

AMST/FMMC 0355 - Theories of Popular Culture

Professor Jason Mittell, Axinn 208, 443-3435

Office Hours: Wed 10-12 / Thu 11-12

Class Meetings: T/Th 9:30 - 10:45 am, Axinn 109

Wed 7:30 - 10:00 pm, Axinn 232

This course introduces a range of theoretical approaches to study popular culture, exploring the intersection between everyday life, mass media, and broader political and historical contexts within the United States. We will consider key theoretical readings and approaches to studying culture, including ideology and hegemony theory, political economy, audience studies, subcultural analysis, the politics of taste, and cultural representations of identity. Using these theoretical tools, we will examine a range of popular media and sites of cultural expression, from television to toys, technology to music, to understand popular culture as a site of ongoing political and social struggle.

Learning Goals:

- Gain familiarity with major theoretical approaches to the study of popular culture, viewing the development of theory as part of a historical dialogue
- Develop critical reading skills for dense theoretical writings
- Learn to apply various theoretical approaches to examples of popular culture, using appropriate methodologies
- Foster a critical perspective on popular culture that balances critique and appreciation

Required Texts & Readings - Books available at Middlebury College Bookstore:

Will Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

John Storey, *Cultural Theory & Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 5th edition (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2009). [INTRO]

John Storey, *Cultural Theory & Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th edition (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2009). [READER]

Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

Note: It is the student's responsibility to get access to a copy for assigned readings. All books are on reserve and easily available at online bookstores.

Other required readings will be available via the course website. Screenings will be

required for this course each Wednesday night; if missed, it is up to each student to make arrangements to screen the required materials at the library before Thursday's class.

Course Requirements:

All of the following requirements must be completed to pass this course. If you do not complete all of the essays, you will not pass the course:

Essay #1 – Judging Pop Culture

Essay #2 – Analyzing Pop Culture

Essay #3 – Audience Analysis

Lecture Report

Final Essay

Grades will also factor students' participation reflecting work both in-class and online.

Assignment details will be on the course website throughout the semester.

Online Participation:

Students will be expected to actively participate on the course's online discussions to respond to course readings and materials, as well as discussing other topics related to the course. For each day's reading, Professor Mittell will post a discussion prompt. In addition to responding to the given prompts, you should read the postings of your peers and construct your own response in dialogue with your classmates.

Students should use the forum to exchange ideas about anything tangentially related to class, posting articles, links, videos, and other material of interest to classmates. Please use the site to share relevant material and links that will be useful to your projects as well, as this course encourages group exploration and discovery. Feel free to write in an informal (but still grammatically correct) style, but treat each other with respect.

Each post will be "graded" on a two point scale: a post gets a 2 if it's a significant, thoughtful response to the prompt or another student's comments; a post gets a 1 if it's a minor response that seems less thought-out; a post gets nothing if it's part of a larger dialogue you've already been part of (but that's still encouraged!). At the end of the semester, these grades will be added together and divided by 10 to get a number on the 4.0 scale, which will be factored into your final grade.

Class Participation & Attendance:

You are expected to attend all class meetings on time, having done the readings, thought about the material, and prepared the necessary online and written assignments.

Attendance will be regularly taken, but it is the individual student's responsibility to attend class in order to gain the most from their education. If a student misses a class, it is up to them to find out what they missed from their classmates and make-up the necessary material. Your final grade will be lowered one mark (B becomes B-) for each unexcused absence in excess of two. If you know that you will be absent from class or screenings,

please contact Professor Mittell as soon as possible to make necessary arrangements and avoid penalties.

The class participation component of your grade will reward students who actively participate in class, meet with the professor outside of class, and otherwise demonstrate their engagement with the material. Likewise, this grade will be used to downgrade students who are clearly disengaged with the class or fail to uphold their end of the course policies. If you are concerned with your participation grade at all, please discuss the matter with Professor Mittell.

Grades:

You will be graded based on the following scale, using a 4.0 scale on all assignments:

- A (4.0) indicates truly excelling on assignments, demonstrating mastery of the material and significantly surpassing the expectations of the assignment.
- B (3.0) indicates above-average work, clearly achieving the course goals and completing all assignments in a strong fashion.
- C (2.0) indicates satisfactorily meeting the course requirements in an adequate fashion.
- D (1.0) indicates not achieving course goals and not adequately meeting expectations.
- F (0.0) indicates dramatically failing to meet course goals and course expectations.

Submitting Work:

Late papers are highly discouraged, as they throw off schedules for both student and professor. If you must hand in any assignment later than the deadline, please contact the professor in advance as soon as the situation becomes apparent – together arrangements can be made, often without penalties. If a paper is not turned in on time without making advance arrangements with Professor Mittell or a Dean's excuse, the paper will be penalized by one mark (e.g. an A- becomes a B+) for each day of lateness.

