

## **AMST/FMMC 0355 - Theories of Popular Culture**

Professor Jason Mittell, Axinn 208, 443-3435

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

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

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

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

Matthew Jacobson & Gaspar Gonzalez, *What Have They Built You To Do?: The Manchurian Candidate and Cold War Culture* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2006).

John Storey, *Cultural Theory & Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 4th edition (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007). [INTRO]

John Storey, *Cultural Theory & Popular Culture: A Reader*, 3rd edition (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007). [READER]

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

Other required readings will be available via eReserves (password: 8839jm) - note that individual eRes titles are fed to this site in the left margin. Screenings will be required for this course each Monday night; if missed, it is up to each student to make arrangements to screen the required materials at the library before Tuesday'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  
Final Essay

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

Assignment details will be on the course website at <http://blogs.middlebury.edu/popcult/> and handed out in class throughout the semester.

***Online Participation:***

Students will be expected to actively participate on online discussions to respond to course readings and materials, as well as serving as a forum to discuss any issues related to the course. Students who do not post weekly responses as described below will receive no higher than a C for online participation. For each day's reading, Professor Mittell will post a brief set of discussion questions. You are responsible for answering one of these questions each week before the class meeting, for an average of 11 posts throughout the semester – you can respond to either day's questions during a given week, but you must post your response by 6 am on the day of the class meeting. In addition to responding to the given question(s), you should read the postings of your peers and construct your own response in dialogue with your classmates. You will not receive credit for posting reading responses after the day on which the readings were assigned unless you have been absent from class for an excused reason and have made specific arrangements with Professor Mittell.

Students should use the blog to exchange ideas about anything tangentially related to class, posting articles and material of interest to classmates. Please use the site to share relevant material and links that will be useful to your projects, as this course encourages group exploration and discovery.

***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 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 email as an attached .doc or .rtf file format document – Professor Mittell will reply via email within 24 hours when a paper has been received. Unless you have received such a notification, you should email him to ensure that the paper was in fact received. Note that emailing using non-Middlebury addresses increases the likelihood of attachments failing or spam filters blocking messages, so please use your middlebury.edu address. Please do NOT slip papers under the door to Professor Mittell's office.

**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.

## Course Schedule

February 9 – *High Fidelity* (2000) – MCTR 7132D

February 10 – Introduction to Popular Culture

February 12 – Culture & Civilization Tradition

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 1 – 2

Storey, Reader, Ch. 1 – Arnold

Dwight Macdonald, “Theory of Mass Culture” (eRes)

February 16 – *My Darling Clementine* (1946) – PN1997.M888 A1 2007D

February 17 – Culturalism

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 3

Storey, Reader, Ch. 4, 6 – Williams, Hall & Whannel

Lawrence Levine, “Shakespeare in America” (eRes)

February 19 – Semiotics & Structuralism

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 6

Storey, Reader, Ch. 28 - Wright

Jere Surber, “Formalist, Structuralist & Semiotic Analyses” (eRes)

February 23 – *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) – PN1997.I758 A1 2006D

February 24 – Structuralism & Myth

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 27-28 – Barthes

Robert Ray, “*It’s a Wonderful Life*” (eRes)

WRITING: Essay #1 due by email before class 2/24

February 26 – Marxism

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 4

Storey, Reader, Ch. 8-11 – Marx & Engels, Adorno

March 2 – *Tootsie* (1982) – PN1997.T62 A1 2008D

March 3 – Ideology

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 30 – Althusser

Robin Wood, “Ideology/Genre/Auteur” (eRes)

March 5 – Hegemony & Post-Marxism

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 12-13, 16 – Gramsci, Bennett, Hall

March 9 – *Die Hard* (1988) – PN1997.D489 A1 2004D

March 10 – Negotiation

READINGS: Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” (eRes)

Storey, Reader, Ch. 15 – Gledhill

March 12 - Active Audiences

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 18 - Ang

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

March 16 – *Animal House* (1978) – MCTR 7868D

March 17 – Psychoanalysis & Popular Culture

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 5

Storey, Reader, Ch. 25-26, 33 – Freud, Lacan, Zizek

March 19 – The Politics of the Carnavalesque

READINGS: Mikhail Bakhtin, “Carnival & Carnavalesque” (eRes)

Kathleen Rowe, “Pig Ladies, Big Ladies” (eRes)

WRITING: Essay #2 due by email before class 3/19

### **March 21-29 - Spring Break**

March 30 – *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) – reserve or online

March 31 – Feminism & Popular Culture

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 7

Storey, Reader, Ch. 19-20 – Rakow, Radway

Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure & Narrative Cinema” (eRes)

April 2 – Case Study: Barbie

READINGS: Lynn Spigel, “Barbies without Ken” (eRes)

Mary Desjardins, “The Incredible Shrinking Star” (eRes)

April 6 – *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) – MCTR 6700D

April 7 – The Cultural Studies Paradigm

READINGS: Brooker, *Using the Force*, Preface - Ch. 4

April 9 – Researching Audiences

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 49 – Ang

Brooker, *Using the Force*, Ch. 5-7

Andrea Press & Sonia Lingstone, “Taking Audience Research” (eRes)

WRITING: Proposal for Final Research Paper due by email before class 4/9

April 13 – *Twin Peaks*, “Pilot” (1990) – PN1992.77 .T88 2007D

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

April 14 – Popular Culture Fandom

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 46 – de Certeau

Brooker, *Using the Force*, finish book

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

Barbara Ehrenreich et. al., “Beatlemania” (eRes)

April 16 – Postmodernism

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 8

Storey, Reader, Ch. 34 – Baudrillard

Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism” excerpted

April 20 – *Bamboozled* (2001) – MCTR 6961D

April 21 – Poststructuralism and Discourse

READINGS: review Storey, Intro pp. 98-103

Storey, Reader, Ch. 31-32 – Foucault, Weedon

Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation” (eRes)

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

April 23 – Race & Representation

READINGS: Robert Stam, “Cultural Studies and Race” (eRes)

Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities” (eRes)

Stuart Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” (eRes)

WRITING: Essay #3 due by email before class 4/23

April 27 – *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) – PN1997.M2568 A1 2004D

April 28 – Case Study: *The Manchurian Candidate*

READINGS: Jacobsen & Gonzalez, *What Have They Built You To Do*, Ch. 1-3

April 30 – Case Study: *The Manchurian Candidate*

READINGS: Jacobsen & Gonzalez, *What Have They Built You To Do*, Ch. 4 -  
Postscript

May 4 – *Almost Famous (Bootleg Cut)* (2000) – PN1997.A3248 A1 2001bD

May 5 – Taste and Popular Culture

READINGS: Storey, Intro, Ch. 9

Storey, Reader, Ch. 42, 43, 48 – Bourdieu, Hall, Fiske

May 7 – Politics of the Popular

READINGS: Storey, Reader, Ch. 51-53 – Webster, Frith, McGuigan

**Final Research Essay due via email by noon, Friday, May 15**

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