Communication and popular culture

Special topics in communication theory

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Comm 5110-002
Tu Th 9:45-11:00a
305 Lind
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Course description and objectives

This is a course on communication and popular culture, but it is _not_ designed to be just a four-month long celebration of comic books, hip hop, the Internet, and the like. Instead, our primary focus will be on the _politics_ of popular culture and we will spend our time exploring several different _critical_ and _analytical_ perspectives on the subject. In particular, we will address such questions as:

·   What is "culture"? And what distinguishes _popular_ culture from other varieties?
·   Of what value is popular culture -- and to whom is it valuable? Is there really anything more to popular culture than "just entertainment"?
·   Who controls popular culture, what are they doing with it, and should we be worried about this?
·   Is popular culture repressive or liberatory? Does it reinforce and support existing structures of social power? Or does it serve as a source of healthy resistance to the status quo?
·   And why should we study this popular culture stuff anyway?

Bear in mind that few (if any) of the questions we'll address this semester have easy answers. How well you do in this class will depend on your ability to think _critically_ about the role of popular culture in contemporary society and your to _argue_ your position(s) well, not your ability to memorize and repeat the "right" answers.

Readings

The following _required_ books are available at the University Bookstore in Coffman Union.

·   S. Elizabeth Bird, _The Audience in Everyday Life_
·   Greg Elmer (ed.), _Critical Perspectives on the Internet_
·   Herbert J. Gans, _Popular Culture and High Culture_ [1999 edition]
·   Carl Hiaasen, _Team Rodent_
·   Nick Hornby, _High Fidelity_
·   Kembrew McLeod, _Owning Culture_
·   Scott McCloud, _Reinventing Comics_
·   Scott McCloud, _Understanding Comics_
·   John Seabrook, _Nobrow_
·   Neal Stephenson, _In the Beginning Was the Command Line..._
·   Judith Williamson, _Decoding Advertisements_

There are also several articles available as PDF and HTML files on the course's WebCT site.

Graduate students

If you are a graduate student, a slightly different set of course rules applies to you. In particular:

·   You are required to do _all_ the readings listed on the syllabus.
·   You are required to attend _all_ class meetings.
·   Your final research paper must be (a) _6250-7500_ words long and (b) suitable for submission to a scholarly conference and/or journal.
·   You must submit a proposed paper topic by 29 Sep and a completed paper by 15 Dec, but you do _not_ have to meet any of the other intermediate paper deadlines/requirements.

Grading

Your final course grade will be based on two factors: attendance/participation (20%) and a major research project (80%). Grade point totals will translate to letter grades as follows:

A	93-100	B	83-86	C	73-76	D+	67-69	F	0-59
A-	90-92	B-	80-82	C-	70-72	D	63-66	N	0-59
B+	87-89	C+	77-79	S	70-100	D-	60-62	I	n/a

· "S/N" grades will only be given to students who have registered for the course on an S/N basis.

· "I" grades will only be given under *extraordinary* circumstances (i.e., major life emergencies).

Attendance/participation

I will take attendance every time we meet. Unexcused absences, late arrivals, and early departures will all affect your grade. In general, the only absences that will count as "excused" are those resulting from:

· major life emergences (with suitable documentation (hospital receipts, funeral notices, etc.)) or

· major religious holidays (with written notice presented at least a week in advance).

Our class meetings will be structured around discussions rather than lectures. As such, this is *not* a course that will reward passive spectators, and you will be expected to make significant contributions to our discussions -- both in class and online -- on a *regular* basis. Ideally, you should aim to:

· attend *all* required class meetings (this includes arriving on time and staying until the end),

· make at least one *significant* contribution to our in-class discussions every time we meet, and

· contribute roughly 250 words of productive commentary to our online discussions *every* week.

Meeting all the goals above will earn you an A for attendance/participation. Should you fall short in one of these areas, you can make up for it with extra work in one of the others . . . but bear in mind that:

· In-class presence matters: if you miss a class, you should contribute more extensively to our online discussions immediately thereafter.

· Consistent effort throughout the semester counts more than isolated bursts of heavy activity: 100 words/week for 15 weeks will serve you better than 1500 words in one massive post.

· Quality counts for more than quantity: a brilliant and insightful 100-word Discussion Board post will typically be worth more than a mediocre 300-word post.

· "Fluff" contributions will *not* help your grade: I reserve the right to *penalize* people who make repeated and obvious efforts to pad their participation score with off-topic comments.

Research project

Your major assignment for this course is a research project that culminates in a 5000+ word paper. This paper must be on a topic appropriate to the course's central theme and it should make a persuasive, well-supported argument about your topic. Your final paper is due *by 9:45 am on 15 Dec*. There are several *mandatory* intermediate deadlines (29 Sep, 13 Oct, 27 Oct, 10 Nov) that will help you complete this project in a timely and satisfactory fashion.

