

University of Western Ontario
English 2017
Reading Popular Culture
September 2014- April 2015

Instructor: Dr. Nigel Joseph

Office: TBA

Class hours: Monday 10.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m. Classroom: SH-3345
 Wednesday 10.30 a.m. – 11.30 a.m. Classroom: SH-3345

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Required texts: Coursepack (will be available at Western Book Store). **Please bring the coursepack to every class.** Note: A lot of the material will be presented in class on Powerpoint, and later on SAKAI. However, **not all** the material that is presented on Powerpoint will appear on SAKAI, so regular attendance is strongly recommended.

Course description:

In this course, we pay attention to the way pop culture can address our deepest desires as well as trigger our deepest fears: often both at once. We explore conservative condemnations of the “trashiness” of pop culture as well as analyses that emphasize its democratic potential and capacity to defuse conflict, and we examine the way pop culture alienates us as well as draws us into new communities. The course encourages us to look at representations (films, books, advertisements) as well as practices (shopping, being fans, modifying our appearance). We examine the contemporary obsession with an ideal bodily type characterized by slimness, and we explore the way body-modifying practices like piercing, tattooing, and cosmetic surgery attempt to conform to or subvert mainstream norms. We look at the ideological underpinnings of a typical suspenseful Hollywood action blockbuster; we explore the reasons for the popularity of the relatively new genre of the superhero film; and we look at some influential theorists’ arguments about how we watch films and why we get the kinds of pleasure we do from watching them. We explore the new kinds of connectivity as well as the new forms of alienation and separation made available through the new social media; we look at the way new forms of distraction and new patterns of civility and incivility are emerging from our shared experiences on the Internet; and we explore new styles of listening to music, together and alone.

Assessment

Final exam	35%
Mid-year exam	30%
In-class assignment	10%
Assignment	20% (1000 words)
Attendance and participation	5%

The two exams will require you to write short essays on topics discussed in class as well as answer a multiple choice question. Tests and exams must be written by hand. No laptops/electronic devices will be permitted, except with special permission. No notes or notebooks may be consulted during the examination.

The in-class assignment should be completed in one hour. The assignment will consist of a short essay and an objective-type (multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, match-the-following etc) test. For the take-home assignment you can use material from the cou

Office of the Academic Dean. Such documentation must be submitted by the student directly to the appropriate Faculty Dean's Office and not to the instructor. It will be the **Dean's Office** that will determine if accommodation is warranted. In general, any absence for legitimate reasons will be dealt with by re-weighting the term work grade accordingly or by arranging make-up tests/examinations.

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western:

<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

University policy on plagiarism:

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing, using footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence. Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

<http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholoff.pdf>. All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (link to Turnitin.com website: <http://www.turnitin.com>.)

Class schedule

This is a flexible schedule: if the discussion is interesting or the class takes longer than anticipated, class will spill over into the next hour or week. In general, however, we will stay on track. Materials on which the lectures are based will be either in the coursepack or on Powerpoint.

Sep 8, 10	Introduction: Popular and high culture, conservative critique and cultural populism, brief history of approaches to "culture": Arnold, Leavis, Frankfurt School; desire, sexuality (Plato, Freud, Foucault); discipline and self-definition; the body and popular culture.
Sep 15, 17, 22, 24, 29	Adorno, Benjamin, Healy, Bourdieu, Ang, High culture/low culture; conservative critique of popular culture; radical defences of popular culture; cultural capital; television viewing and the destruction of reading skills; guilty pleasures
Oct 1, 6, 8, 15, 20	Ideology (and desire): ideology (Marx, Althusser); ideological analyses of popular films; the long shadow of the Western; individualism, averageness, taciturnity, American exceptionalism and vigilantism in action blockbusters In-class assignment Oct 21 (10%):

Oct 22, 27, 29, Nov 3, 5, 10, 12, 17	Looking good and the spectacle of the body; the aesthetic of the slim body; advertising, looking slim and eating disorders that attend the pressure to look slim; Bordo , Kilbourne (anorexia and deep ideology, or just advertising?); the body and what we do to it: tattooing, piercing, cosmetic surgery and the “real” body; cutting up women: Jeffreys, Gimlin, Pitts ; tattooing and piercing : trauma or therapy? exercise and women; gym culture; men and the gaze; impersonality and the importance of the surface; what is authenticity anyway?
Nov 19, 24, 26, Dec 1, 3	The superhero film: politics, ideology, pleasure; the uncanny double and the modern superhero.
	Mid-year examination (30%)
Jan 5, 7, 12, 14, 19, 21, 26	Theories about why and how we watch films; Mulvey and the gaze; Butler and performativity; Creed , abjection, and horror; the domestication of the vampire (Twilight; True Blood); new mixed genres of monsters.
Jan 28, Feb 2,	The mall: Rushkoff , Kosinski, shopping malls and planned seduction; shopping and the spectacle; shopping for goods that define one; shopping as celebration of capitalism and consumerism; worshipping consumerism together (Durkheim).
Feb 4, 9, 11,	Fans and fan behavior; are you a fan or an aficionado? fandom and fan communities.
	Reading Week Feb 16-20
Feb 23, 25,	The concert and the listener with headphones; rock music, the spectacle of the concert, and the audience as community.
March 2, 4, 9	Privatized music and the fragmentation of taste; the Ipod, listening together alone; Adorno, Kassabian, Rey Chow, Assignment due March 4th (20%)
March 11, 16, 18	The Internet and other new media: profound distraction or new routes to community? Dreyfus on remoteness, distraction, and the disembodied tele-teacher.
March 23, 25, 30, April 1, 3,	Disembodied-ness, civility, netiquette, distraction , and new communities on the net: Kingwell, Yus.
April 6, 8	Review