

Cinema Studies 365

Cultural Studies

Jeff Pence
Spring 2008
TTH 11:00-12:15
King 321 (Screening to be arranged)

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Cultural Studies occupies a strange position, or trajectory, in the contemporary academy. To some, it implies the opening up of canons and interpretive energy to permit engagement with the full range of human cultural experiences: not just great works of literature, art, cinema and music can be examined to understand their representations of, and challenges to, our notions of value and knowledge—instead, the ordinary, everyday experiences of popular culture in all its variety can be explored to offer us a picture of actually existing cultural life including aspirations for its transformation. There is a great deal of leverage and desire in those statements—descriptions morphing into aspirations. The gain here is often presumed to be an escape from the pedantry of tradition, albeit with the benefits of traditional education's expert interpretive strategies, which can be seen to have utilized high culture and the protocols of proper responsiveness to the same to discipline and constrain the unruly energies of marginalized and as-yet-uncultured populations. Workers, women, minorities, youth and so on. In this light, Cultural Studies recuperates the experiences of the marginalized in the service of political progress: its ego-ideal blends the timeless appeal of the insurgent with the always-anticipated evolution of one who belongs. Can you square hipness? To others, Cultural Studies offers quite a different prospect. From one point of view, along with some other, nearly interchangeable terms, such as Theory and Postmodernism, Cultural Studies is seen as trivial in its anti-elitism, sacrificing categories of beauty and value for the cheap thrill of discussing "Celebrity Rehab" or Monster Truck competitions in self-aggrandizing jargon. *Ekphrasis*, *exegesis* and their sister practices, in this view, are fit for contemplating works of art, not for sorting manufactured entertainment. From a left perspective, Cultural Studies is often seen as going beyond the politicization of texts and into the textualization of politics—a wag-the-dog logic in which the secondary signs of political power are mistaken as causes. On all sides, people wonder if the good (enjoyable) is, must be, or even can be, good (for you).

We will approach these questions and others, including: to what extent does the formative source of a cultural work or practice determine its meaning? Or, to the contrary, how free are audiences, consumers and (re)users to appropriate works and practices for their own purposes? And how are students of these processes implicated, by their choices and approaches, in the economy of meaning-making that they entail?

One premise of this class, which fans and critics of CS ought to assent to, is that Cultural Studies is interested in borders: between high and low, center and margin, enfranchised and excluded, valid and invalid, refined and vulgar, cultivated and amateur, mature and childish, liked and disliked, etc. The second premise of this class, which fans and critics of CS ought to assent to, is that Cultural Studies is interested in the movement across borders of cultural objects and energies. Either up and in or down and out, depending on one's perspective.

In this class, we will study influential texts/debates in the field, test them against contemporary works with ambivalent stature in the hierarchy of value, use our own experiences as test cases for such investigations, and move on to do cultural study without a net. The third premise of the class is that Cultural Studies is best understood through practice, and in fact exists only through practice. To this end, we will engage in a set of shared test cases, gradually moving toward final independent projects investigating some sphere of cultural experience.

Course Policies and Requirements

Attendance is taken and mandatory. You may miss two classes without a viable excuse (official medical excuses and family emergencies are the only ones I have accepted). Beginning with the third unexcused absence, your grade will begin to decline. After five absences, you will fail the course. Also, consistent late arrivals are disruptive to the class and will adversely affect your grade.

I also require **participation**. I do this because oral communication in a group setting is an acquired skill, just like writing, and an important one, both in the context of this course and in general. Good participation isn't solely measured by the sheer quantity of words spoken. It also depends on developing one's ability to listen to others' statements, to incorporate their thinking into your own expressions, to ask questions, to clarify where a discussion has gone and how it could be improved, to make connections between others' statements. Feelings of reticence and discomfort speaking in a class are natural--but, then, so is writer's block. Neither are sufficient reasons for not working through the hesitancy and developing abilities and confidence in the required skills for this course. If you need help figuring out how to enter class discussion, come talk to me for some tips and strategies.