This assignment is explicitly designed so that it can be used to satisfy the Senior Paper requirement for Communication Studies majors. If you intend to use this project for this purpose, you will need to:

· inform me *in writing* of your intent to do so by 15 Sep,

· register for Comm 3995 by 16 Sep, and

· earn a grade of B- or better on your completed project.

WebCT

We will use WebCT for several things this semester:

· graded online discussions of assigned readings and related issues,
· "virtual lectures" designed to stimulate (additional) online discussion,
· course-related business announcements, and
· a resource site for official course documents and all our non-book readings.

WebCT is accessible from the My U Portal (http://www.myu.umn.edu) via the "my Toolkit" tab. To use WebCT, your browser must have both Java and cookies enabled, and it must allow pop-up windows. Recent versions of Firefox, Netscape, and Internet Explorer (but, sadly, not Opera) should all work.

Academic integrity

I assume that the vast majority of students are honest, but to help us avoid potentially disastrous misunderstandings, the following is a _partial_ list of major examples of academic dishonesty:

· plagiarism in any of its forms
· copying papers (in whole or in part) written by other students
· having someone else research and/or write substantial portions of your research project for you
· knowingly assisting someone else in their efforts to engage in any of the above practices.

The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty is a _zero_ for the assignment in question . . . and, of course, in cases that involve your final research paper, such a penalty will result in a final course grade of F.

Further information about the University's official policies with respect to academic dishonesty -- including more detailed explanations of what constitutes "plagiarism" and "cheating" -- can be found online at http://writing.umn.edu/tww/plagiarism/

Etiquette

· The discussion portions of our class sessions will occasionally cover topics that provoke strong differences of opinion within the group. I do not expect us to walk away from our class meetings in perfect and total agreement about the issues under discussion, but I _do_ expect _all_ of our conversations to be characterized by mutual respect and collegiality. Impassioned arguments and strongly expressed opinions are acceptable in this class; verbal bullying and personal attacks, on the other hand, will _not_ be tolerated under any circumstances.
· Significant disruptions of the normal flow of course-related business -- e.g., using your cell phone in class, excessive side chatter, engaging in premature leave-taking behavior -- may result in penalties to your attendance/participation grade.
· If you wish to, you may make audio recordings of our class lectures and/or discussions, provided you can do so without disrupting the ordinary flow of the class. The purchase and/or sale of either written notes or audio recordings of our class meetings, however, is strictly prohibited.

Miscellaneous

· My office hours are 12:30-2p on Tue and Thu, 2-3p on Wed, and by appointment. Don't be shy. Take advantage of these. Please. It's why they exist.
· If you miss an assignment deadline, I will penalize your grade in direct proportion to the lateness of your submitted assignment. Major life emergencies and major religious holidays constitute exceptions to this rule, _but only if_ you provide the same type of documentation listed under "Attendance/participation" for such circumstances.

Reading/assignment schedule

Gray-shaded dates denote Graduate Seminar Days, which are optional _attendance_ days for undergraduates, but the _readings_ listed in the lefthand column are still required.

date	required reading (all) due dates (undergraduate)	required reading (graduate) due dates (graduate)
6 Sep	no readings	no readings
8 Sep	Williams, "Defining a Democratic Culture" Anderson, "Reflections on _Magnum, P.I._"	Grossberg, "Cultural Studies: What's in a Name (One More Time)" Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'" Ross, "No Respect: An Introduction"
13 Sep	_Understanding Comics_ [pp. 1-137]	Grossberg, "Teaching the Popular" Frith, "The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture From the Populists"
15 Sep	_Understanding Comics_ [pp. 138-215] _High Culture and Low Culture_ [pp. vii-26]	Adorno, "On Popular Music" Gendron, "Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs"
20 Sep	_High Culture and Low Culture_ [pp. 27-160]	Rodman, "Elvis Culture" Kipnis, "Disgust and Desire: _Hustler_ Magazine"
22 Sep	_High Culture and Low Culture_ [pp. 161-210]	Sammond, "A Brief and Unnecessary Defense of Professional Wrestling" Mazer, "'Real' Wrestling / 'Real' Life"
27 Sep	_Decoding Advertisements_ [pp. 6-70]	Monaco, "The Language of Film: Signs and Syntax" McClary & Walser, "Start Making Sense!: Musicology Wrestles With Rock"
29 Sep	**paper topic** **5-item bibliography** _Decoding Advertisements_ [pp. 71-137]	**paper topic** Barthes, "Myth Today" Rodman, "Elvis Myths"
4 Oct	_Decoding Advertisements_ [pp. 138-179] _Nobrow_ [pp. 3-63]	Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television" Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies"
6 Oct	_Nobrow_ [pp. 64-130]	Radway, "Mail-Order Culture and Its Critics: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Commodification and Consumption, and the Problem of Cultural Authority" Morris, "Things to Do With Shopping Centers"
11 Oct	_Nobrow_ [pp. 131-221]	Makagon, "The Lure of Flickering Images" Hamilton, "Alternative Media: Conceptual Difficulties, Critical Possibilities"
13 Oct	**thesis paragraph** _Team Rodent_ [all]	McChesney, "U.S. Media at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century" Hebdige, "Dis-gnosis: Disney and the Retooling of Knowledge, Art, Culture, Life, Etc."
18 Oct	_In the Beginning Was the Command Line..._ [pp. 1-80]	Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Williams, "The Technology and the Society"
20 Oct	_In the Beginning Was the Command Line..._ [pp. 81-150]	Johnson, _Interface Culture_ [selections] Auslander, "Tryin' to Make It Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture"

