

SOC 210: SOCIOLOGY OF POPULAR CULTURE

Spring 2009

Bellevue Community College

Instructor: Denise Johnson

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(Note: when emailing me, please put "SOC 210" in the subject line)

Office Phone: (425) 564-5143

Office Hours: 8:30-9:20am daily

Office Location: D110K

Class Meets: Daily 11:30-12:20

Class Location: A130



-Nirvana's "Nevermind" album cover (#1 album in 1992)

-Weird Al's "Off the Deep End" album cover (a parody of Nirvana; reached #17 on the charts)

-Bart Simpson

Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPQR-OsH0RQ> to see Nirvana's first huge hit, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," which largely introduced Seattle's "grunge rock" to the national stage. Look at the video. Listen to the lyrics. What messages are Nirvana trying to convey? What do *you* take away from the video and song?

Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnuHJZMdako> to see Weird Al Yankovic's parody of Nirvana, called "Smells like Nirvana." Look at the video. Listen to the lyrics. What messages are Weird Al trying to convey? What do *you* take away from the video and song?

COURSE INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, popular culture has become increasingly central to social life in America. In fact, popular culture plays a vital role in shaping not only how we think about ourselves and each other, but also about the larger world around us. Throughout this quarter, you will learn how to analyze popular culture from a sociological perspective. Some of the key questions we will examine are:

What makes culture "popular?"

Who are the creators of popular culture?

How does popular culture impact our lives?

What can we learn about who we are as a people by studying popular culture?

By the end of the quarter, you should be able to critically analyze popular culture by placing it within a broader social context. You will learn how to "read" popular culture much like a text. We will touch upon a wide range of popular culture "texts," from commodities and advertisements to movies and television to music and fashion.

LEARNING ATMOSPHERE

I believe that students learn best when they are actively involved in the teaching and learning process. Thus, this is an *active, interactive* course where you are expected to read, write, discuss, and participate. I think of our class as a "collaborative learning community" where we all teach and learn from each other. Every time you make a comment or ask a question, you teach something to the rest of us. I challenge you to abandon the traditional passive student role and to get involved with teaching and learning – I think you'll enjoy it and learn a lot in the process!

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing the course, the successful student will be able to:

- Demonstrate a general understanding of concepts used in sociology and popular culture;
- Show critical analysis of popular culture texts;
- Explain and discuss how the intersections of race, class, and gender are represented and maintained in popular culture texts;
- Demonstrate a general understanding of the dominant representations and identity constructions of people in historical and contemporary analyses of US popular culture;
- Demonstrate a general understanding of production analysis;
- Demonstrate a critical understanding of textual analysis;
- Show his/her understanding of popular culture through an historical lens.



REQUIRED TEXTS AND MISCELLANEOUS PURCHASES

Texts: Perry, Imani "Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop"
Ritzer, George "The McDonaldization of Society" (5th edition)
Tomasino, Anna "Discovering Popular Culture"
Additional readings are posted on our course website on MyBCC

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

The following outlines what you may expect of me as your instructor:

A sincere effort to help you learn the course material. Since my ultimate goal is to help you learn and succeed, I intend to spend enough time and effort on class preparation to make the material as understandable and as interesting as I possibly can.

Accessibility. I agree to be available to you outside of class should you desire help. I encourage you to come to my office hours whenever you have a question or concern. I am more than happy to help. Please try to make it your personal goal to visit my office hours at least once this quarter. I think you will find it helpful. If my office hours are not convenient for you, just send me an email and we can schedule an appointment that fits your schedule.

Attention. When you are speaking, you will have my undivided attention.

Fairness. Your grade will be based upon what I detect that you have learned and how I assess your performance. I will not negotiate final grades.

The following outlines what I expect from you as a student in this class:

A sincere effort to learn the course material.

Preparation. You should come to class having done the assigned readings and homework. (Note that the BCC guideline for homework is two hours outside of class for each hour spent in class.) On seminar days, you should bring the readings. All homework and papers should be typed and double-spaced (unless otherwise noted). Please purchase a stapler and a box of large paper clips if you don't already have them – individual papers must be stapled, while groups of items turned in together must be clipped.

