

## **SOCIOLOGY OF POPULAR CULTURE, Sociology/English/Communication 322**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Examines popular culture from a sociological and a comparative perspective. Emphasizes the impact of mass media on individual behavior, marketing and consumption of amusements and entertainments in the domestic and global marketplace.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

How seriously should we take popular culture?

Popular culture is the major cultural environment in which we live our lives. It generates the images and ideas that entertain, inform, amuse and outrage us. We love to be entertained and we hate what we think it may be doing to us. During this semester, I hope that each of you can approach a culture that you know with the eyes and ears of an outsider.

This class will examine popular culture from a sociological and comparative (history, art, economics, semiotics, linguistics) perspective. Sociology as a field of study looks at the impact of social groups and institutions on individuals and, to a lesser extent, at the role of the self in changing institutions. Popular culture shapes us as consumers of a culture and is shaped by us as we reject it or embrace it. We'll develop the following themes during the semester:

- (1) What is popular culture? What distinguishes popular culture from other kinds of culture (art, folk culture)? Is there a distinction at all anymore?
- (2) What conditions were necessary to create a truly "popular" culture? What is the social history of popular amusements?
- (3) What does popular culture tell us about ourselves? About our history? How is popular culture made? How are ideas disseminated?
- (4) Is U.S. popular culture a kind of hegemonic device? How much does U.S. popular culture inform popular culture elsewhere in the world? Are we moving towards McWorld or cultural Jihad? How do other countries and cultures perceive the U.S. thanks to popular culture?
- (5) How are race, class and gender represented and reproduced in the media? How meaningful are these representations? Why do we care so much about gossip and celebrities? and finally,
- (6) What impact does popular culture have on its audience? Does it do anything to us?

For the duration of this class, you'll be asked to become a critical consumer of popular culture as well as an ethnographer or social historian as we approach our own culture.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

Your grade will be based on several components:

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| (1) | In-class writing (unannounced essays, attendance) | = 50 |
| (2) | Midterms/final exam (50 pts. X 3)                 | =150 |
| (3) | Course project                                    | =100 |
|     | Total points                                      | =300 |

(1) Several times during the semester, you'll write essays in class. These short, free writing assignments will not be announced in advance and cannot be made up. They will never be worth more than 10 points each.

(2) Exams will be a combination of objective (multiple choice items) and essay. Three exams are scheduled -- one during the 5<sup>th</sup> week of class; the other during 10<sup>th</sup> week, and the last during the final exam period. The final will be cumulative in the sense that information will build on earlier weeks.

(3) During the final weeks of the term, class members will give oral presentations about their course project. You will work in teams based on your interests, although papers will be written individually. You have a choice between doing an ethnographic analysis (involving observation or participant observation) or a content analysis of the historical accuracy of an event, period, or personage presented in popular culture. You can focus your work on virtually any content area: from popular myths, rituals, superstitions and values, to arts and entertainment, to rituals. You might be interested in studying fan cultures (Trekkies, Sci Fi fans, Anime), or fashion and the meaning of clothing, or theme parks, or tattooing and body art and its meaning, or images of Americans in the foreign press, or shopping as an expression of self, or the changing etiquette of baby showers, or why people go to class reunions...etc. etc. A more detailed handout of this assignment will be given to you early in the semester. The 100 points includes a grade for a paper proposal, an oral presentation, and the final paper draft of a typed, proofed, double-spaced 6 to 8 page paper (excluding field notes). Since the last weeks of class will be devoted to hearing student presentations, I will take attendance.

## **GRADES:**

As in all courses, an "A" represents outstanding/exceptional work; a "B" represents good to very good work; a "C" represents adequate work; a "D" represents a borderline effort, and an "F" represents a failing grade.

### *Superior or "A" (100%-90%) performance:*

I listen carefully when others speak and I volunteer often. I actively participate with enthusiasm and with a positive attitude. My presence makes a positive impact on what we do in class. I always arrive on time to class and I do not leave class early. I always do the assigned homework.

### *Above Average to Average "B" or "C" (89%-70%) performance:*

I volunteer occasionally and generally listen to the professor and others, but sometimes get distracted. I show interest and participate in all activities, sometimes actively, sometimes passively. I sometimes arrive late to class or leave class early. I do most of the assigned homework.

### *Unsatisfactory "D" or "F" (69%-0%) performance:*

I do not pay much attention to classroom activities. I do homework, sleep, and/or read the newspaper during class activities. I am not interested in group activities, I participate

little, and I am distracting to others. I frequently arrive late to class or I leave class early. I rarely do my homework.

### **Grading scale**

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300-270 A (90% and above)

269-240 B (80-89%)

239-210 C (70-79%)

209-180 D (60-69%)

179 and below F

This class will use + and – designations, where a B+ = 87-89.9%; a B= 83.1-86.9%; and a B- = 80-83% and etc.