25 Oct	*Reinventing Comics* [pp. 1-125]	Park, "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings as Show Trial: Decency, Authority, and the Dominated Expert" Berman, "The Internet, Community Definition, and the Social Meaning of Legal Jurisdiction"
27 Oct	**annotated 10-item bibliography** *Reinventing Comics* [pp. 126-242] *Critical Perspectives on the Internet* [pp. ix-48]	Rodman, "The Net Effect: The Public's Fear and the Public Sphere" Sterne, "Thinking the Internet: Cultural Studies Versus the Millennium"
1 Nov	*Critical Perspectives on the Internet* [pp. 49-128]	Marvin, "Dazzling the Multitude: Original Media Spectacles" Spigel, "Media Homes: Then and Now"
3 Nov	*Critical Perspectives on the Internet* [pp. 129-202]	Tetzlaff, "Yo-Ho-Ho and a Server of Warez: Internet Software Piracy and the New Global Information Economy" Lessig, "Balances"
8 Nov	*Owning Culture* [pp. ix-108] Gladwell, "Something Borrowed"	Gaines, "Superman and the Protective Strength of the Trademark" Keil, "On Civilization, Cultural Studies, and Copyright"
10 Nov	**rough draft** *Owning Culture* [pp. 109-156]	Condry, "Cultures of Music Piracy: An Ethnographic Comparison of the US and Japan" Nel, "The Disneyfication of Dr. Seuss: Faithful to Profit, One Hundred Percent?"
15 Nov	*Owning Culture* [pp. 157-264]	Wang, "Recontextualizing Copyright: Piracy, Hollywood, the State, and Globalization" Pang, "Copying *Kill Bill*"
17 Nov	**NO CLASS** *The Audience in Everyday Life* [pp. 1-50]	**NO CLASS** Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" Hall, "Reflections Upon the Encoding/Decoding Model" Gurevitch & Scannell, "Canonization Achieved?: Stuart Hall's 'Encoding/Decoding'"
22 Nov	*The Audience in Everyday Life* [pp. 51-117]	Radway, "Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects" Grossberg, "Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics"
24 Nov	**NO CLASS** *The Audience in Everyday Life* [pp. 118-163]	**NO CLASS** Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans" Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions"
29 Nov	*The Audience in Everyday Life* [pp. 163-192]	Bratich, "Amassing the Multitude: Revisiting Early Audience Studies" Gibson, "Beyond Cultural Populism: Notes Toward the Critical Ethnography of Media Audiences"
1 Dec	*High Fidelity* [pp. 1-75] Seigworth, "Sound Affects"	Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music" Frith, "Why Music Matters" Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech About Music"

6 Dec	*High Fidelity* [pp. 76-170]	Rodman & Vanderdonckt, "Music for Nothing or, I Want My MP3: The Regulation and Recirculation of Affect" Bell, "Do You Believe in Fairies?: *Peter Pan*, Walt Disney, and Me"
8 Dec	*High Fidelity* [pp. 171-258]	Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Music Culture" Hill, "Why Isn't Country Music 'Youth' Culture?" Wald, "Just a Girl?: Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth"
13 Dec	*High Fidelity* [pp. 259-323]	Neumann & Simpson, "Smuggled Sound: Bootleg Recording and the Pursuit of Popular Memory" Jones, "Music That Moves: Popular Music, Distribution and Network Technologies" Bull, "The World According to Sound: Investigating the World of Walkman Users"
15 Dec	**NO CLASS** **final paper**	**NO CLASS** **final paper**