

Are We What We Like? Popular Culture and Identity

First-Year Seminar 103.01

Spring 2012

TR 10:50-12:05 Robert Scott Small 250

Dr. Hector Qirko
Office Hours: TR 9:15-10:15 am,
3:15-4:15 pm, and MWF by appt.

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Course description: “What kinds of music do you like?” is a common question, and we ask it because answers tell us a great deal more about people than just what pleases their ear. Similarly, other aspects of popular culture (movies, television, clothing, food, games, jokes, etc.) tell us who people are and what they stand for, and our own preferences in these areas reflect in part what we want to communicate about ourselves to others. This seminar explores anthropological approaches to understanding the role of popular culture in shaping identity and the means through which individuals and groups accept, reject, transform, and manipulate aspects of popular culture to achieve social, economic, and political goals.

Learning objectives:

1. Familiarity with appropriate data, information and knowledge-gathering techniques and research skills in cultural anthropology.

Anthropology is at its core the study of human similarities and differences, and cultural anthropology theory and method in particular deal directly with culture as a process, characteristics of cultural groups, and social identity formation and maintenance. In addition, folklore studies have long been an important concern in anthropology, and more recently anthropologists and others have conducted research specifically in popular culture as well. This seminar will therefore introduce you to fundamental theory, methods, and research in anthropology by means of cultural domains that I hope you will find interesting and relevant. In addition, two assignments will provide you with opportunities to begin to learn first-hand how to conduct anthropological research. In the first, you will analyze a current identity-related trend in popular culture through the collection of mass media-based data (internet, newspapers, television, etc.). In the second, you will conduct ethnographic research to explore how individuals make use of an aspect of popular culture for identity-related purposes. Both projects will result in written papers and presentations that detail research methods as well findings as they relate to the concepts and issues discussed in the course.

2. Using appropriate critical thinking skills and problem-solving techniques in a variety of contexts.

This seminar will require you to read, analyze, and discuss a variety of readings related to the topic. In addition, as noted above, the two research assignments will result in written papers and oral presentations. Research proposals and drafts will be turned in on specified dates in order for you to receive feedback on your work, and additional drafts can be submitted at any time prior to paper due dates for additional editorial and content suggestions. Therefore you will have an opportunity to work on your active and critical reading, research, analytical, writing, and oral presentation skills. Ultimately, one of the most important benefits of an anthropological perspective is that it encourages examination of taken-for-granted assumptions about people and groups. The seminar’s focus on aspects of culture that directly impact our daily lives should therefore facilitate this most fundamental area of critical thinking.

3. Using effective skills and strategies for working collaboratively.

Both research projects will be group-based, as you will be organized in small research teams that will be responsible for all aspects of the work. You will therefore gain experience in strategies for effectively working with others to achieve desired goals. You will receive guidance in effective teamwork at all stages of the process, as well as feedback from me and your fellow students. This process and its products will underscore, in what I hope will be an interesting and enjoyable fashion, the value of team-centered work.

4. Developing the foundations for a successful college experience.

As this course is part of the First-Year Experience curriculum, an important component is assisting first-year students in your development of solid academic, social, and personal foundations in order to successfully transition from high school to college. Our FYE Peer Facilitator, Thomas Pittman, will meet weekly with you during class time, and additional activities, briefings, etc. will be scheduled throughout the semester. The FYE component of the course will have its own syllabus and Oaks site to facilitate your navigating its requirements and activities. In addition, the College of Charleston First-Year Experience book is a required text. Attendance and participation in the FYE component of this course are as important as they are to the course as a whole.

Course structure: Class periods will consist of lectures, videos, music, etc., discussion of topics, readings, and audio/visual content, and student presentations.

Graded work:

Exams

| | |
|----|-----------------------|
| I | 20% (of course grade) |
| II | 20% |

Projects

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| I Media-based analysis | 20% |
| II Ethnographic analysis | 25% |

Participation

15%

Grade scale:

A 90-100%; A- 88-89; B+ 86-87; B 80-85; B- 78-79; C+ 76-77; C 70-75; C- 68-69; D+ 66-67; D 60-65; D- 58-59; F 57 or below.

Requirements:

Readings There is no textbook for this course. Instead, readings will be made available as pdfs on the course Oaks site. **NOTE:** For best results, read assigned sections **prior** to class periods for which they are assigned!

Exams (2/21, 4/26)

There will be two in-class, short identification exams designed to ensure course engagement and understanding of materials covered in the lectures, readings, films, and class discussion. In addition to fundamental terms, concepts and illustrations, you will be expected to identify specific research and researchers as highlighted in lectures. Exams are not cumulative, and study guides will be provided prior to each. Exam I, if missed due to an excused and documented absence, can be made-up on 4/24 (Reading

Day) at 10:00 a.m., location TBA. You must contact me prior to that date if you plan on taking the test. The make-up exam will be in essay form.