### **UNIVERSITY POLICY:**

UNIVERSITY POLICIES ON ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND STUDENT CONDUCT WILL BE STRICTLY ENFORCED. PENALTIES FOR CHEATING AND PLAGIARISM RANGE FROM AN “F” (NO CREDIT) ON AN ASSIGNMENT TO AN “F” IN THE COURSE TO EXPULSION FROM THE UNIVERSITY. FOR DEFINITION, SEE PP. 7-10 IN THE FALL 2008 SCHEDULE OF COURSES, OR PP. 58 IN THE UNIVERSITY CATALOG. STUDENTS SHOULD ALSO BE FAMILIAR WITH UNIVERSITY POLICY REGARDING STANDARDS FOR STUDENT CONDUCT (PP. 96 IN THE UNIVERSITY CATALOG).

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES** RECEIVE REASONABLE ACCOMODATION FOR LEARNING AND EVALUATION. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT THE EDUCATIONAL ACCESS CENTER, BELL TOWER ROOM 1541, PHONE 805-437-3331 (V/TTY), EMAIL: [accommodations@csuci.edu](mailto:accommodations@csuci.edu)

### **OTHER POLICY (MINE):**

CLASS POLICY ON **CELL-PHONES AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES** IN CLASS: TURN THEM OFF! I EXPECT STUDENTS WHO ATTEND TO BE ATTENTIVE – THIS MEANS NOT READING THE NEWSPAPER, CARRYING ON A CONVERSATION, DOING WORK FOR OTHER CLASSES, SLEEPING, ETC.

YOU ARE EXPECTED TO BE IN CLASS ON TIME, AND CLASS WILL ALWAYS END ON TIME. IF YOU HAVE A CONFLICTING APPOINTMENT AND NEED TO LEAVE DURING CLASS, PLEASE DO ME THE COURTESY OF LETTING ME KNOW IN ADVANCE.

IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP PACE WITH THE CLASS IF YOU ARE GOING TO BE AWAY FOR A UNIVERSITY-SPONSORED EVENT.

**IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS CANNOT BE MADE UP. EXAMS CANNOT BE RESCHEDULED EXCEPT IN CASE OF SERIOUS ILLNESS OR EMERGENCY.**

Popular Culture Readings and Topics Syllabus through Midterm #1 \*\*

<b>Week Of--</b>	<b>Major Topic--</b>
(1) 8/26-28	Unit I: Definitions and Critique. Introduction to this course: What is Popular Culture? <u>Reading:</u> Gans, Preface and New Introduction; "In Defense of Shameless Pleasures," LA Times, 7/27/08 (Blackboard eReserves)
(2) 9/2-4	Why Study Popular Culture? The Cultural Hierarchy Perspectives on Popular Culture: elitists/alarmists/apologists <u>Reading:</u> Gans, Chapter 1; Steven Johnson, Television; in <i>Everything Bad is Good for You</i> (2005); Jones and Nissenson, <i>Going, Going, Gone</i> (1994).
(3) 9/9-11	Term project options: ethnography vs. content analysis Unit II: History. A Social History of Amusements Conditions necessary to create popular culture <u>Reading:</u> Gans, Chapter 2
(4) 9/16-18	Analyzing Meaning in Popular Culture: Semiotics; Freud; Marx; Feminism and Other Interpretations. History (cont.) <u>Reading:</u> Gans, Chapter 3; Alison Lurie, <i>The Language of Clothes</i>
(5) 9/23-25	Proposals due for term project 9/23 Review for Midterm I <u>Reading:</u> No new reading
(6) 9/30-10/1	Midterm #1 Unit III: Arguments about Globalization and Hegemony <u>Reading:</u> Jenkins, Introduction

- (7) 10/7-9                      Concentration of Media  
Meet in presentation groups 3/4  
Reading:
- (8) 10/14-16                    Stereotypes and Celebrity  
Film: TBA  
Reading:
- (9) 10/21-23                    Unit IV: Taste Publics and Consumption  
Markets and Marketing  
Reading:
- (10) 10/28-30                   Midterm #2: 4/5  
Reading:
- (11) 11/4-6                      Taste Publics (continued)  
Reading:
- (12) 11/11-13                   Unit IV: Impact of Popular Culture  
Reading:
- (13) 11/18-20                   Class Presentations begin
- (14) 11/25                        Class Presentations continue  
THANKSGIVING 11/27
- (15) 12/2-4                      Class Presentations continue  
Exam review

**FINAL EXAM:** Tuesday, December 9, 10:30-12:30 p.m. Final exam will be cumulative

\*\*Syllabus is tentative and subject to change

\*\* Dates are tentative