COMM 123: Critical Approaches to Popular Culture

Summer Session II: June 30-August 5, 2022

Monday/Wednesday, 5:15-9:05pm

Instructor

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Course Description

Popular culture has been alternately condemned as too trivial to warrant attention and too powerful to resist. Its consumers have been dubbed fashion victims, couch potatoes and victims of propaganda. This course considers these critiques, as well as those that suggest that popular culture can be emancipatory, allowing for the creation and renegotiation of meaning. Over the course of the semester, we consider the impacts of various forms of popular culture and discuss their effects on how we see ourselves and others. We explore the ever-shifting distinctions between high, middlebrow, and low culture and analyze how power and resistance structure the production and consumption of popular texts. Topics covered include: social media influencers, reality TV, memes, celebrities, fandom, TikTok, and more!

Course Goals

In COMM 123, students will …

1. become proficient in communication and cultural theory on popular culture
2. develop skills to evaluate, question, and make sense of different forms of media and their socio-political implications
3. create and maintain a collaborative learning community (+ have fun!)
4. build a repertoire of critical thinking skills to navigate a media-saturated world

Assignments and Grades

Class Attendance and Participation – As an interactive seminar, students are expected to attend and participate in class. Participation means sharing opinions and insights, asking questions, giving relevant examples and, alternatively, submitting written comments after each class. Students should come to class ready to engage in course readings and with each other. **(15 points)**

Essay – Using ideas from our course readings, students will complete an essay (1,400-1,600 words), in which they critically analyze and reflect on a pop culture artifact of their choice. To get feedback, students will submit an outline of their paper before the due date for 10 points. **(40 points)**

In-Class Pop Culture Artifact Presentation – Towards the beginning of the semester, students will select one pop culture artifact and give a short presentation about how it relates to that day's readings. This artifact can be the same or different from the one used in the essay. **(10 points)**

Exam – A final, cumulative exam will be given on the last day of class. **(35 points)**

Extra credit – One extra credit opportunity will be offered during the course. **(TBD)**

Class Policies

- o Devices: Laptops, smartphones, other devices are permitted in class, but please do not use them unless explicitly permitted or you have an accommodation. My goal is for us to use technology in class without it becoming a distraction!
- o Accessibility/Accommodations: Please reach out if you need particular accommodations in class so that you can participate fully. For institutional support, contact the Weingarten Learning Resources Center at disabilityservices@vpul.upenn.edu and 215-573-9235. This service is free and confidential.
- o Discussion ground rules: Class discussions may be uncomfortable or challenging at times, but they should never make us feel unsafe. In the event of a disruption, I will intervene in discussion and address the matter in office hours and/or at our next meeting.
- o Cooldown period: Students should wait at least 24-hours from when grades are returned before requesting feedback or a regrading (Note: Grades are rarely changed).

Campus Resources

The University of Pennsylvania has many resources available to students. Some worth highlighting:

- o The Marks Family Writing Center: Visit http://writing.upenn.edu/critical/wc/ to get feedback and support on your writing assignments.
- o Mental Health Resources: Like physical health, mental health must be a priority. If you find yourself feeling low, experiencing distress, or struggling with mental health, please reach out to Penn's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 215-898-7021. You may also reach out to me or the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, Litty Paxton. I will make every effort to maintain the confidentiality of information you share with me, but please know that in cases of disclosing experiences of sexual assault, self-injury or intent to injure others, I may be required by the University to report concerns.
- o Student Basic Needs: It is important to me that you have the resources you need to be able to focus on learning in this course—this includes both the necessary academic materials as well as taking care of your day-to-day needs. Students experiencing difficulty affording the course materials should reach out to the Penn First Plus office (pennfirstplus@upenn.edu). Students who are struggling to afford sufficient food to eat every day and/or lack a safe and suitable space to live should contact Student Intervention Services (vpul-sisteam@pobox.upenn.edu). Students may also wish to contact their Financial Aid Counselor or Academic Advisor about these concerns.