All papers should be submitted via the course website as an attached .doc or .rtf file format document. Please do NOT slip papers under the door to Professor Mittell's office.

Cutting You Some Slack:

College is one of the few situations in life where the expectations are clearly laid out and the consequences for meeting or missing those expectations is transparent. The grading system and workload has been designed to be as fair and straightforward as possible, allowing students to choose how to prioritize the class versus other obligations or interests. However, there may be times that things become challenging and you want to ask for some leniency. One time per semester, students may request to be cut some slack, resulting in a more flexible attitude toward grading or other policies. Simply write on an assignment, or send an email describing the request, with the phrase "please cut me some slack" - Professor Mittell will adjust his expectations accordingly. Slack cannot be requested after a grade has been given.

Academic Dishonesty:

All work you submit must be your own and you may not inappropriately assist other students in their work beyond the confines of a particular assignment, in keeping with the Middlebury College Honor Code. All papers and exams must include the statement of the Honor Code along with the student's name (as a digital signature) in order to be graded.

There is a no-tolerance policy for academic misconduct in this course! The minimum penalty for academic misconduct will be a failing grade (F) for the course – further academic and disciplinary penalties may be assessed. The definitions of plagiarism and cheating used in this course are consistent with the material in the College Handbook, Chapter V.

Course Policies:

Any student with a disability or who otherwise needs accommodation or assistance should make arrangements with Professor Mittell as soon as possible. If you know that you will have conflicts due to athletics or other college activities, you must notify Professor Mittell in advance and arrange to make up missed work – athletic absences are not excused and it is the student's responsibility to make all arrangements.

Email is Professor Mittell's preferred mode of communication (besides face-to-face conversation!), generally checking regularly during the work week – if you email him asking for a response and do not receive one within one working day (M-F), assume that your email may not have been received. Office voicemails will typically be answered less promptly. Please do **not** call Professor Mittell at home.

Printing & Computer Use Policy:

Writing assignments for this course are managed through the course website, with no printing required. Many readings are online – students are welcome to print or not print at their choosing, with the understanding that students should take notes on readings either via digital annotation or separate notebook or word processing file. You should bring readings to class each day, either via paper or on a computer screen. Feel free to use laptops throughout all class meetings except during screenings, where the light from the screen can disrupt the viewing experience. If you are on your laptop, you are expected to engage with course materials, not free-range surfing the web, checking email, Facebook, etc.

Course Schedule

February 8 – Introduction to Popular Culture
February 9 – *High Fidelity* (2000) – MCTR 7132D
February 10 – Culture & Civilization Tradition
READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 1 – 2
Storey, Reader, Ch. 1 – Arnold
Dwight Macdonald, “Theory of Mass Culture”

February 15 – Culturalism
READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 3
Storey, Reader, Ch. 4, 6 – Williams, Hall & Whannel
Lawrence Levine, “Shakespeare in America”
February 16 – *Slings & Arrows*, “Oliver's Dream” - PN1992.77 .S615 2007D
My Darling Clementine (1946) – PN1997.M888 A1 2007D

February 17 – Semiotics & Structuralism
READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 6
John Fiske, “[Surfalism & Sandiotics: The Beach in Oz Culture](#)”
Tom Streeter, “[Semiotics & Advertising](#)” online tutorial
Guy Deutscher, “[Does Your Language Shape How You Think?](#)”
LECTURE: “The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet” by Tom Streeter, University of Vermont, Thursday Feb. 17, 4:30 pm, McBi 220

February 22 – Structuralism & Myth
READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 24 – Barthes
Storey, Reader, Ch. 25 – Wright
WRITING: Essay #1 due via course website before class 2/22
February 23 – *Slings & Arrows*, “Geoffrey Returns” - PN1992.77 .S615 2007D
It's a Wonderful Life (1946) – PN1997.I758 A1 2006D
February 24 – Marxism
READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 4
Storey, Reader, Ch. 7-10 – Marx & Engels, Adorno

March 1 – Ideology
READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 27 – Althusser
Robert Ray, “*It's a Wonderful Life*”
Robin Wood, “Ideology/Genre/Auteur” (eRes)
March 2 – *Slings & Arrows*, “Madness in Great Ones” - PN1992.77 .S615 2007D
Tootsie (1982) – PN1997.T62 A1 2008D
March 3 – Hegemony & Post-Marxism
READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 11-12, 15 – Gramsci, Bennett, Hall
Deborah Holdstein, “[Tootsie: Mixed Messages](#)”
LECTURE: “Chandler, Hawks and *The Big Sleep*” by James Naremore, Indiana University, Thursday March 3, 4:30 pm, Axinn 232