Attendance. Please attend all class sessions. Your presence in class contributes significantly toward your final grade in the course, as I cover a lot of material in class that can not be found in the readings. If you do need to miss class, please note that you will not be able to make up any in-class work that you may have missed (such as group work), and **you are also responsible for any and all work that is due at the class meeting immediately upon your return, even if it was assigned on the day you were absent.** Being absent does not grant you an automatic extension. I highly recommend that you get the names and contact information of one or two of your classmates so you can contact them for any assignments or notes you may have missed while absent.

Promptness. Coming into class late is not only disruptive to learning, but it is also disrespectful. You should be in class on time except when delayed by an emergency, and you should stay until class is over unless you become ill or have made arrangements with me to leave early. Furthermore, you should comply with all due dates. I believe that one of the major lessons students take away from college is the importance of meeting deadlines. As a result, **no late work will be accepted unless you have had it approved by me BEFORE the due date.** Late work will receive a **zero** grade.

NOTE: I do not accept assignments via email. It is your responsibility to get the work to me in class when it is due.



Okay, we get it. You win.

<http://alienloveapredator.com> ©2005 bernie hou

If you know you are going to be absent on the day an assignment is due, then turn it in early. **Being**

absent on the day something is due does not grant you an automatic extension. Major due dates are indicated on the attached Course Calendar, so plan ahead.

Contribution. Learning about each other's perspectives is an integral part of the learning process in this course. I believe that you will learn a lot about yourself and your fellow classmates. To work effectively in this course, therefore, you are expected to be an active participant in our learning environment. You should do your best to contribute to class discussions and activities. Please be advised that your grade will suffer if you do not participate and contribute to the intellectual life of our class.

Respect and tolerance. Since learning about each other's perspectives is central to this course, it is of the utmost importance that you respect your classmates' experiences, differences, and opinions. Disrespectful attitudes will not be tolerated.

Honesty. If you cheat, you fail. No excuses will be taken into account. Your work must be your own, except when asked to work with other students. Furthermore, you are required to acknowledge in your papers if you have borrowed any ideas, terms, or phrases, even if you have borrowed from a classmate. If you have any hesitation, or if you are in doubt about one of these issues, feel free to ask me.

A NOTE ABOUT COURSE READINGS:

The readings in this course may be difficult for some students. However, if you follow my reading tips, you will find the process much easier (and you'll perform better on exams too). In this class, it's very important to be an active reader. Have a purpose when you read! As you read, regularly ask yourself, "Am I getting it?" If not, go back and find the place where you last understood the material and re-read from that point forward. Also, you should take notes as you read. Try making an outline of the material by organizing the main ideas and supporting details. Or, write a brief summary of the main ideas. Or, make comments in the margins. Regardless, *you should always highlight or underline the main points as you read.* If you are having trouble concentrating, take a break and come back to the readings later. Please know that I am always available to assist you with any of the readings. Do not hesitate to come to my office hours for help! My goal as an instructor is to help you succeed.

GRADING

Grades are based on the following factors:

| | |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Quizzes (5 @50 pts each) | 250 points (25% of final grade) |
| Seminar | 200 points (20% of final grade) |
| Popular Culture Journal | 200 points (20% of final grade) |
| Group Presentation of a Pop Culture Item | 100 points (10% of final grade) |
| Final Exam (comprehensive) | 100 points (10% of final grade) |
| Homework | 100 points (10% of final grade) |
| Class Participation | 50 points (5% of final grade) |

TOTAL **1,000 points**

The following are the letter-grade equivalents to the course points:

| Course Grade | Point Total | Course Grade | Point Total |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------|
| A | = 930-1,000 points | C+ | = 770-799 points |
| A- | = 900-929 points | C | = 730-769 points |
| B+ | = 870-899 points | C- | = 700-729 points |
| B | = 830-869 points | D+ | = 670-699 points |
| B- | = 800-829 points | D | = 600-669 points |
| | | F | = 0-599 points |

The following is a brief description of each of the course components:

- (1) **Quizzes:** Five in-class quizzes are given over the course of the quarter (that's about one every other week, on average). Quizzes should take no longer than 15 minutes and are administered at the beginning of class. Quizzes are designed to test whether or not you *completed* and *understand* the course material from the previous weeks (as well as the material from week of the quiz). Note that **you cannot makeup missed quizzes**. If you come in late on a quiz day, you will be expected to finish the quiz at the same time as the rest of the class. Quiz dates are provided on the attached Course Calendar, so plan ahead accordingly.

