New York University
Gallatin School of Individualized Study
Interdisciplinary Seminar:
The Cultural Politics of Bad Taste
IDSEM-UG 1738-001
Spring 2015
Room 527, 1 Washington Place
Thursday, 6:20 – 9:00 p.m.

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Office Hours: Thursday 3 – 5 p.m. and by appointment
Course Description:
This seminar will investigate the ideological, political and historical parameters of ‘taste’ in popular culture. Through examination media artifacts that exemplify ‘trash’, the course will examine how ‘taste’ is constituted as a cultural category that reflects, produces and maintains the social structures of American society. What is meant by designations such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ media, ‘high and ‘low’ art, ‘offensive’ or ‘artistic’ and who is empowered to make these distinctions? How do ‘bad objects’ reveal the ideological basis of ‘taste,’ and what is their relationship to ‘legitimate’ art forms? Does ‘trash’ pose a challenge to cultural standards of taste and ‘the mainstream’? What is the relationship between ‘bad’ art and spectatorship and why might audiences find ‘trash’ so enthralling? Readings will be drawn from Bourdieu’s Distinction, Glynn’s Tabloid Culture, Ross’ No Respect, and the anthology Trash Culture, while screenings will include cult films such as Mystery Science Theater 3000, Pink Flamingos, Plan 9 From Outer Space, South Park, and The Room, and a selection of reality TV programs, music and viral videos.

Course Objective:
This interdisciplinary seminar will consider the question of taste in popular culture and how it functions to produce, reflect and maintain hegemonic class, gender and racial hierarchies in American society. Through emphasis upon Trash Culture, and media products often derided as bad, vulgar, kitsch or valueless according to prevailing critical, scholarly and consumer opinion, students will scrutinize how critical, academic and industrial discourse participates in a process of social regulation and control through mass media and popular culture aesthetics. At the same time, we will explore how ‘bad objects’ can be construed in terms of presenting the possibility for articulating an oppositional aesthetic, one that poses an ambivalent challenge to hegemonic ideologies and social structures on the one hand, while exposing the incoherence and fluidity of the notion of a ‘mainstream’. Students will be afforded the opportunity to think critically about questions of pop culture aesthetics, aesthetic value and what constitutes good v. bad art. Through contrast of ‘high quality’ and ‘high art’ in popular culture, the course will explore what makes a media product ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and what such distinctions tell us about culture and politics? The course will strike a balance between consideration of the production, textual strategies and narrative patterns of such debased media forms as utilized by creative teams and industrial (corporate) entities and an investigation of the reception of such texts by audiences and critics. Students will be introduced to theories of Trash Aesthetics, Camp, and Paracinema (to name a few central ones) and asked to analyze and reconsider a variety of popular culture artifacts utilizing such perspectives. Can such theoretical approaches to low art also provide a means by which normative behaviors and ideologies can be challenged, appropriated or reconfigured?

Course Policies and Requirements:
Students are expected to come to class prepared, having completed the assigned readings and ready to participate actively. Attendance in class is required and
essential; attendance will be taken each week – it is your responsibility to sign the attendance sheet. Since class participation is such an integral part of the course, the policy regarding attendance is both clear and strict. More than three absences will seriously jeopardize your ability to pass the class. If you miss more than three classes, the highest participation grade you can receive is a B-. Students who miss more than five classes will be strongly encouraged to withdraw from the course and will receive a class participation grade of F. Please be on time! Habitual lateness will impact your class participation grade, as each three instances of lateness will be counted as an absence. In addition, if a student leaves class before it concludes, their departure will be counted in the same way as lateness, i.e. each three early exits will also be counted as an absence.

Participation in discussions is also a crucial aspect of the class. Students are expected to participate regularly. We all have opinions, theories, ideas and concerns about popular culture, and students are expected to share theirs in the class context in light of assigned course materials. Even if you attend every class, if you do not contribute, you cannot receive a class participation grade higher than B.

Screenings are an integral component of the course and students are required to watch all the titles on the syllabus, even if they have seen them in the past. Due to the difficulty in obtaining materials, the instructor reserves the right to change the screenings without prior notice; screenings also may be adjusted according to the interests, needs and dictates of the course. Please be advised that some of the films, video segments to be screened, and other media will include content that is extremely graphic in nature in terms of sexuality and violence. Please notify the instructor if you have concerns regarding the content of screenings and other media.

Written assignments must be completed as scheduled. Late work will be accepted only at the discretion of the instructor and only in cases of documented medical or family emergency. Students are required to notify the instructor if circumstances will not permit the timely completion of course work. A heavy course load or work for other classes is insufficient reason for missing class or submitting work late. An incomplete will be granted only in the most extreme instances, will require sufficient documentation and are strongly discouraged.

Written work that is plagiarized will result in immediate failure. There Will Be Absolutely No Exceptions! No Excuses! If you are unclear on the parameters regarding citation of sources or use of the Internet please speak with the instructor.

