

American Studies 241 - 8821  
Michael Winetsky Instructor

### Popular Culture and Mass Society: Origins, Values, Critiques

The subject of this course is the origins, values, and critiques of Popular Culture and Mass Society. We regard this popular culture as largely a phenomenon of the twentieth century, but we will also investigate its origins in earlier periods and its future in an increasingly globalized world. We will principally be interested in the popular culture of the United States, although the very possibility of a "Mass Society" is coincident with the rise of the nation state, and it must be understood internationally. We will examine on the role of Western Liberalism in creating a popular culture, and distinguishing this liberalism from the forms of fascism that are also a tendency of mass society. We will examine the concept of the "star" as it extends from the invention of the movie star in the 1920s to the celebrity culture of today with pervasive media, paparazzi, and self-commodified reality stars. We will attend to a number of critiques of popular culture, and ask what influence these critiques have had. Finally, we will examine youth culture, from the advent of developmental psychology, to the importance of youth culture in the social revolutions of the 1960s, to today's consumer childhoods.

Students will not only gain knowledge of American cultural history, they will also learn to use the tools of the cultural critic.

### TOPICS BY CLASS MEETING

1. The Contemporary Scene (August 28th)
  - Jay Z video "NY State of Mind"
  - Thorstein Veblen, "Theory of the Leisure Class" (excerpt)
  - In class writing brainstorm
  - Advertising Slogans
2. The Origins of Liberal Culture: Revolutions and Romantic Individualism (Sept. 5)
  - reading due: Wordsworth, *Intimations Ode*
  - Expressionism, Youth Potentiality
  - images: Lyrical Ballads, title page
  - "The Declaration of Independence"
  - Habermas's Idea of the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere
3. The Rise of Mass Culture (Sept. 11 ---> Sept. 25)
  - reading due: Pollen, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Introduction and Part I
  - NY Times "What Science Has Done for the American Farmer" (1917) &

Film: Charlie Chaplin, "The Tramp" (1915)  
images: Buster Keaton "College" (1927)  
further reading: Eric Lott, Love and Theft (Oxford UP, 1995) Chapters 1 & 3  
Michael North, Reading 1922 (Oxford UP, 199) Intro. & p.163 - 172

4. Liberal Individualism contends with Mass Culture (Oct. 4)

reading due: Glaspell, *Inheritors*  
The Provincetown Players Manifesto  
Magazines, *The Masses* and *The Little Review*  
film: "Yankee Doodle Dandy" (1942) George M. Cohan statue in Times Sq.  
Nationalisms  
history: World War I & World War II  
further reading: Imagined Communities

5. Mass Society Without Liberalism (Oct. 9)

reading due: *Revolt of the Masses*, Chapters 1, 5, 7, & 8 / Chapter 4 also recommended  
reviewing *Inheritors*  
film due: Orson Welles' "The Stranger"  
The Paranoid Style in American Politics  
history: Fascisms / HUAC  
further reading: Michael Paul Rogin Ronald Reagan, The Movie!

6. The Implications of New Freedoms (Oct 16)

reading due: Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Chapters II - IV  
Glaspell, *The Verge*  
The Jazz Age: Louis Armstrong; Josephine Baker  
American Popular Song  
Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*  
PBS American Masters series, Louis Armstrong (1989)  
excerpt: David Savran, Highbrow/Lowdown

7. New Features Emerge, Old Order Crumbles (Oct. 23)

Essay Proposals Due  
Brief History of the Reception of Eastern Religions in the West  
excerpt: Jack Kerouac, The Dharma Bums (1959)  
the birth throes of Youth Culture  
film: "Rebel Without a Cause" (1955)  
Jim Stark is "Sincere."  
Jazz and Popular Song  
images: "High Society" (1956)

8. Pop and the Cultural Upheavals of the 1960s (Oct. 30)

reading due: *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Part II

Baby Boom Generation

Kennedy's Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Kennedy and the Space Race: Rice University Address 1962

A Momentary Possibility: Authentic Pop

The March on Washington

Rock and Roll: Beatlemania ; Bob Dylan ; Pop Art

excerpt from Helen Gurley Brown Sex and the Single Girl (1962)

Two recent television shows imagine the Kennedy assassination. Excerpts:

American Dreams season 1, episodes 1 & 2 (2004)

Mad Men season 3, episode 12 (2009)

further viewing: "The Apartment" (1960) Billy Wilder, dir.