5 quizzes @ 50 points each = 250 total points

- (2) **Seminar:** We will have eleven seminars over the course of the quarter. Seminar involves breaking students into groups in order to have thought-provoking discussions about a reading. It is crucial that you come to seminar prepared. You will need to complete the readings ahead of time and bring a brief paper (approximately 1 typed page) to each seminar. (NOTE: I will not accept papers that are not typed.)

Each seminar paper should include the following:

a statement of the article's thesis (in your own words!); in other words, what is the main point

of the article, and what is the author CONCLUDING about the topic?
3-4 central questions that you have about the article (the questions should be thought-provoking, not “What did you think about the article?” and “What is the author saying?”); these are meant to be the questions you’d like to ask your classmates during discussion.

Seminar papers should NOT include your opinion about the article (you will have plenty of time to talk about that during seminar). Instead, remain focused in your papers, and succinctly explain what the author is actually saying. Your seminar grade is based on attendance, participation, and papers.

Seminar papers: 11 @ 10pts each = 110 points
Seminar participation: 90 points

(3) Popular Culture Journal: Throughout the quarter, you will keep a journal of contemporary popular culture items. I will collect your journal twice over the course of the quarter – once in the middle and once at the end (due dates are on the attached Course Calendar). Directions about the journal are as follows:

For nearly every week of the quarter (weeks two through eleven), you will locate one item from popular culture and write an analysis of each of your selections. You will also write a conclusion summary to attach at the end of your journal. All work must be typed and double-spaced. You will lose points if you do not follow the required format.

Begin collecting one popular culture item each week (weeks two through eleven) and writing your analyses. By the end of the quarter, you will have chosen ten items and written ten analyses. You are required to choose whichever items you’d like as long as you choose one item from each of the following categories:

- A magazine advertisement (cut it out and attach it to your analysis)
- A television advertisement (provide a YouTube link)
- A fashion trend (attach pictures to your analysis)
- A music video (provide lyrics and a YouTube link if possible)
- A sport (provide pictures)
- A television show (provide pictures and brief background about the episode)
- A movie (provide pictures and a weblink to the movie trailer)
- A popular item for consumption (provide pictures)
- A slang word or colloquial expression
- A piece of popular technology (provide pictures and brief background about the item)

After you have collected the item, write an analysis to complement it (you should do this weekly). Each analysis should answer the following (you should answer these in numerical order):

- 1) What is the item?
- 2) Why did you select this item? What is its significance?
- 3) What do you “see” in the item? Write down what you see in the visuals. Describe any people – what do they look like? What are they wearing? What are they doing? How are they positioned? What does their body language convey? What is being said?
- 4) What “argument” or “claim” do you think the item is making? (E.g. What claim is a Hummer automobile making? What about a snowboard? A tattoo? A Marlboro cigarette ad?)
- 5) What values, lifestyles, or points of view are represented, or omitted, in this item? In looking at the item, it is important to understand that there is no “value-free” pop culture; all aspects of culture carry subtle (and not-so-subtle) messages about who and what is important. Oftentimes, what or who is NOT REPRESENTED is just as important as what or who IS REPRESENTED. Try to analyze your item for values and points of view.
- 6) How might different people understand this item differently than you? No two people see an item the same way. Each person brings to the item a unique set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which, when applied to the text creates unique interpretations.
- 7) Who do you think created this popular culture item? Take your best guess. Remember that everything you see was created by someone.

It is your responsibility to keep these pop culture items and analyses well organized in a small folder or binder (yes, presentation is important!). You are also expected to keep your journal up-to-date, completing one analysis per week. You may be asked to give updates to the class about your journal throughout the quarter.

At the end of the eleventh week of the quarter, you will write a brief (1-2 page) conclusion summary. In this summary, you should address the following:

What did you learn from keeping this journal?

Reflect on the popular culture items you chose to focus on – which were most interesting and enlightening?

