

English 258: Popular American Culture

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Fall 2013, CRN: 82395, MWF 2:30-3:20pm, Clark 317

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Course Description and Goals

The last couple of decades have revealed a sharp rise in cultural studies courses and departments across Western world campuses. Is popular culture really worthy of scholarly attention? Can it do more than entertain and make money? We will explore this academic debate as we dive into serious, critical study of American popular culture. As an English course, we will still strive to interpret texts and analyze their meaning and potential implications – only we will look at pop culture texts in addition to scholarly criticism as part of the greater goal to interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts. The media and popular texts we come across daily influence much of our lives. In the Internet age (particularly since the rise of Web 2.0 and user-generated sites), we also have more opportunities to comment on, influence, and create our own popular culture. Being aware of how such texts impact our beliefs, values, and cultural identity is critical to understanding ourselves and how we can help affect social change and progress.

Textbooks and Materials

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I. A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*

Misc. Handouts on eCampus (must be printed and brought to class)

Dexter. Season 1. Dir. James Manos, Jr. (DVD; available on eCampus)

True Blood. Season 1. Dir. Alan Ball (DVD; available on eCampus)

Recommended: a 3-ring binder to hold handouts, articles, syllabus, exam reviews, notes, etc

Course Requirements and Policies

- Online Blackboard posts on eCampus = 25% (you will receive a separate handout specifically about discussion questions and posts)
- Midterm exam = 25%
This 50-minute exam will be open-note and consist of mostly short answer questions on readings and class discussion/notes from the first half of the semester.
- Final exam = 25%
This exam will be open-note and consist mostly of short answer questions. It will address material from the second half of the semester.
- Participation and in-class work = 25%
This includes participation in discussion groups, class lectures, performance on in-class quizzes, assignments, discussion questions, etc. Obviously, you must be present to participate and in-class work cannot be made up. We should remember that the health and progress of our class's community relies on open discussion – the free sharing of ideas, points of view, interpretations, and feelings – about the pop culture texts and social issues we encounter. As with any group of this size, we inevitably come from a wide range of backgrounds, histories, experiences, and cultures. Your respectful contributions to class are vital to our community.

Attendance

You will be **allowed 4 absences** TOTAL – there is NO distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” absences, so please save them for when you really need them. **Every absence after 4 will lower your**

final grade by one letter. This INCLUDES EXCUSED absences, so use them wisely! Being more than 10 minutes late for class constitutes an absence. Leaving early, texting, using other technology without my permission, inappropriate talking, or being otherwise engaged during class time can also lead to an absence. Please be both physically and mentally present during class time.

Course Disclaimer

As with all topics we care about deeply, this course is guaranteed to raise questions, pique interest, and probably cause emotions to run deep. In academic settings we must understand that respectfully questioning and challenging an issue is a *healthy* way to broaden our comprehension of the material. Some topics we address are emotionally charged (minstrelsy and racism, the Holocaust, child-child murder) and others are less charged (slasher films, fan culture, Facebook). However we feel about the certain aspects of popular culture, in order to understand it, we will spend as much time cheering and championing pop culture as we will probing the dark recesses, unpleasant memories, and ongoing controversies stuffed in the backs of its closets. We can love and hate certain aspects of it for our own reasons, but we must be able to support those feelings with validity, logic, and evidence. In this course, we will look in detail at several areas that may be **sensitive** for some students: childhood trauma and violence, genocide, graphic murder, racism, overt and queer sexuality, etc. We are a group of **academic adults** and the maturity of much of this course's content reflects this. Pop culture – and real life – is full of difficult social problems and harsh realities that we often *want* to ignore; however, facing them and analyzing how such issues are addressed and represented in pop culture can help us understand what our role is – and can be – in making the world a better place.

Readings and In-Class Discussions

As readers, we all approach a text with our personal agendas and issues. Throughout this semester we will examine controversial materials and our subsequent reactions to them. Hopefully, we will learn various viewpoints from one another so that we will then possess additional skills with which to approach our reading and writing processes. Please be forewarned that this classroom is a safe forum for expressions and opinions, but is NOT a place for unmerited or ill-spirited discussions. *Prejudicial or intolerant opinions* concerning race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other personality elements have *no place* in the classroom. Let's act like adults and have respect and tolerance for varying points of view and each other.

