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English 264

Reading Popular Culture

This course introduces students to the theoretical, methodological and historical problems, tools and concerns facing popular culture studies today, with an especial emphasis on the ways in which popular culture studies and theory has shaped and been shaped by literary history and its study. While we consider a range of texts and media that seem to fit (at least at first) uneasily within the walls of the University—including video games, comics, television, and web sites—we will consider how “culture” is defined and how its “highs” and “lows” are both policed and challenged. As part of this larger goal to rethink the relationship between traditional “high culture” texts, such as poetry, and “low” or popular culture texts, such as comic strips, we will focus one unit on an earlier historical period—“High Modernism”—when the relationship between mainstream and elite culture was under pressure in ways that might illuminate our own “culture wars.”

[Note: all essay readings in course packet available from Grade A Notes; all other books available at SBX Books; all screenings will be in-class as well as available for private screenings on closed reserve in the Main Library]

I: What is “popular” “culture,” and should it be “studied”?

Week 1

- T: Introduction
Th: Raymond Williams, “The Analysis of Culture” (1961); Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’” (1981)

Week 2

- T: Michel de Certeau, “The Practice of Everyday Life” (1984)
Screening: *The Simpsons* (1989-)
Th: Simon Firth, “Contemporary Culture and the Humanities” (1993); Henry Jenkins, et al., “Defining Popular Culture” (2002)
F: *Research exercise 1 due*: locate and compare a “mainstream” and an “academic” discussion of popular culture

Unit 2: Popular Culture/ High Culture: the case of “Modernism”

Week 3

- T: F.R. Leavis, "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture" (1930); T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" (1922); Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice Cream" (1922); William Carlos Williams, "The rose is obsolete" (1923); Hart Crane, "Chaplinesque" (1926)
- Th: Walter Benjamin, from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935)

Week 4

- T: *Screening: Charlie Chaplin, City Lights* (1931)
- Th: George Herriman, *Krazy Kat* (1927-28)
- F: *Research exercise 2 due: a formal case study of one periodical or newspaper from the 1920s 1930s*
- Online quiz 1 due by Sunday at 5PM*

Unit 3: Contemporary Popular Cultures 1—Television

Week 5

- T: *Screening: Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003); Horace Newcomb, "Popular Television Criticism"
- Th: Alan McKee, "Fandom (Buffy the Vampire Slayer)"

Week 6

- T: Graeme Burton, "Critical Approaches to Television Studies" (2000); *Screening: Ozzie and Harriet* (1952)
- Th: Pierre Bourdieu, from *On Television* (1998)
- F: *Research exercise 3 due: using one of the critical approaches outlined in our reading, perform a critical overview of the first 3 episodes of any television show available on dvd or video*
- Online quiz 2 due by Sunday at 5PM*

Unit 4: Contemporary Popular Cultures 2—Video Games

Week 7

- T: Mark J. P. Wolf, "Formal Aspects of the Video Game" (2001); *Screening: The Sims* (2000), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002)
- Th: Chris Crawford, "Interactive Storytelling" (2001); Eku Wand, "Interactive Storytelling" (2002)

Week 8

- T: Alison McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games" (2003); *Screening, Zelda: Windwaker* (2003); *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003)
- Th: Sacha A. Howells, "Watching a Game, Playing a Movie: When Media Collide" (2002)
- F: *Writing exercise due*: write a formal analysis of how space, time, narrative, and genre are deployed in one video or computer game of your choice.

Online quiz 3

Unit 5: Contemporary Popular Cultures 3—Comics and Graphic Novels

Week 9

- T: Stan Lee & Mike Ditko, *Amazing Spider-Man* (1961); Michael Bendis, *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2001); Brian Bradford Wright, from *Comic Nation* (2001)
- Th: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (1993); Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (1998)

Week 10

- T: McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (continued); Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000)
- Th: Conclusion: the future of popular culture studies.

F: *Annotated bibliography due*: 3-4 secondary sources to be used in support of final project

Final paper (5-7 pages) due Wednesday of final week

Final exam

Required texts

Course Packet at Grade A Notes

Michael Bendis, Ultimate Spider-man: Volume 1 (2001)
George Herriman, Krazy Kat, 1927-28 (2002)
Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, Amazine Spider-Man: Volume 1 (1994)
Daniel Clowes, Ghost World (1998)
Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics (1993)
Chris Ware, Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth (2000)