Theorizing Popular Culture

IDSEM-UG1443
6 September – 20 October 2011

TuTh 4:55PM - 6:10PM
One Washington Place, 601

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Class Description and Purpose: The word "popular culture" is derived from the Latin words "populus" ("the people") and "cultus" ("habitation, tilling, refinement, worship"). “Popular Culture,” although often used synonymously with “mass culture,” in a more general sense refers to the tastes, styles, and other practices of the "people" (as opposed to the "elites"). The academic study of popular culture includes research by: (1) Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians who tend to ask questions about whether "the people" are producers or consumers of popular culture, the socioeconomic bases of cultural activity, and the role of culture in social and political change; (2) Critics of the arts and cultural historians who interpret and evaluate the forms and meanings of the artifacts of popular culture; and (3) Media and communications specialists who concentrate on technological questions such as the effect of the medium (oral or written, analog or digital) on the message. In this class we will read and discuss major arguments that bridge all three of these approaches through theorizing.

Required Texts: All readings will be made available through Blackboard.

Assignments: Two short papers (2-3 pages) and one take-home final (3-4 pages) due the week after class ends. Email me your paper; the subject line and file name MUST include your last name. Plagiarism will not be tolerated (see policy below).

Course Format and Expectations: This is a seminar, a meeting of minds gathered to share views and insights about a common experience (in our case, a reading). Your attendance is vital, both to your own progress and to our existence as a group. Do come to class on time and avoid leaving early unless absolutely necessary. Class preparation and participation will affect your final grade.
Reading Schedule:

T / September 6  2011 MTV Awards: Lady Gaga / History Discussion / What is Popular? What is Theory? What is Culture?

R / September 8  Louis Menand, “Browbeaten”
Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture”

T / September 13  Matthew Arnold, from “Culture and Anarchy”
Zoe Williams, “The UK Riots: The Psychology of Looting”

R / September 15  Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”
Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular”

M / September 19  First Paper Due

T / September 20  Georg Simmel, “Fashion”

R / September 22  Clement Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch”
F. R. Leavis, “Mass Civilization and Minority Culture”

T / September 27  Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

R / September 29  Theodor Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture”


R / October 6  Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”
Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”

F/ October 8  Second Paper Due

T / October 11  Fall Holiday

R / October 13  Janice Radway, from “Reading the Romance”
Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp”

T / October 18  John Fiske, “Popular Culture”

R / October 20  Simon Frith, ”The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Saving Popular Culture from the Populists”

F / October 28  Final papers due
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