

READING POPULAR CULTURE • ANG 1005 • FALL 2011

INSTRUCTOR:

Frederik Byrn Køhlert

OFFICE:

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OFFICE HOURS:

Tuesdays, 12:30-14.00, or by appointment

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CLASS HOURS:

Tuesdays, 8:30-11:30

ROOM:

B-4285, Pavillon 3200, rue Jean-Brillant



COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to the study of popular culture. Dismissed throughout its history as propaganda, triviality, valueless entertainment or a tool of mass deception, the field of popular culture is contested precisely *because* it is popular, and its consumers have been called everything from couch potatoes to cultural dupes. Yet despite continuing skepticism about its value, popular culture remains the main cultural presence in modern societies, and the important question to ask is therefore what exactly it can teach us not only about the world, but also about ourselves.

The course will challenge an unreflective approach to popular culture based on emotional appeal and consumption, and we will instead apply a critical framework that allows us to investigate the meanings, values, tastes and aesthetics of its various forms. Examining the history, theory and practice of studying popular culture, class readings will consist of both theoretical material and several examples of film, comics, music, literary fiction, television and internet culture, all of which will demonstrate the field's ability to engage with contemporary issues of political and societal importance.

REQUIRED READING

- JOHN STOREY: *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (fifth edition)
- CARL WILSON: *Celine Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*
- MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI: *House of Leaves*
- STEPHENIE MEYER: *Twilight*
- CHESTER BROWN: *Paying For It*
- KEN DAHL: *Monsters*

All books are available at the university bookstore. Other required readings are available online through StudiUM.

GRADING BREAKDOWN

10%	Participation
10%	First in-class test
15%	Second in-class test
20%	Weekly questions (10 assignments of 2% each)
20%	First essay (3-4 pages)
25%	Second essay (5-6 pages)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

PARTICIPATION: This course is discussion-based; your preparation and participation is crucial to its success. Plan to attend all class meetings, and come to class prepared to discuss the week's assigned readings. Your participation grade will depend on the quantity, as well as the quality, of your in-class contributions.

IN-CLASS TESTS: The two in-class tests will focus on both primary and secondary readings. They will test your knowledge and understanding of the issues we have discussed in class, and will include questions on any of the texts on the syllabus that we have already covered in class. If you read the texts and participate in class discussion, you should have no problem with the tests.

WEEKLY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Each week you will write 3 discussion questions that collectively engage with all the readings for that week in one way or another. The questions should be open-ended, and while one question per text might be sufficient, you get extra points for questions that engage with two or more texts and point out connections or differences between them. Try to consider how one

text might illuminate your interpretation of another, or how they seem to offer different perspectives on the same ideas. You should then be prepared to ask these questions in class, in order to facilitate discussion.

The questions should be entered on the course website on StudiUM, and are due at 22:00 on the night before class; the site will automatically close for new entries at this time. Each set of questions is worth 2% of your final grade, and you will receive 2 points for excellent, 1 point for satisfactory, and zero points for unsatisfactory or a missed assignment. Of the 12 weekly assignments, your 2 lowest grades will not count towards your final grade.

ESSAYS: You will write two essays on topics of your choice, although they should concern themselves with an analysis of a primary text. I encourage you to write on something (book, comic, film, TV show, etc.) we have discussed in class. If you want to write on something else, I require you to come talk to me to discuss the topic and get my approval. If you fail to do so, you will fail the assignment. You do not need to get approval to write on something we have discussed in class, but you're always welcome to meet with me to discuss your ideas. Your essay should be critical and argumentative; that is, it should have a thesis, and be an attempt to convince the reader of something. If you are unsure of how to do this, please arrange to meet with me.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

ESSAY FORMAT AND LENGTH: All work must be typed and use standard formatting: 2.5 cm margins, black ink, double-spaced Times New Roman size 12 font, with your name, the instructor's name, class number and the *due* date (*not* the date of composition) in the upper left hand corner of the page. Page numbers in the upper right hand corner. Remember to change your word processor's spell checker to English, print on only one side of the paper, and *staple in the upper left corner*. A stapler can be bought at the bookstore for less than what you spent on lunch yesterday. Buy one. Page-length requirements are just that: *requirements*. The works cited page does not count toward the page-length requirement. If your essay is shorter than the required page length, or fails to comply with all of these requirements, I will consider it an incomplete assignment and your grade for that essay will be zero. Please note that I have graded many essays in my life, and that it is easy for me to detect overly large margins or other attempts to make your essay appear longer than it is.

DUE DATES: I expect you to turn in essays on time. Essays are considered late if not ready by the beginning of class on the assigned due date. If you are concerned that you will not be able to make a due date, contact me in advance, and I may negotiate an extension. I will not grant extensions the day the assignment is due or after a due date has passed; late essays lose 10 points/100 of their grade for each day late, including weekends and holidays. I will not accept a paper that is more than three days late.

Absolutely no work will be accepted over email.

