

**UNST 254A—001/44347 SOPHOMORE INQUIRY: POPULAR CULTURE**

**Dr. Grace Dillon. 725-8144 / [dillong@pdx.edu](mailto:dillong@pdx.edu) / CH 117Q. Office Hours: MW 12:45-1:45 p.m. and by appointment.**

**Class meets MW 2-3:15 p.m. / CH 225**

**Mentor Section UNST 254B—001, M 4-4:50 p.m. / CH 147.**

**Mentor Section UNST 254B —002, W 4-4:50 p.m. / CH 147.**

**Mentor Section UNST 254B —003, W 1-1:50 p.m. / CH 159.**

**Mentor: Jeff Bailey [bailevj@pdx.edu](mailto:bailevj@pdx.edu)**

**Web Site Link: <http://web.pdx.edu/~dillong/popcult/>**



**Course Description and Goals:** Critics often associate popular culture with low art because the general public seems to prefer Austin Powers to Artaud and pulp fiction to the classics. The term "popular culture" in fact suggests a contrast with an "unpopular culture," implying that most people actually dislike what is not popular because it is high art. From these assumptions, one can argue that choosing to study popular culture involves a choice to abandon something that is more refined and therefore more worthy of critical attention. In this view, the study of popular culture becomes evidence of the dumbing down of America. Conversely, one can argue that such a claim simply reflects an elitist stance and that embracing popular culture as a topic of scholarship provides evidence of a welcomed move away from elitism. As we choose to study critically aspects of popular culture, we will confront these issues throughout the quarter.

This course examines how popular culture, “the cultures of everyday life” (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* xi) “offers a common ground”, “is an arena of consent and resistance” (xi) and possibly is “the most visible and pervasive level in a given society” (Petracca and Sorapure, *Common Culture*, p. 3). In the process of myth reading and choosing and decoding the signs of everyday life, course participants will observe, research, and write about cultural phenomena and gain experience with methodologies, such as semiotics, that are employed in cultural studies. In addition, hegemonic theory, “the concept” used “to explain and explore relations of power articulated in terms of class” will be expanded to “include, for example, gender, race, meaning, and pleasure” (xiv). Ultimately, the course emphasizes the idea that artifacts of popular culture are in fact “texts” that we should analyze in order to determine their creators’ intentions. The end goal is to gain control of, rather than be controlled by, the texts of popular culture.



**Requirements:** Final Exam: 30%; Panel Presentation (1), individual Panel Essay (1) and Audience-Response (7): 20%; Research Essay: 25%; Attendance and Participation in main and grad mentor sessions (includes Public Radio project, group workshops, dialogue journal responses as needed, or class-assigned analytical journals to readings): 25%.

**Final exam:** Your final exam will consist of three parts: a section requiring you to define key terms with stipulative examples provided for each and two sections requiring you to write two essays.

**Panel Presentation:** You will join a generally four-five member group and collaborate on a 25-30-minute

presentation covering a specific self-directed and focused topic selected from the ten general topics noted in class: t.v., postmodernism, advertising, cyberculture, film, music, sports, leisure, fads and fashion, and appropriation of culture. There will be **8 groups, two for each session** documented in your course schedule. Start thinking now about your preferences. You will start forming your group and choosing your topic by the second grad mentor session. Keep in mind that you will be attaching an **individual panel essay** to your final work for this project.

**Audience Response:** When other panels present their views on the topics covered in class, you will record your reactions to the presentations using a separate audience response evaluation form for each group and turn them in for review by Jeff and me as well as by the groups themselves.

**Dialogue Response Journal (1 ½-2 typed pages each):** These will be announced throughout the quarter and given in both sessions, and tend to be questions and comments as you peruse and analyze the assigned readings or may be responses to directed questions given the session before. While the purpose of this journal is to explore in a stronger experiential sense, popular culture as truly "everyday life", be sure to apply the principles and theories you have acquired from the readings in the main and mentor sessions. Note that a shorter version of this will be jotted down in class (not necessarily typed) and will be termed **analytical journals**.

**This Portland Life Public Radio Storytelling Project:** Note that this project is an opportunity to put some of the theory of this course into action in a more public forum, in many ways also reflecting the current 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture studies' revitalization of the 1960s political ethos of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England, where theory was understood as being strategic, performative, and directed towards solving important, pressing economic, social, and political problems. Jeff, your mentor, will be working closely with you on this project throughout the quarter.

**Research Essay:** You will also write an individual research essay using the proper MLA format on any topic covered in our class or on pertinent popular culture themes. Ideally, your research essay will draw on the information you gained along with the collaborative connections you made during class discussions and lectures. Note that the thesis proposal, annotated bibliography, and rough drafts will be due earlier in Britt's sessions and are specified on your research handout.

