Weeks thirteen -fourteen: Heroes and celebrities: Stardumb?

Cultural shifts from hero to eternity in Fifteen Minutes

“Celebrity culture:” branding, fanaticism, death mythology, biography and

mythmaking; pseudo events, “Endless Elvis” case study
Readings: (Boorstin :The Image)
Screening: *Forever James Dean* (A&E Biography)
*Journal Project Due

Week fifteen: Popular culture: Projects, papers, perspectives and punctuation

Final exam (TBA)