9. Culture of Fantasy, Culture of Me (Nov. 6)

reading due: *American Nerd*, Part I

Critical Spatial Theory and the Culture of Choice

Barry Schwartz's idea of The Paradox of Choice

The Hedonism of Rock N' Roll

David Bowie, "Moonage Daydream"

excerpt: Matei Calinescu The Five Faces of Modernity "Kitsch"

"Free to Be You and Me" (1974)

What is the meaning of "far out?"

Comedy and Subversion: Saturday Night Live and 1970s Comedy

Cultures in which Irony Becomes the Dominant Mode of Discourse

further viewing:

"Star Wars" (1977) George Lucas, dir.

"Animal House" (1978) John Landis, dir.

10. Global Pop, Hip Hop and Teen Culture (Nov. 13)

The Films of John Hughes

MTV and the Multimedia Pop Star

- Dance and Singing: Exhibition and Consumption. (Inhibition.) Projection.

guest lecture from Jeremy Faust, "Orientalism in Michael Jackson's 'Liberian Girl.'"

Paul Simon and Lady Smith Black Mambazo

Global Pop: Michael Jackson "Black or White,"

Madonna - "Material Girl" and "Like a Virgin"

Hip Hop Culture (the 4 Pillars) and Old School Rap: Run DMC, "You Talk Too Much"

images: "Coming to America" John Landis, dir. (1988)

further viewing: "Do the Right Thing" Spike Lee, dir. (1989)

12. Getting Real in the Early 90s (Nov 20)

reading due: The Beauty Myth

The Culture Wars: How Come You Can Take a College Course in Pop Culture.

What does it mean to “get real?”

The return of Race Riots.

Nirvana, *Nevermind*

film: “Slacker”

TV Series: “The Real World”

LAST DAY FOR ESSAY#1 DRAFTS - November 24th

13. From Television Reality to Reality Television (Dec. 4)

reading due: The Omnivore’s Dilemma, Part III

AOL. Google. You Tube. Social Networking Sites.

TV Series: “Survivor.” “American Idol.” the “Laguna Beach” franchise.

Sex Tapes

Consolidations of Media Companies

Contortions in the Newspaper Industry:

NPR News “AOL Aims High with Hyperlocal Journalism” (17 August 2010)

14. Course Review

## STUDENT WORK

Each of the following three categories represent one-third of a student’s semester grade:

**Class Participation & Seminar Attendance.** Students are expected to work together to foster a learning environment in the classroom and in online forums. Students should arrive at seminars with questions, observations, issues, or passages worth the attention of the group, and are expected to speak thoughtfully and to listen generously. Respect for the process and fellow students, and interest in the material are also reflected in Class Participation grade. Holistic letter grades in this category are evaluated in cooperation with the student at midterm and revisited when the semester is over. Students should plan to attend all seminar meetings.

**Commentary (a.k.a., Short Assignments).** Each student must submit written commentary throughout the semester. A kind of notebook-assignment, each submission should be roughly one page in length, and should draw attention to a passage in an assigned or recommended text. Students can use commentary to discuss the significance of the passage in relation to the work and/or ideas discussed in seminar, or to pose probing questions for discussion. Honesty and struggle are at a premium on these assignments, while polish is viewed as extra. Commentary on reading assignments should be posted in online forums on a weekly basis (except when noted). Also, some in-class writings, such as thought-pieces and quizzes, will be counted

among commentary papers. Commentary papers are not graded, but are marked with a √. On rare occasions a √+ or √- may also be given.

Essays. Please turn in two papers on culture this semester. Each should be 4-7 pages in length, and should follow the style guidelines of the MLA or Chicago. Essays can only be submitted on scheduled due dates and no late work will be accepted. Each essay receives three grades, scored on a ten point scale, -- one for writing, one for reading and use of quotation, and one for quality of the ideas. Grade for this category represents an average six scores on two essays. All essays should be submitted over email.

### Books on Order at the CSI bookstore

author (last name), title / isbn

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|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Pollan, <i>The Omnivore's Dilemma</i>                             | / 9780143038580 |
| 2. Ortega Y Gasset, <i>Revolt of the Masses</i>                      | / 0393310957    |
| 3. Freud (Strachey, trans.), <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i> | / 0393301583    |
| 4. Glaspell, <i>Plays</i>                                            | / 0521312043    |
| 5. Nugent, <i>American Nerd</i>                                      | / 9780743288026 |
| 6. Wolf, <i>The Beauty Myth</i>                                      | / 0060512180    |