**ATTENDANCE:** Because this class emphasizes group workshops and interactive discussions, absences are discouraged. **Each absence after the first three lowers your grade one level.** If you miss more than two weeks' worth of classes, you should consider dropping the course and retaking it when your schedule permits. If you arrive late or leave early, you may be counted absent for the day. Please notify Jeff or me if you must miss class for some reason. Discussions are encouraged and analytical journals or dialogue journal responses may come up in class. These responses will aid you in partnered discussions or quick workshops at the beginning of the session and in synthesizing critical theoretical material. In sorting out the meaning of each article provide your own concrete popular culture examples that are relevant to the areas noted for that particular session.

**The Right to be Successful:** Students with disabilities who may require accommodations are encouraged to contact the PSU Disability Resources Center and the professor at the beginning of the term.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:** The main readings for this course are supplied in your Smart Copy packet located on 6<sup>th</sup>



Avenue.

**Recommended Texts for broad overview of relevant critical theory:** 1) *Cultural Studies: From Theory to Action*. Edited by Pepi Leistyna. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Press, 2005. 2) Fuery, Patrick and Nick Mansfield. *Cultural Studies and Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 3) Guins, Raiford and Cruz, Omayra Zaragoza. *Popular Culture: A Reader*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005. 4) Storey, John. *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003. 5) Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

**COURSE SCHEDULE: The day-to-day schedule follows. Note that you should complete reading assignments by the day on which they are listed.** Pck.=Smart Copy packet.

### WEEK ONE: Screening Avenues

M 1/8 Introduction to course. Welcome to popular culture!

W 1/10 Mark Schaefermeyer's "Film Criticism" and Robert Stam's "Film and the Postcolonial" and "the Poetics and Politics of Postmodernism" (same selection). (handouts in class session before) Discussion of theoretical approaches, political economy, and ritual with film clip samples in class. Group discussion includes either film clips shown in class or what you feel qualifies as more recent blockbusters or award-winning films.

Mentor Sessions M 1/8 and W 1/10: Introduction to mentor session. Bring a cultural artifact to class that represents you (e.g. a skateboard, toy, magazine, cd) Semiotic approach. Background reading: Sonia Maasik, et. al., "The Semiotic Method". Discuss This Portland Life Project. Welcome to Popular Culture questionnaire.

### WEEK TWO: Fake News: The Word!



M 1/15 Holiday. Campus closed.

W 1/17 Readings: Robert W. McChesney's "Global Media, Neoliberalism, and Imperialism" and Robert Scholes' "Intertextuality". (Pck. 1 and 2) Clips of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Parody, intertextuality, class, and transnational exchanges, negotiations, and crosscurrents.

Mentor Sessions: W 1/17 Workshop on forms of intertextuality of TV selections of choice. Public radio project discussion begins. ( Typical M Mentor sessions welcome to come.)

### WEEK THREE: The Imperial Gaze and Ghosts of the Machine

M 1/22 Readings: Michael Omi, "In Living Color: Race and American Culture," Antonio Gramsci's "Hegemony" and Howard Winant's "Racial Politics in the Twenty-first Century (Pck. 3, 4, and 5) *The Tyra Banks* episode. Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy referenced. "Corporate multiculturalism" and neoracism. Race, class, and appropriation from an ethnic studies perspective.

W 1/24 Readings: Jean Baudrillard's "The Precession of Simulacra" and "Simulacra and SF" (Pck 6) and Toshiya Ueno's "Japanimation and Techno-Orientalism" available online at: <http://www.t0.or.at/ueno/japan.htm>

Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* referenced. *Ghost in the Shell*, *Ghost in the Shell 2*, *The Matrix*, *Shrek*, *Vanilla Sky*, *Memento*. and *The Kung-Fu Hustle* referenced. Hyperreality, the desert of the real, Disneyfication and techno-orientalism.

Mentor sessions M 1/22 and W 1/24: Escaping the Textbook workshop. Public radio project discussion continues. **Select group for panel presentations by this session.**



**WEEK FOUR: Down the Rabbithole or the In-Front-of-Us**

M 1/29 Readings: James Newman's "Manufacturing Fun" and Chris Crawford's "Two Cultures. No Hits. No Runs." (Pck. 7 and 8) Video games, franchisements, indie game developers, and interactive storytelling. **Research paper: thesis and prospectus due.**

W 1/31 Readings: Carl Freedman's "The Critical Dynamic: SF and Utopia," William Gibson's "Gernsback Continuum," and Chereene Sherrard's "The Quality of Sand." (Pck. 9,10, 11) Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Rintaro's *Metropolis*, *The Island*, and *Sky Captain and the World Tomorrow* referenced. Ray-gun gothic transmogrified , transatlantic triangles "marooned," and the "no-where" of utopia engaged.

Mentor Sessions M 1/29 and W 1/31: Techno-surrealism, steampunk and diesel punk, and forms of hyperreality. This Portland of Life workshop on themes and stories. Come prepared to discuss your ideas!