How does your journal relate to the class in general?

Place this conclusion summary at the end of your journal.

NOTE: I will not accept late journals; journals that are not handed in on the due dates will receive a **zero** grade. Your journal will be graded not only on its completeness (Did you collect the correct number of sources and write the analyses?), but also its thoughtfulness (Do your answers show that you thought hard about the topics, or did you give the topics just a little superficial attention?). *Better journals will demonstrate that you've contemplated the course materials and thoughtfully connected your popular culture items to them.* You can earn up to twenty points for each item and analysis. Full credit will be awarded to high quality entries. Again, I will deduct points if you do not follow the proper format.

As always, please ask me if you have any questions whatsoever!

- (4) Group Presentation of a Popular Culture Artifact: In groups of about three students each, choose any specific popular culture item. You might select a particular fashion style, a television commercial, a song, a celebrity, an object, or a piece of art. You can choose anything you'd like, as long as it's appropriate for a college classroom (and as long as it is not already something your group members are analyzing independently in your journals). Analyze this item from a sociological perspective, addressing the same questions from the journal analysis listed above. You should not do library research for this project; rather, consider what a sociological analysis of the item can contribute to our understanding of it. You will deliver a 15-20 minute group presentation to the class in which you: (1) show us the item, (2) describe the item, and (3) analyze the item from a sociological perspective. I would be happy to consult with each pair ahead of time to make sure you're on the right track (in fact, I recommend this highly). Each group will sign up early in the quarter for a particular day to present.



- (5) Final Examination: I will give a comprehensive final exam at the end of the quarter. The exam *may* consist of multiple choice, true/false, short answer, and/or essay questions. **Please note that I do not give make-up exams, and I do not give early exams.** If you are absent on the exam day, you will receive a zero grade. Please review the attached Course Calendar and make note of the exam date. Plan ahead!
- (6) Homework: You will complete several homework assignments throughout the quarter that require you to reflect on the course material and/or observe the social world. You should do your best to address every assignment thoughtfully, clearly, and

completely. Homework will be graded not only on completeness (Did you adequately address all the components of the assignment?), but also thoughtfulness (Does your assignment show that you thought hard about the topic, or did you give the topic just a little superficial attention?). Homework assignments vary in length - some may be a paragraph long, others will be 1-2 pages (usually typed and double-spaced). Please note that I will not accept late homework, so homework that is not handed in on time will receive a **zero** grade. Additionally, I will not accept homework that isn't typed (unless I've specifically mentioned that it can be handwritten). Some homework assignments are described in the attached Course Calendar, and others will be announced during class.

- (7) Participation: Participation is essential to the format of this class and will therefore contribute significantly toward your grade. In short, your success in this class depends on your *active* participation. "Participation" includes attendance (remember that you are allowed to miss four classes without penalty to the participation portion of your grade), class discussions, group work, and independent in-class assignments such as film questions. *Do not take this portion of your grade lightly – excellent attendance can significantly improve your final grade!*

Students with Disabilities. All students are responsible for all requirements of the class, but the way they meet these requirements may vary. If you need specific academic accommodations due to a disability, please speak with me and with Disability Resource Center (564-2498). You will need to obtain the appropriate documentation from DRC in room B233. The disability accommodation documentation must be given to me before it is needed rather than afterward, so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

COURSE CALENDAR

The following Course Calendar will be revised as needed. Please note that you will be held responsible for all revisions to the calendar. If you miss a class, be sure to check either with me or a classmate regarding any changes.

WEEK ONE – Introduction to the Course

Readings and Assignments:

Tomasino Ch 1, pp1-44

DUE FRIDAY: Homework Look at the three pictures on the first page of this syllabus. Visit the two websites listed below the pictures (in order), and answer the questions I've written after each web address. Your assignment should be a couple of paragraphs long, typed.



WEEK TWO – Introduction to Pop Culture

Readings and Assignments:

“The World is a Text” Ch 1, pp75-115 (on website)

Tomasino pp xii-xv (tab these pages and refer to these definitions often!)