READINGS: You should always bring the scheduled texts to class with you. You are responsible for printing out all reading assignments that are posted on the course website. You should read all assigned texts closely and actively, and doing so will probably mean marking up the text or taking notes in a separate notebook. I encourage you to jot down questions and thoughts while you read and bring these notes to class.

LAPTOPS & ELECTRONIC DISTRACTIONS: Just like at the movie theater, I ask that you turn off all electronic devices when you come to class.

OTHER INFORMATION

COURSE WEBSITE ON STUDIUM: This syllabus is available in electronic form on the course website, which you can access through the “mon portail” link on the university website or directly at <https://studium.umontreal.ca>. The website also includes important information about essays and plagiarism, as well as several required readings (marked on the syllabus with “StudiUM”), either as links or downloadable in pdf format. Finally, most weeks has a list of links to recommended supplementary articles, videos, radio broadcasts and other material related to the week’s topic and which I expect you to at least familiarize yourself with, perhaps in the form of skimming if you are pressed for time. You should make it a habit to check the course website regularly.

TEXTBOOK COMPANION WEBSITE: Our main textbook for this class is John Storey’s *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, which is excellent introduction to the topics we will be discussing in class. The book has a companion website with study questions, a glossary, links and, most valuably, a series of short self-assessment quizzes that allows you to test your understanding of each chapter. I highly recommend you check these out after reading. The website can be found here: <http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/storey>

OFFICE HOURS: You are highly encouraged to meet with me individually to better understand my expectations, discuss paper topics, and/or receive feedback on your papers. Either drop by during my office hours or make an appointment if you need to come at a different time.

PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented, including information from websites and other material obtained on the Internet. If in doubt, document. Please consult <http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/plagiat/> for a definition of plagiarism and information on how to document your sources. It is your own responsibility to educate yourself about these matters; ignorance about how to use sources is not a valid excuse if you get caught plagiarizing.

Please see the course website on StudiUM for more information about how I expect you to document your sources.

In cases where plagiarism has been clearly established, the case will be handed over to the university's committee for academic integrity. Once that happens, it is out of my hands, and the standard penalty is automatic failure of the course and in some cases expulsion from the university.

Note that I am very good at detecting plagiarism. If you can find a source to plagiarize, I can find it *faster*.

Please see me if you have any questions about your use of sources.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM ME

You may expect that I will come to class prepared and on time, that I will assign a reasonable (if rigorous) amount of reading, that I will give you sufficient time to complete assignments, and that I will give timely feedback on submitted work. Our schedule is somewhat subject to change; however, you can also expect that I will not be changing the schedule heedlessly over the term. You may expect that I will make myself available via email and during weekly office hours to discuss anything related to the course.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING LIST

INTRODUCTION

September 6: Movie (in-class): *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*

1. WHAT IS (POPULAR) CULTURE?

September 13: Storey: Chapter 1 & 2

2. MASS CULTURE AND ITS CRITICS

September 20: Storey: Chapter 4
Douglas Kellner: "Culture Industries" (StudiUM)
Molly Young: "Sweatpants in Paradise: The Exciting World of Immersive Retail" (StudiUM)

3. CULTURALISM AND THE VALUE OF POPULAR CULTURE

September 27: Storey: Chapter 3
Stuart Hall: "Encoding, Decoding" (StudiUM)
Alan McKee: "Introduction" (StudiUM)
Steven Johnson: "Watching TV Makes You Smarter" (StudiUM)

4. TASTE AND THE AESTHETICS OF POPULAR CULTURE

October 4: Stephenie Meyer: *Twilight*
Glen Thomas: "The Best Australian Romance Novelist: Emma Darcy" (StudiUM)
First in-class test

October 11: Carl Wilson: *Celine Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*

5. PSYCHOANALYSIS AND DESIRE

- October 18: Storey: Chapter 5
Movie (in-class): *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*
First essay due
- October 25: No class

6. ISSUES OF RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY AND THE BODY

- November 1: Storey: Chapter 7, pages 135-160
Chester Brown: *Paying for It*
- November 8: Storey: Chapter 7, pages 160-165 & Chapter 8
Paul Burston: "Just a Gigolo? Narcissism, Nellyism and the 'New Man' Theme" (StudiUM)
Andrew O'Hehir: "What We Talk About When We Talk About 'The Help'" (StudiUM)
- November 15: Ken Dahl: *Monsters*. Potential author visit by Ken Dahl.
Second in-class test

7. POSTMODERNISM

- November 22: Storey: Chapter 9
- November 29: Storey: Chapter 6
Mark Z. Danielewsky: *House of Leaves*

8. INTERNET CULTURE, OWNERSHIP, APPROPRIATION AND FANDOM

- December 6: Storey: Chapter 10
Jenny Turner: "The Beautiful Undead" (StudiUM)
Rod Hilton: "Twilight: The Abridged Script" (StudiUM)
Movie (in-class): *Twilight*
- December 13: **Final paper due in my mailbox by noon**