Naturally, **readings** and **viewings** are to be completed and considered before the class meeting for which they are assigned. In the case of films, there are multiple copies of each film at circulation

Likewise, **written assignments** are due at the beginning of the class for which they are assigned. Late work loses a third of a grade per day, beginning with that class. Documented excuses are permissible. I no longer accept papers that are neither stapled nor clipped. **As a rule, I will not accept email attachments in lieu of a hard copy.**

Graded Work

Blackboard Posts: in weeks 2-11, you are required to post weekly on the blackboard forum designated for this class. These responses may be interpretive reactions to the texts of the upcoming class, retrospective questions or thoughts on on-going discussions or questions, or take some other valuable initiative of your own design. (Exceptions: the TV and music posts will be entirely original, albeit fan-based.) I expect these to be thoughtful, speculative and generous pieces, and am less concerned that they be formally perfect than that they be interesting. I equally value those who initiate new lines of thought and those who respond with care to the thoughts of others. You will be assigned to respond on either Monday or Wednesday of each week, alternating week to week. Respond late and your efforts are wasted. Posts should be about 500 words, interesting attachments and links welcome. 9:00 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday are the respective deadlines for each group. Read each others' posts—why wouldn't you?

Midterm Essay: One reflective midterm essay of 1750-2500 words, due no later than Saturday, March 22. Use this as a chance to think critically about your experience in the course thus far, and to construct your own trajectory through our shared material.

Group Presentations: you will be divided into working groups to research and reflect upon different commercial-cultural spaces and practices in our area. These groups will have ample time to determine a subject of study, an approach and a motivation. The purpose of the presentations is to ignite group discussion. More later.

Final Project: A 3000-4000 word essay, or its other-media equivalent, either following through on the group project or developing another interest.

Schedule

Week 1

- 2/5 Introduction
- 2/7 Rojek, Arnold, Macdonald, Williams (BB)

Week 2

- 2/12 Adorno & Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry"
- 2/14 excerpt of Naomi Klein's No Logo (read I & II)
<http://books.guardian.co.uk/firstchapters/story/0,6761,402483,00.html>
view Fight Club (dir. David Fincher)

Week 3

2/19 Bordieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture”

2/21 view Metropolitan (dir. Whit Stillman)

Week 4

2/26 Hebdige, Subculture: the Meaning of Style

2/28 view Velvet Goldmine (dir. Todd Haynes)

Week 5

3/4 view 24 Hour Party People (dir. Michael Winterbottom)

3/6 Brabazon, “Here to Stay? 24 Hour (post) Party People”

Week 6

3/11 Gauntlett & Hill, “Television’s Personal Meanings: Companionship, Guilt and Social Interaction,” available through OBIS as TV Living: Television Culture and Everyday Life (pp. 110-140); you must set up an Ebrary account for access—free and easy
Watch TV!

3/13 Ott, “Television as Lover, Part II: Doing Auto(Erotic) Ethnography”
Watch TV!

Week 7

3/18 TV reports

3/20 TV reports

3/22 **Midterm essay due**

Week 8

SPRING BREAK

Week 9

4/1 Walser, "Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances," available through OBIS in Moore, Allan F. (ed.). Analyzing Popular Music, pp. 16-38. Ebrary account required as above.
Listen to music!

4/3 Shumway, "'I Give it a 94. It's Got a Good Beat and You Can Dance to It': Valuing Popular Music"
Listen to music!

Week 10

4/8 Music reports

4/10 Music reports

Week 11

4/15 Tinkcom et al, "On Thrifting"

4/17 Stewart, "Real American Dreams (Can be Nightmares)"

Week 12

4/22 Project appointments/fieldwork

4/24 Project appointments/fieldwork

Week 13

4/29 Presentations

5/1 Presentations

Week 14

5/6 Presentations

5/8 Presentations