March 8 – Negotiation

READINGS: Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”

Storey, Reader, Ch. 14 – Gledhill

Jonathan Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities”

March 9 – *Slings & Arrows*, “Outrageous Fortune” - PN1992.77 .S615 2007D

Die Hard (1988) – PN1997.D489 A1 2007B

March 10 – Active Audiences

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 17 - Ang

John Fiske & Robert Dawson, “Audiencing Violence” (eRes)

IN-CLASS SCREENING: *Slings & Arrows*, “Mirror up to Nature” - PN1992.77 .S615 2007D

March 15 – Psychoanalysis & Popular Culture

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 5

Storey, Reader, Ch. 22-23 – Freud, Lacan

March 16 – *Slings & Arrows*, “Playing the Swan” - PN1992.77 .S615 2007D

Animal House (1978) – MCTR 7868D

March 17 – The Politics of the Carnavalesque

READINGS: Mikhail Bakhtin, “Carnival & Carnavalesque”

Kathleen Rowe, “Pig Ladies, Big Ladies”

Priscilla Meddaugh, “Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse”

WRITING: Essay #2 due before class 3/17

March 22 – Feminism & Popular Culture

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 7

Storey, Reader, Ch. 18-21 – Rakow, Radway, Geraghty, Butler

LECTURE: “‘Toto, I think we're in Oz again (and again and again)': Remakes and Popular Seriality” by Frank Kelleter, University of Göttingen, Tues March 22, 4:30 pm, Axinn 232

March 23 – *Barbie Nation* (1998) – NK4894.3.B37 B475 2007D

The Simpsons, “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” (1994) - PN1992.77 .S58 v.5 2004D

Superstar: Karen Carpenter Story (1987) – [online](#)

March 24 – Case Study: Barbie

READINGS: Lynn Spigel, “Barbies without Ken”

Mary Desjardins, “The Incredible Shrinking Star”

March 26 – April 3 - Spring Break

April 5 – The Cultural Studies Paradigm

READINGS: Brooker, *Using the Force*, Preface - Ch. 7

WATCH ON OWN: *Star Wars* (1977) - PN1997.S65956 A1 2004D

[*Star Wars Uncut*](#)

April 6 – *George Lucas In Love* (2000) – MCTR 7400D

Be Kind Rewind (2008) – PN1997.2.B4 A1 2008D

April 7 – Researching Audiences

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 51 – Ang

Brooker, *Using the Force*, finish book

Joke Hermes, “Audience Studies 2.0”

WRITING: Proposal for Final Research Paper due before class 4/7

April 12 – Popular Culture Fandom

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 48 – de Certeau

Henry Jenkins, “Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?”

Barbara Ehrenreich et. al., “Beatlemania”

April 13 – *Better Off Ted*, “Racial Sensitivity” (2009)

Bamboozled (2001) – MCTR 6961D

April 14 – Race & Representation

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 8

Storey, Reader, Ch. 31, 33, 35 – Gilroy, Hall, hooks

April 19 – Poststructuralism and Discourse

READINGS: review Storey, Intro pp. 126-133

Storey, Reader, Ch. 28-29 – Foucault, Weedon

Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation”

Jason Mittell, “Cultural Power of Anti-TV Metaphor”

April 20 – *Twin Peaks*, “Pilot” (1990) – PN1992.77 .T88 2007D

The Simpsons, “Simpsons Spin-off Showcase” (1994) - PN1992.77 .S58 v.8 2006D

April 21 – Postmodernism

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 9

Storey, Reader, Ch. 37, 42 – Baudrillard, Collins

Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism” excerpted

April 26 – The Pitfalls of Pluralism

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 40, - Hebdidge,

Michael Bérubé, “The Science Wars Redux”

Mark Andrejevic, “Critical Media Studies 2.0”

WRITING: Essay #3 due by email before class 4/26

April 27 – *Almost Famous (Bootleg Cut)* (2000) – PN1997.A3248 A1 2001bD

April 28 – Politics of the Popular

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 10

Storey, Reader, Ch. 44, 45, 50 – Bourdieu, Hall, Fiske

Lester Bangs, “Astral Weeks”

May 3 – Taste and Popular Culture

READINGS: Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, entire book

LISTEN ON OWN: Céline Dion, "[Let's Talk About Love](#)"

May 4 – *The Joe Schmo Show 2*, "On With the Schmo" - PN1992.77 .J64 v.2 2009D

Idiocracy (2006) - PN1997.2.I356 A1 2006D

May 5 – Power in/of Cultural Studies

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 52-55 – Webster, McGuigan, Garnham, Grossberg

Final Research Essay due by noon, Friday, May 13

Graduating seniors absolutely **MUST** hand in papers on time (and preferably early)!