Course Syllabus

Date	Readings
7/4	**No class**
7/6	Course introductions + short presentation dates assigned -- Storey, J. (2009). What is popular culture? *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, pp. 1-16. Schudson, M. (1987). The new validation of popular culture. In J. Storey (Ed.) *Cultural theory and popular culture*, pp. 495-503. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. -- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Newbery Park, CA: Sage, pp. 225-249
7/11	Kellner, D. (2007). *Cultural theory, classical and contemporary positions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. pp. 3-11. Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. (1944). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. pp. 1-12 ***Warning: This is a difficult reading!*** *As you read, underline sections you understand, and bring questions to class. Kellner will provide some context, so feel free to read Kellner first.* -- Zeisler, A. (2008). *Feminism and pop culture*. Seal Press. Pp. 1-21 Crunk Feminist Collective. (2017). Hip hop generation feminism: A manifesto. In *Crunk Feminist Collection*.
7/13	Benjamin, W. (1936). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. *Visual Culture: Experiences in Visual Culture*. -- Cole, T. (2019). When the camera was a weapon of imperialism – and when it still is. *The New York Times*. Sutherland, T. (2017). Making a killing: On race, ritual, and (re)membering in digital culture. *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture*, *46*(1), 32-40. -- Sontag, S. (1964). Notes on camp.

7/18	*****OUTLINE DUE THIS WEEK***** Jenkins III, H. (1988). Star Trek rerun, reread, rewritten: Fan writing as textual poaching. *Critical studies in Media communication*, *5*(2), 85-107. Penny, L. (2019). How the nerds are reinventing pop culture. *Wired.* --- Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative <3 intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology, 8.* Marwick, A. (2015). You may know me from YouTube: (Micro)-celebrity in social media. Pp. 333-350 in *A Companion to Celebrity*, edited by P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
7/20	Asner, A. (2005). *Class dismissed: How TV frames the working class.* Sender, K. (2006). Queens for a day: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and the neoliberal project. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 23*(2). --- Fiske, J. (2010). The jeaning of America. In *Understanding popular culture*. Routledge, pp. 1-21. Judkiss, M., & Bhattarai, A. (2021). Jean wars. *The Washington Post.* --- Gladwell, M. (1997). The coolhunt. *The New Yorker.* Powers, D. (2019). *On trend: The business of forecasting the future.* Chapter 3. University of Illinois Press.
7/25	*****ESSAY DUE***** Banet-Weiser, S. (2015). Popular misogyny. *Culture Digitally.* --- Oullette, L., & Murray, S. (2004). *Reality TV: Remaking television culture.* New York University Press. Psarras, E. (2020). "It's a mix of authenticity and complete fabrication" Emotional camping: The cross-platform labor of the *Real Housewives. New Media and Society*, 1–17. --- Kardashian Kolloquium. *Theory and Content-Creating in Las Vegas: Which Iconic City is the Kardashian Family?* [YouTube video]

7/27	Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapter 3. Marwick, A. & Lewis, R. (2017). *Media manipulation and disinformation online*. Data & Society Research Institute. Selections. --- Williams, A. (2020). Black memes matter: #LivingWhileBlack with Becky and Karen. *Social Media+ Society, 6*(4). Parham, J. (2020). TikTok and the evolution of digital blackface. Wired.
8/1	Carlson, B., & Frazer, R. (2018). *Social media mob: being indigenous online*. Maquarie University, Sydney. --- Crawford, C. (2021). Earth. In Atlas of AI, pp. 23-52. Yale University Press. --- Nussbaum, E. (2019). TV's reckoning with #metoo. *The New Yorker*. Kay, J. B., & Banet-Weiser, S. (2019). Feminist anger and feminist respair. *Feminist Media Studies, 19*(4), 603-609. ***Please note: These articles describe instances of sexual harassment and violence that may be triggering for survivors of assault or abuse.***
8/3	**FINAL EXAM**