Projects

I. *Media-based analysis*. For this project, your team will explore a current trend in popular culture through the collection of mass media-based data (internet, newspapers, television, etc.) in order to assess how it relates to identity issues. A project proposal will be due on 2/14; a data-set rough draft on 3/1; and a project presentation on 3/20 or 3/22. The paper itself will be due on 3/22.

II. *Ethnographic analysis*. Your team will conduct ethnographic research on an aspect of popular culture and identity by means of participant-observation and interviews. This project proposal will be due on 3/15; the data-set rough draft on 4/3; and a project presentation on 4/17 or 4/19. The paper will be due on 4/19.

More detailed discussion of requirements for both projects will take place in class.

Class participation

Class attendance, engagement, and participation are essential for success in this course, as much of the material on exams will stem directly from lectures, audio/visual materials, and class discussion. Participation involves more than just speaking out in class- it also reflects your dedication to your research teams and the class as a whole. Full credit for participation therefore involves coming to class on time having read the material assigned for the day, being prepared to contribute your views on the assigned readings, and collaborating fully and appropriately with your research teammates.

You will be permitted **three** absences from regular class periods for whatever reason (so save them for when you really need them!). After that, each absence will result in a loss of 5 course grade points. Absences on exam or presentation dates must be excused and documented through Student Affairs at 67 George St. (more information on the process, and downloadable forms, at http://www.cofc.edu/studentaffairs/general_info/absence).

If you must miss a class, obtain notes from classmates and feel free to meet with me during office hours to discuss them prior to the relevant exam. I will not provide lecture notes, although I will post power-point content and other material as applicable.

Honor code:

Violations of the honor code will be taken seriously. If you need reminding, see your Student Handbook to review code violations and penalties. As plagiarism is a common (and occasionally unintentional) infraction, I recommend that you watch the tutorial developed by the College Library at <http://tutorials.library.cofc.edu/research/plagiarism/index.html>, and/or read material from the Purdue Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/1/>.

Special needs:

If you have a documented disability and have been approved to receive accommodations through SNAP Services (<http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>), please feel free to discuss related issues with me at any time during office hours or by appointment.

Course Outline:

NOTE: subject to revision. Readings are listed by pdf file names on Oaks.

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|-------|------------------------|---|
| 1/10 | Introduction to course | Sullivan 96 |
| 1/12 | Culture | Miner 07 |
| 1/17 | Methods | Geertz 07, Monaghan 07 |
| 1/19 | Issues | Ratner 00 |
| 1/24 | Popular culture | Fedorak 09:1 |
| 1/26 | Methods | Fedorak 09:2, Levine 92 |
| 1/31 | Issues | Fiske 89:2 |
| 2/2 | Identity | Nagel 94, Sokefeld 99 |
| 2/7 | Methods | Goffman 07, Eckert 07 |
| 2/9 | Issues | Dao 11, Treuer 11 |
| 2/14 | Internet 1 | Fedorak 09:5, Miller 02 [proposal project I] |
| 2/16 | Internet 2 | Turkle 95: 7, 10 |
| 2/21 | Exam I | |
| 2/23 | Film | Fedorak 09:9, Sutton & Wogan 09 |
| 2/28 | TV | Fedorak 09:3, Gross 01 |
| 3/1 | Music 1 | Fedorak 09:4, [Film: "Accordion Kings"] [draft project I] |
| 3/6-8 | Spring break | |
| 3/13 | Music 2 | Horton 57, Alverman & Hagood 00 |
| 3/15 | Language | Yousouff 07, Maltz 07 [proposal project II] |

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| 3/20 | Project I presentations | |
| 3/22 | Project I presentations | |
| 3/27 | Humor | Pinsky 05, Wan 09, Waisanen 09 |
| 3/29 | Food | Fedorar 09:8, Fox 03 |
| 4/3 | Sports | Carter 02, Hornby 92 [draft project II] |
| 4/5 | Clothing | Locke 11, Fiske 89:1 |
| 4/10 | Body art | Fedorak 09:7, [Film: "Tattoo Odyssey"] |
| 4/12 | Carnivals and "inversions" | Cowley 85, Turner 83 |
| 4/17 | Project II presentations | |
| 4/19 | Project II presentations | |
| 4/26 | Exam II* (8:00-11:00 am) | |

* Final exam day/time may not be changed unless you have too many exams scheduled on the same day (as defined by the College).

Citations for chapter readings:

Fedora, Shirley (2009). Pop culture: The culture of everyday life. University of Toronto Press.

Fiske, John (1989). Understanding popular culture. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Monaghan, Leila & Goodman, Jane E. (2007). A cultural approach to interpersonal communication: Essential readings. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Sutton, David & Wogan, Peter (2009). Hollywood blockbusters: The anthropology of popular movies. New York: Berg.

Turker, Sherry (1997). Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet. New York: Touchstone.