**WEEK FIVE: Visualizing between the Panels and the Comic Book Guy**

M 2/5 Readings: Henry Jenkins' " Television Fans" and Barish Ali's "The Violence of Criticism: The Mutilation and Exhibition History *From Hell*." (Pck. 12, and 13). The transformation of graphic novels and comics into film. *Batman Begins*, *Tank Girl*, *Spiderman* (epic series), *X-Men*, and *Sin City*. *Unbreakable*, *Galaxy Quest*, *High Fidelity*, *Nurse Betty*, and *Starship Troopers* also referenced. Rogue fans and comic metanarrative. **Annotated bibliography on research paper due.**



W 2/7 **Panel presentations (2)** on either cyberculture or hyperreality, postmodernism, or TV.

Mentor Sessions M 2/5 and W 2/7: Active consumerism and rogue fandom. Using the software Audacity.

**WEEK SIX: Reification, Culture Industry's Co-optations and Media Morphing of the Body Image**

M 2/12 Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno's "Culture Industry." (Pck. 14) Ad workshop on metonymy.

W 2/14 Susan Bordo's "beauty (re) discovers the male body" (Pck. 15) Feminization, gender and image shifts, and global homogenization. Feel free to bring a fashion magazine, preferably filled with international models, to class. Clips of *Zoolander* and *Tank Girl*.

Mentor Sessions M 2/12 and W 2/14: Read Mark Dery's "The Empire of Signs" available online at <http://www.well.com:70/0/cyberpunk/cultjam.txt> and his recent culture jamming on his floating signifier blog, October 28, 2005: [http://www.markdery.com/archives/blog/floating\\_signifier/index.html#000051](http://www.markdery.com/archives/blog/floating_signifier/index.html#000051). Culture jamming, internet activism, and adbusters. Writing Workshop: Peer review. **Bring the rough draft copy of your research paper.**

### WEEK SEVEN: Globalization and Postmodern Schizophrenia



M 2/19 Frederic Jameson's "The waning of affect" and Sherif Hetata's "Dollarization, Fragmentation, and God." (Pck. 16 and 17) Postcolonial theory, transnationalism and neo-colonialism. *Fight Club*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* referenced.

W 2/21 **Panel presentations (2) on either ads or film.**

Mentor Sessions M 2/19 and W 2/21: Reading: Mike Davis's "Fortress LA: The Militarization of Space" and *Ecology of Fear*. (Pck. 18) Architecture, urban planning, and Disney's Celebration.

### WEEK EIGHT: Gothic organicism and the Carnavalesque and the Pith and the Rind,



M 2/26 Reading: Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's "From Carnival to Transgression". (Pck.19) and clips of *Hannibal*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Blade*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, *Dead Man*, *Spawn*, *Ravenous*, *The Shadow of the Vampire* and *Shaun of the Dead* referenced. Encoding and decoding humour and horror. **Research Essay (5-6 pages, 5 sources minimum) due in main class.**

W 2/28 Reading: Ismail Xavier's "Historical Allegory." (Pck. 20) Epic film. "Circumflectere cursus." The long journey and Way home. *The Cathedral*, *The Lord of the Ring* series, *Gladiator* and the *Rome* HBO series, *Troy*, *Alexander*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and *Kill Bill Volumes One and Two*. From epic hero storytelling to the consciousness of a national allegory. The psychomachia of private and public virtues. accompanying transnational imaginaries. Edward Said's "Invention, Memory, and Place" referenced.

Mentor Sessions Monday M 2/26 and W 2/28: Final exam review.

**WEEK NINE: *Ruah*, Wind Spirits, and *Wiindigo* and the Vatic Impulse**

M 3/5 Reading: Carolyn Podruchny's "Werewolves and Windigos: Narratives of Cannibal Monsters in French-Canadian Voyageur Oral Tradition" (available online, Academic Premier Database). Antonia Bird's *Raveonous*, Christopher Gans' *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, Grant Harvey's *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning*, and Andrew Raj Berzins and Norma Bailey's *Cowboys and Indians: The J. J. Harper Story*. Postmodernism renewed in postindian territory. Intimate intersections, forbidden frontiers, and the *wiindigo* spirit.



W 3/7 **Panel presentations (2) on either film or music.**

Mentor Sessions M 3/5 and W 3/7 : Bring in a song lyric (with CD, etc.) to share that you feel qualifies as poetry for you.

**WEEK TEN: The Aesthetics of our Plastic World, and Beyond**

M 3/12 Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan's "Modeling Authenticity" and Cornel West's "Black Postmodernist Practices." (Pck. 21 and 22) Music, aura and authenticity, choreography, and "MTV heuristics." Samples of MTV videos and *Rage Against the Machine* documentaries. The globalization of Hip-Hop, postmodern tenets renewed, political activism, and cultural appropriation in musical circles.

W 3/14 **Panel presentations (2) on sports, leisure, fads and fashion, or appropriation of culture.**

Mentor Sessions M 3/12 and W 3/14: Public radio presentation and discussion. End-of-quarter celebration.

**Final Exam Schedule:** Monday, March 19, 12:30-1:20 p.m. **Take-home final exam due.**