

English 391-006

Reading Twentieth Century Popular Culture

Instructor: Meghan Rosatelli
Office: Hibbs 408
Office hours: Tues. 2-3 & by appt.

Box: Hibbs 309
Class time: T/TR 3:30-4:45
Room: Hibbs 329

Overview

The rapidly evolving culture of twentieth century America left behind a trove of cultural artifacts that continue to influence the twenty-first century. From Prohibition in the early nineteen twenties to the gaming culture of the late nineteen nineties, and everything from the pulps, Elvis, Motown, sci-fi, *The Simpsons*, and the Disney monolith in between, we have seen a celebration of “low” culture that (not matter how we may resist) constantly surprises and draws us into the expanding mainstream audience. And, much to the cynic’s chagrin, these popular culture texts often reflect the social and political zeitgeist of the time through humor, fantasy, or “reality” and help to define passing generations. The study of popular culture illuminates our understanding of collective action, belief, and entertainment while celebrating and interrogating the origins of our cultural pleasures.

Course Goals

Students should emerge from this course with a comprehensive working knowledge of twentieth century popular culture and role of media in shaping all things “low.” This knowledge will complement their ability to synthesize dynamic mainstream culture with their own historical (or present) interests in literature, publishing, film, fashion, music, lifestyle, etc. By merging their own interests and knowledge of culture with an understanding of popular culture history, the texts that reinforce that history, and the theories behind what makes certain texts mainstream, students should be able to critically analyze and argue the many shifts and nuances of popular culture in America. Students will explore the collective momentum that keeps popular culture in constant flux, the influence of the mass media, how the contemporary style of the time characterizes society, and how popular culture influences individual and collective identity. Reading texts that influence mainstream culture and/or reflect that culture will allow students to merge historic events with historical renditions of the popular and insular aspects of the everyday. Most importantly, students should leave the class with a strengthened respect for those individuals who broaden the scope, aesthetic, and currency of our cultural capital and (perhaps) a desire to interrogate and understand what we often take for granted.

Course Objectives

Students will expand their reading and writing abilities through thoughtful and in-depth analysis of various aspects of popular culture and the texts (literature, film, music, fashion, etc.) that comprise these areas. Because the course will be multi-modal and multi-media, the students will be expected to merge various forms of texts and media into their research and analysis. Students will create a blog that reflects their individual interests in popular culture with the specific course topics. This space will allow the student to work creatively while expanding their knowledge and curiosity in the subject, and will provide students a forum for discussion. Balancing upper-level writing expectations with the multi-media work will challenge students in analytical and creative ways that will not only influence their working knowledge in the course, but in other courses as well. Students will also be required to access and analyze texts from the Special Collections and Archives Department in the VCU library.

Texts

The Maltese Falcon, Dashiell Hammett (1930)
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, Michael Chabon (2000)

I Am Legend, Richard Matheson (1954)
Neuromancer, William Gibson (1984)

Skinny Legs and All, Tom Robbins (1990)
Barrel Fever, David Sedaris (1994)

Assignments

The Blog:

- You will set up a blog on Blogger on the first day of class. Please add every student in the class (and me) to your "friends." For the sake of your classmates' privacy, you will keep your blog as "friends only" until the end of the semester.
- You will be expected to blog on the current course topics each week (specifically readings). I would be ecstatic if you blogged more than once a week, but once a week is the absolute minimum. These posts should be thorough and should explore linking, adding photographs, video, etc. You must contribute to your blog by **midnight on Saturday**.
- Commenting on your classmates' blogs is encouraged (and noticed), but not required.

Mid-term examination:

- A 4-question essay style exam that covers the first half of the semester.

Final Paper and multimodal project with presentation:

- An 8-10 page paper, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, proper MLA citations. This paper will focus on a popular culture topic of your choice based on one of the books read in class.
- Multimodal, creative project based on your research topic. More details to follow.
- A 10-minute presentation to show the class your multimodal project.
- **Your topic must be approved before Spring Break!**

Quizzes:

- I have no intention of giving quizzes on the reading **but** if I feel students are not reading weekly quizzes will be introduced and worked into your grade.

Grading

- o Final paper and multimodal project with presentation: **30%**
- o The blog: **30%**
- o Mid-term examination: **20%**
- o Participation and attendance: **20%**

My Policies

Attendance:

- o Departmental Policy: Students who miss more than six classes in a course that meets twice a week cannot pass the course.
- o My Policy: Expect to lose 1 point from your final grade for each unexcused day that you miss—until the unlucky number seven. I **strongly** suggest that you e-mail me **in advance** if you have to miss class and/or bring a doctor's note. I also expect **extra effort** on the blogs to make up for your absence in class discussion.

Email:

- o I always welcome thoughtful questions and comments via e-mail. I will try to respond to you as quickly as possible. What I **do not** welcome via e-mail: late work, excuses, questions along the lines of "what did I miss in class?"