DUE FRIDAY: QUIZ

DUE FRIDAY: Seminar on “The World is a Text”

WEEK THREE – “Reading” Popular Culture

Readings and Assignments:

Media Society Chapter 8, pp265-298 (on website)

DUE THURSDAY: Homework: Find a faculty member’s office on campus that has multiple items posted on the door or window. Take your time, examining the items. “Read” the office door. What items are on the door/window? What image is being conveyed? What does it tell you about the faculty member? Based on the items on the door, do you think different people may perceive the faculty member differently? How so? Explain. Write about one page, typed.

DUE FRIDAY: Quiz

DUE FRIDAY: Seminar on “Media Society”



WEEK FOUR – Creating Popular Culture

Readings and Assignments: **No classes on Thursday, April 23rd**

Ritzer, pp1-78

DUE FRIDAY: Seminar on Ritzer

WEEK FIVE – Consuming Popular Culture

Readings and Assignments:

Ritzer, pp79-139

DUE FRIDAY: Seminar on Ritzer

WEEK SIX – Consuming Popular Culture

Readings and Assignments: **No classes on Friday, May 8th**

Ritzer, pp141-231

DUE THURSDAY: Quiz

DUE THURSDAY: Seminar on Ritzer

WEEK SEVEN – Social Inequality and Media Representation

Readings and Assignments:

Media Society Ch. 6, pp195-227 (on website)

DUE MONDAY: Journal (must include five popular culture items)

DUE WEDNESDAY: Seminar on Media Society

WEEK EIGHT – Popular Culture and Race

Readings and Assignments:

Tomasino Ch 4

Native American mascots article (on website)

DUE MONDAY: Seminar on Native American mascots article

DUE WEDNESDAY: Seminar on Tomasino

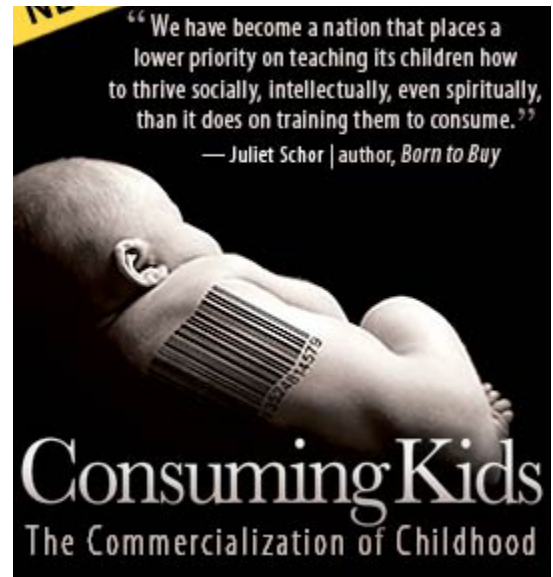
DUE FRIDAY: Quiz

WEEK NINE – Popular Culture and Race

Readings and Assignments:

Perry, pp1-101

DUE FRIDAY: Seminar on Perry



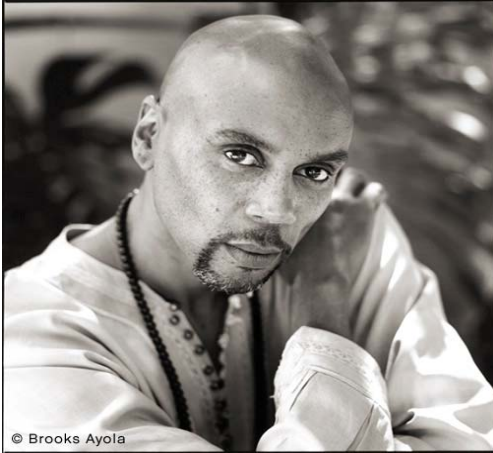
WEEK TEN – Popular Culture and Gender

Readings and Assignments:

Perry, pp102-203

DUE FRIDAY: Quiz

DUE FRIDAY: Seminar on Perry



WEEK ELEVEN – Popular Culture and Gender

Readings and Assignments:

Tomasino Ch2, pp45-88

DUE WEDNESDAY: Seminar on Tomasino

WEEK TWELVE – Final Exam

Readings and Assignments:

DUE TUESDAY: Completed Journal

DUE TUESDAY: Final Exam