There is absolutely no eating allowed in class, though you may bring beverages! There will be a 10 - 15 minute break at the halfway mark of the class meeting; please utilize that time period for eating. Please turn off your cellular phone or, at the very least, change the mode to vibrate. Texting, surfing the Internet, or conducting chats during class and screenings is not only rude and disrespectful it will significantly impact your class participation grade. Students who habitually
text their friends, receive phone calls or spend class time searching websites will receive a class participation grade no higher than D. This is your only warning!

**Grading Policies:**
15% Attendance and Participation (Includes Bad Object Presentation)
20% Short Paper Response Assignments
30% 7 - 10 Page Mid-Term Essay
35% 10 - 15 Page Final Essay (5% of the grade includes a written final paper proposal)

**Reading Assignments:**
Please be advised that the reading load for this course is quite heavy, though the number of assignments will vary from week to week. Even though discussions may not draw on the reading directly, it is imperative that you complete them in a timely manner. The variety and range of readings are deliberately designed to enhance your understanding of the films and the topic of each weekly class. Readings due for a given week are to be done before the class meets. Additional readings may be assigned during the semester and placed on reserve in Bobst Library or on the course’s NYU Classes site.

**Required Texts:**
LaGuardia, David *Trash Culture: Essays in Popular Criticism* Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2008
Mathijs, Ernest and Xavier Mendik *The Cult Film Reader* (Manchester, UK: Open University Press, 2008)
Washburne, Christopher and Maiken Derno eds. *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004) ***Available as an eBook or On-Line through Bobcat Reserve Articles as indicated on the syllabus. Articles will be available through the Reserve Readings desk at Bobst Library.

**Recommended Text:**
Ross, Andrew *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989)

**Writing Policies and Requirements:**
There are two types of papers for this course: short response journal entries and essay length papers. The long essays will be completed in a two phases: first,
students are required to submit a rough draft, which will be evaluated but not graded. The draft will then be followed by a final version of the essay, which will be graded. The instructor will not accept the final paper without the prior submission of a rough draft and the approval of your topic. Please be advised that you must submit your work in person; papers sent via email will not be accepted!

**Writing Assignments:**

1. **Short “Response” Papers:**
   Each week, beginning with the second, the student will be asked to submit a “response” to a question posted by the instructor to the course NYU Classes Site. You will be asked to do one of the following: provide your interpretation or view of an assigned reading, or to apply the theory advanced by a given author to a film, TV Show or other cultural artifact you have seen or has been screened in class.

   These responses are to be three full pages in length and will be collected each week at the beginning of class. They are not meant to be scholarly essays or research papers – they are merely your personal reactions to the instructor’s question or suggestion. You may write in an informal, conversational voice if you choose. They will not be graded. In order to receive full credit, you need only to complete five short responses in a conscientious manner.

   Each short essay will be worth 19 points towards response paper component of the final grade. Partial credit for inadequately completed entries will be awarded at the discretion of the instructor. An essay may receive 1, 3 or 5 points as partial credit.

   As your response essay is so brief, it is imperative that you do not summarize the plot of a film nor summarize the author’s argument (unless directed to do so) nor provide detailed descriptions of scenes. You may provide cursory description only if necessary to clarify your position. The purpose of these assignments are merely to permit you to reflect upon course materials, dialog with the theoreticians and attempt to apply their ideas to cultural productions.

2. The second writing assignment is a short essay, an analysis of a single media production in greater detail than in the response papers. Your critique must be formulated in terms of class discussions and lectures and related to one of the assigned readings. You may select a film, TV show or other popular culture text not discussed in class, but the instructor must approve the topic in advance. The paper is to be between seven and ten double spaced typewritten pages. The midterm essay is due no later than March 12th. You may submit it earlier if you like. Students who submit papers at least one week prior to the March 12th deadline will be afforded the option to rewrite and revise their work.

3. The third writing assignment is a longer, analytical essay and single sustained argument regarding a popular culture text consider to be in Bad Taste. Your
discussion of the texts(s) in the must be related to, and discussed in tandem with the themes of the course. This final paper will require an explicitly developed and stated thesis, bibliographic research, and close analysis of the text(s) utilizing one of the theoretical methods covered in class. The analytical essay is to be no less than ten and no more than fifteen (10-15) double spaced, type written pages. You will be required to submit a brief three – four sentence description of your project for the instructor’s approval by April 17th. This project proposal is considered part of the assignment. Failure to submit a proposal means that you have not completed the assignment and your grade will be reduced by a fraction. The final essay is due no later than May 14th. Students who submit papers at least one week prior to the May 14th deadline will be afforded the option to rewrite and revise their work.