Office hours:

- o Try to give me a heads up if you plan on coming to office hours. If you can't make those times, contact me so we can find another time to meet. Also, come to office hours with some notes, questions, pen, paper, positive attitude—these things make any meeting more productive.

Late work/Late students:

Because much of the “work” of the course will be on your blogs and in class discussion the late work policy is a little different in this course.

- o For the blogs: because you can post at any time during the week, there will be no credit given for late posts.
- o Late students: If you show up more than 15 minutes late you will be marked absent. If you are consistently 5-10 minutes late I reserve the right to lower your grade. If you have an extenuating circumstance, please speak with me.
- o Mid-term: No make-up will be given.
- o Final Paper: Due date is the final date I will accept the paper.

University Policies

What to know and do to be prepared for emergencies at VCU:

- * Sign up to receive VCU text messaging alerts (www.vcu.edu/alert/notify). Keep your information up-to-date.
- * Know the safe evacuation route from each of your classrooms. Emergency evacuation routes are posted in on-campus classrooms.
- * Listen for and follow instructions from VCU or other designated authorities.
- * Know where to go for additional emergency information (www.vcu.edu/alert).
- * Know the emergency phone number for the VCU Police (828-1234). Report suspicious activities and objects.

VCU Honor System

All VCU students are presumed upon enrollment to have acquainted themselves with and have an understanding of the Honor System. Therefore, it is a student's responsibility to ask course instructors to clarify expectations for each assignment in order to be in compliance with the Honor System. The 2007 - 8 VCU Honor System policy statement and purpose is located at http://www.provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/Honor_system_policy.pdf

Statement on Americans with Disabilities Act

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 require Virginia Commonwealth University to provide an 'academic adjustment' and/or a 'reasonable accommodation' to any individual who advises us of a physical or mental disability. If you have a physical or mental limitation that requires an academic adjustment or an accommodation, please arrange a meeting with me at your earliest convenience. Additionally, if your course work requires you to work in a lab environment, you should advise the instructor or department chairperson of any concerns you may have regarding safety issues related to your limitation(s).

Weekly Lessons/Homework

Intrigue

- Jan 13: Introductions, set up Blogger accounts.
Read: Pulp on Blackboard
- Jan 15: Overview of popular culture—Bakhtin and carnival theory, etc.
Read: *The Maltese Falcon* (Chapters 1 **through** 4)
- Jan 20: Dashiell Hammett, pulps, hardboiled crime fiction, Weegee
Read: *The Maltese Falcon* (5-11)
- Jan 22: *Pulp Fiction* and the 90s
Read: *The Maltese Falcon* (10-16)
- Jan 27: Guest speaker on film adaptations
Read: *The Maltese Falcon* (17 – end)
- Jan 29: Reading Discussion—escape, the golem
Read: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Part One)
- Feb 3: Library session – meet in Special Collections (classic comics)
Read: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Part Two)
- Feb 5: Michael Chabon, WWII, historical context
Read: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Part Three)
- Feb 10: Reading discussion—failure, magic, good v. evil
Read: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Part Four)
- Feb 13: Evolution of the superhero, contemporary superheroes
Read: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Part Five)
- Feb 17: Homosexuality: 1940-1960
Read: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Part Six)
- Feb 19: Reading discussion
Read: *I am Legend* (1-6)

Fantasy

- Feb 24: Guest speaker on zombies and vampires
Read: *I am Legend* (7-15)
- Feb 26: Richard Matheson, historical context, adaptations, horror influence
Read: *I am Legend* (16-end)
- Mar 3: Reading discussion/overview
Review for exam
- Mar 5: Mid-term exam
Read: *Neuromancer* (1-4)
- Mar 10: **Spring Break**
- Mar 12: **Spring Break**
- Mar 17: William Gibson, historical context, science fiction, N. Katherine Hayles, Mark Hansen
Read: *Neuromancer* (5-10)

Mar 19: Reading Discussion—prosthetics, drug use, capitalism
Read: *Neuromancer* (11-16)

Mar 24: Cyberspace, Tom de Haven's graphic novel adaptation, Jean Baudrillard, Donna Haraway
Read: *Neuromancer* (17-end)

Mar 26: Reading discussion—AI, mass fear, religion
Read: *Skinny Legs and All* (1-84)

Humor

Mar 31: Library Session – meet in Special Collections (original manuscript viewing)
Read: *Skinny Legs and All* (85-169)

April 2: Historical context, reading discussion
Read: *Skinny Legs and All* (170-259)

April 7: Comic literature
Read: *Skinny Legs and All* (260-346)

April 9: Film adventure comedy, *National Lampoon*, *Goonies*
Read: *Skinny Legs and All* (346- end)

April 14: Reading Discussion—metaphor, magic and surrealism, art and life
Read: *Barrel Fever* (select stories and essays)

April 16: Presentations
Read: *Barrel Fever* (select stories and essays)
*April 20th last day to withdraw

April 21: Presentations

April 23: Presentations

April 28: Presentations

April 30: Presentations

Final Paper Due