

Popular Culture: Analysis, Interpretation & Critique

The County College of Morris
Randolph, NJ
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Instructor Contact Information:

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Office Hours: Tues/Thrs, 9am-10:30am

Course Description:

This course is meant to provide students with the theoretical perspectives and methods of inquiry necessary for the analysis, interpretation, and critique of cultural artifacts that have emerged in the sphere of the *popular* (i.e. culture that is created and/or consumed by the common person). Through lecture, discussion, readings, screenings, and written assignments, students will learn to apply the theories and methods necessary to recognize evidence and make well-reasoned arguments in pursuit of uncovering the personal and social significance of specific artifacts and their connection to the larger culture in which they are situated.

Course Objectives:

1. To provide an understanding of what defines the term “culture,” and a specific understanding of the term “popular culture” and how these terms are applied in the context of theory.
2. To provide an understanding of how different formats of media (modalities) shape the production, transmission, and reception of popular culture.
3. To provide a framework for interpreting popular culture that is based on theoretical perspectives, and methods of inquiry.
4. To familiarize students with a variety of media texts that contribute to a general understanding of popular culture and the functions that it performs.
5. To familiarize students with common terminology for describing and interpreting popular culture and media formats.
6. To improve skills of oral and written communication.

Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Recall and define terminology related to popular culture.
2. Recognize and describe how different formats of media (modalities) shape the production, transmission, and reception of popular culture.
3. Identify media texts that are exemplary of popular culture and theorize about the functions that they perform.
4. Interpret examples of popular culture based on theoretical perspectives and using valid methods of inquiry.
5. Interpret examples of popular culture using common terminology employed in communication, media studies, and related disciplines.
6. Speak and write more effectively on topics related to media and popular culture.

Textbook:

Barker, Chris & Jane, Emma A. (2016). *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. Washington, DC: Sage.¹

Course Expectations:

1. *Attendance:* Attend all class meetings. Two unexcused absences are permitted.
2. *Reading and Participation:* Come to class prepared to discuss the topic described in the course schedule based on the assigned reading from the textbook.
3. *Preliminary Exam:* Multiple choice examination of terms, concepts, and definitions.
4. *Assignments:* Media Biography and Analytical Paper.

¹ This book is available on Kindle for \$31.67.

Evaluation and Grading:

1. *Attendance Policy:* Students are entitled to two unexcused absences from class. Beyond these absences, a full letter grade will be deducted from the final grade for each additional unexcused absence. Excused absences are accepted only if they are legitimate and accompanied by documentation relating to the nature of the excuse. Legitimate excuses are unpreventable emergency situations that prohibit attendance for a particular class session. More than four absences in total (including both excused and unexcused absences) will result in automatic failure in the course.
2. *Informed Participation:* Students are expected to demonstrate informed participation during class discussion. Informed participation counts as a verbal contribution to class discussion based on concepts, theory, or terminology learned in class, from assigned readings, or from another valid academic source (e.g. from another class or from outside reading). Every student is expected to make a minimum of one verbal contribution to each class session. Students who exceed that amount will have a half-point added to their final grade for every additional contribution. Students who have a deficit of contributions will have a half-point deducted from their final grade for every missing contribution.
3. *Preliminary Exam:* A preliminary examination will be used to ensure students comprehend the theoretical perspectives and methods of inquiry associated with media and popular culture.
4. *Media Biography:* A timeline that includes narration, analysis, and synthesis for the purpose of explaining the personal significance of specific popular culture artifacts over the course of your life.
5. *Analytical Paper:* A three page essay with the following contents corresponding to paragraphs: (1) An introduction that provides context for the program. (2) A summary of the program content. (3) A description of how the theoretical perspective and method of inquiry will be applied. (4-X) A report of the analysis. (X) Conclusions based on the analysis.

Grade Calculation Chart:

Preliminary Exam	25%
Media Biography	25%
Analytical Paper	50%
Participation	See above.
Attendance	See above.

Grade Calculator:

A (93-100)	C+ (77-79)
A- (90-92)	C (70-76)
B+ (87-89)	D (60-69)
B (83-86)	F (below 60)
B- (80-82)	

Course Calendar:

Week 1 (1/18)

Introduction

Complete index cards for class participation.

What is Culture? What is Popular Culture?

Critical Perspectives (Gender, Race & Ethnicity, Political Economy, Metaphysics)

Methods of Inquiry (Narrative, Aesthetics, Semiotics, Psychoanalysis)

Reading: Chapters 1 & 2 in Cult Studs

Assignment: Media Biography Timeline

Week 2 (1/23, 1/25)

Culture & Cultural Studies Overview

Narrative Analysis: Basic Concepts

Reading: Chapter 9 in Cult Studs

Due: Media Biography Timeline

Week 3 (1/30, 2/1)

Gender as a Theoretical Perspective

Narrative Analysis II: Theories of Adaptation (Distributional Functions)

Reading: Chapter 8 in Cult Studs

Week 4 (2/6, 2/8)

Race, Ethnicity & Nationality as Theoretical Perspectives

Theories of Adaptation II: Aesthetics as a Method of Inquiry (Integrational Functions)

Reading: Chapters 3 & 5 in Cult Studs

Week 5 (2/13, 2/15)

Political Economy as a Theoretical Perspective

Semiotics as a Method of Inquiry

Assignment: Media Biography Narrative

Week 6 (2/20, 2/22)

Metaphysics as a Theoretical Perspective

Psychoanalysis as a Method of Inquiry

Due: Media Biography Narrative

Assignment: Study for Preliminary Examination

Week 7 (2/27, 3/1)

Preliminary Examination

Assignment: Draft of Analytical Paper

Reading: Chapter 4 in Cult Studs

Week 8 (3/6, 3/8)

Body & Culture

Due: Draft of Analytical Paper

Reading: Chapter 7 in Cult Studs

Week 9 (3/13, 3/15)

Spring Break

Week 10 (3/20, 3/22)

Mythology, Archetypes, and the Collective Unconscious

Reading: (Tele)Presence & Simulation

Week 11 (3/27, 3/29)

Collective Consciousness, Noosphere, & Monism

Reading: Chapter 6 in Cult Studs

Week 12 (4/3, 4/5)

Alienation, Misanthropy, & Nihilism

Week 13 (4/10, 4/12)

Popular Culture Association: No class this week.

Week 14 (4/17, 4/19)

Points of Convergence, Divergence & Departure

Assignment: Media Biography Analysis & Conclusion

Week 15 (4/24, 4/26)

Mediated Exhibitionism

Due: Media Biography Analysis & Conclusion

Assignment: Final Analytical Paper

Week 16 (5/1, 5/3)

The Creativity of Crumb

Due: Final Analytical Paper

Week 17 (5/8)

Final grades, summary, and future directions.