**Brief Bad Object Presentation:**
As part of the course requirements, you are obligated to present to the class a popular culture text (of any kind) that you would consider to be representative of trash aesthetics, camp aesthetics, poor taste or cult cinema. **This is not optional.** Beginning March 26th students will be asked to give a brief (5-10 minute) presentation of their Bad Object and explain how it represents ‘bad taste’ or ‘trash culture’. The presentation may be related to either the short response papers, or the longer essay assignments. Students will be asked to follow instructions provided on a separate handout.

**Plagiarism:**
There are few academic matters more serious than plagiarism. Any written work for a college course must be wholly original, or it needs to be cited correctly. If you take any idea from an outside source, whether it is a website, DVD commentary track, book or another media form, you must indicate where you obtained that information. Copying anything off of the Internet without noting the source is considered plagiarism! If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the instructor before submitting your work. **Do not assume something is common knowledge** unless it would be blatantly obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of the subject. For instance, that Ed Wood is often regarded as the worst director in American cinema history is widely known by people even if they have never seen any of his films; in contrast, an interpretation of *Plan 9 From Outer Space,* or how Wood’s visual style and narrative preoccupations have been discussed by scholars and appropriated by fans of cult cinema is not common knowledge.

Copying materials from website and books without noting where it can be found and verified by another individual is considered plagiarism; it is not research! (Properly sourcing materials is research, using it without attribution is plagiarism.) Since plagiarism is a violation of the University’s Policy on Academic Integrity, not to mention dishonest and a form of fraud, work that is plagiarized will result in immediate failure for the assignment. No excuses and no exceptions! **You will receive an F for any direct copying from websites, even if it is only a few sentences!** A second violation will result in an F for the course and the Dean of Students being notified.
**Weekly Schedule:**

**Week One: January 29th**  
**Bad Objects, Bad Subjects: An Introduction to The Cultural Politics of Taste**

Screening:  
*Mystery Science Theater 3000: Catalina Caper.*

Readings:
2. David Thorpe “Pondering the Beautiful and Complicated Contradiction That Is Josh Groban and His New Song ‘Brave’” *Sound of the City Blog* at The Village Voice @ http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2012/12/josh_groban_believe.php  

**Week Two: February 5th**

**Things That Suck: Bad Objects**

Screening:  
*Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) 100 min.

Readings:
2. David Hume “Of The Standard of Taste” from *Four Dissertations*, link via NYU Classes.  

**Week Three: February 12th**

**People That Like Things That Suck: Bad Subjects**

Screening:  
*Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1929) 62 min.

Readings:
Week Four: February 19th

**Camp: Seriousness, Aesthetics and Failure**

**Screening:**
*Valley of the Dolls* (Mark Robson, 1967) 123 min.

**Readings:**
2. Susan Sontag “Notes on Camp” on Reserve.

Week Five: February 26th

**Desire and the Fractured Mirror**

**Screening:**
*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) 98 min.

**Readings:**
2. David LaGuardia, “Introduction” and “Late Elvis” in *Trash Culture*.

Week Six: March 5th

**Cult Films, Cult of Films**

**Screening:**
*Plan 9 From Outer Space* (Ed Wood, 1959) 80 min.

**Readings:**
2. LaGuardia, “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” in *Trash Culture*.

Week Seven: March 12th

**I Can’t Get That Freakin’ Song Out of My Head: Sounds that Suck**

**Screening:**
*Selection of Music Videos*

**Readings:**
4. Elizabeth Tolbert “Theorizing The Musically Abject” in *Bad Music*, p. 82 - 94.
6. LaGuardia, “Prince, Madonna, Springsteen and Michael Jackson” and “Heavy Metal” in *Trash Culture*.

Week Eight: March 26th

**Ephemera: Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing But Signification**

**Screening:**
*Beach Party* (William Asher, 1963) 98 min.

**Readings:**

Week Nine: April 2nd

Exploitation:
Screening:
Pink Flamingos (John Waters, 1971) 107 min.
Readings:

Week Ten: April 9th

Blaxploitation:
Screening:
Coffy (Jack Hill, 1973) 89 min.
Readings:
3. Jon Kraszewski “Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation” on Reserve.

Week Eleven: April 16th

Transgression and Television
Screening:
The Swan
Readings:
1. Kevin Glynn Tabloid Culture, Chapter One.
2. Bordieu, p. 466 - 479.

Week Twelve: April 23rd

Tabloid Television: Current Affairs
Screening:
South Park: The Mystery of the Urinal Deuce
Readings:
1. Glynn, Chapters Two and Three, p. 46 – 143.
Week Thirteen: April 30th

**Reality Television as Hegemonic Discourse**

Screening:

*Average Joe*

Readings:


Week Fourteen: May 7th

**But Is It (Bad) Art?**

Screening:

*The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003) 99 min.

Excerpt:

*The Aristocrats* (Paul Provenza, 2005)

Reading:

2. LaGuardia, “The Problems of Contemporary Criticism” in *Trash Culture*. 