Plagiarism and Cheating

Plagiarism is defined as “material that has been knowingly obtained or copied in whole or part, from the work of others...including (but not limited to) another individual's academic composition (WiP xxi). Cheating refers to “doing academic work for another student, or providing one's own work for another student to copy and submit as his or her own” (WiP xxi). Plagiarism and cheating are forms of academic dishonesty and are never acceptable; they are taken very seriously by both the university and myself. Such behavior typically leads to an F in the course and is reported to the department/university. Please let me know if you're having a crisis and we'll try to work something out before you feel you need to resort to desperate measures such as academic dishonesty.

Special Needs

If you have an issue (such as a learning disability, hearing or vision impairment, etc) that could affect your class performance or productivity, please let me know about this during the first week of class and I will try to accommodate you. Also, be aware of the support services available here on campus through the Office of Accessibility Services, <http://accessibilityservices.wvu.edu>, (304) 293-6700.

Note: *The Hunger Games* is a juvenile/young adult book but it is about 375 pages long. PLEASE be READING this book throughout the beginning weeks so that you may finish it in time for our class discussions. You'll want to start watching the *True Blood* and *Dexter* television episodes early, as well.

Course Schedule: Subject to slight changes as necessary.

Origins, Definitions, Theory

Week 1 (Aug. 19-23)

- Course introduction and syllabus
- Introduction to pop culture; in-class activity
- Intro, cont'd

Week 2 (Aug. 26-30)

- Discuss Danesi chapter (eCampus)
- Danesi, cont'd
- Shakespeare: pop to high culture; discuss Levine's article (eCampus)

Race and Ethnicity

Week 3 (Sept. 2-6)

- NO CLASS – Labor Day
- Historical representations of African Americans: watch *Ethnic Notions* (DVD) in class
- Discuss *Ethnic Notions*

Week 4 (Sept. 9-13)

- Current stereotypes of African Americans: Begin Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (DVD) in class
- *Bamboozled*, cont'd
- Finish *Bamboozled* film

Week 5 (Sept. 16-20)

- Discuss *Bamboozled*
- Discuss *Bamboozled* article (eCampus)
- Intro to reading comix; McCloud excerpts (eCampus)

Week 6 (Sept. 23-27)

- Discuss Spiegelman's *Maus*
- *Maus*, cont'd
- Discuss Ewert's article on *Maus* (eCampus)

Social Class

Week 7 (Sept. 30- Oct. 4)

- Discuss *The Hunger Games* novel
- Discuss *The Hunger Games*, cont'd
- Midterm exam review

Week 8 (Oct. 7-11)

- **MIDTERM EXAM**
- Begin *The Hunger Games* (DVD)
- *The Hunger Games* film, cont'd

Week 9 (Oct. 14-18)

- NO CLASS: Fall Break
- Finish *The Hunger Games* film
- *The Hunger Games*: novel v. film

Week 10 (Oct. 21-25)

- TV's working-class male buffoon: discuss Butsch's article (eCampus)
- Watch and discuss *Family Guy* episode (in class)
- Celebrity culture (eCampus reading) ; Last Day to Drop

Gender and Sexuality

Week 11 (Oct. 28-Nov. 1)

- Fandom and gender: *Misery* (DVD) clips in class

- Discuss Jensen's article (eCampus)
- Intro to the Horror Genre (handout on eCampus)

Week 12 (Nov. 4-8)

- The Slasher Film: discuss Clover's article (eCampus)
- Watch clips from *Halloween*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Scream*; discuss
- Queer/gothic: interview vampire, other examples

Week 13 (Nov. 11-15)

- Vampire in popular culture
- *True Blood* clips and discussion
- *True Blood*, cont'd

American Vigilantes

Week 14 (Nov. 18-22)

- Vigilante in American culture
- *Dexter* clips & discussion
- Discuss Dexter article (eCampus)

Thanksgiving Break: Nov. 23-30

Week 15 (Dec. 2-6)

- Contemporary/participatory pop culture- online, web 2.0
- Practical application: Song analysis in class
- Discuss students' song analyses

Week 16 (Dec. 9)

- LAST DAY of class: Final Exam Review and evaluations

Week 17

- **FINAL EXAM:** Monday Dec. 16
8:30am-10am in our regular classroom