

## The Aesthetics of Commercial Culture: Syllabus

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Thursdays 6-8:30 p.m.  
Office hours: by appointment  
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### Course description

What are the aesthetic choices within pop culture phenomena such as Beyoncé’s “Formation” that captivate and challenge us? How does the choice in medium, e.g., video, music, or text, affect the reception and creation of contemporary culture? This course, entitled *The Aesthetics of Commercial Culture*, delves into the aesthetic practices that constitute production and distribution practices in late capitalist society. This is a theoretical and experiential course: our primary goal is both to theorize capitalist culture and to experience its workings on ourselves with a critical eye. That is, we will be connecting our everyday and in-class experiences of consumer goods to theories about them, at the same time as we will interrogate those theories based on our experiences. In the process, we will encounter and employ a variety of methodologies, including literary close reading, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, to grapple with the meaning-making processes of capitalist aesthetics.

### Learning objectives

- To think critically about the deep-reaching social effects of the aesthetic culture that surrounds us in the everyday; to gain important insights into the ways in which that culture encourages us to repeat, perform and reproduce structures of power.
- To develop a critical awareness of how everyday cultural practices, many of which seem innocent, are imbricated in deeper structures of power and underlying discourses of normativity.
- To move beyond a simplistic understanding of the social system as a struggle between top-dogs and underdogs.
- To recognize the ways in which literary analysis is a critical tool that is helpful and necessary for understanding the complexities of our contemporary lives, and to be able to use a variety of methodologies from literary scholarship in students’ own analyses.
- Lastly, to come to view literary analysis as not just a useful tool, but also as fun!

### Required texts

We will be listening to or viewing a variety of songs, videos ads and other media (all of which were made and released post-2010); see schedule of classes. (Note: you will also be asked to listen to or watch all the songs and media that are mentioned in the readings.) For the separately assigned media, the difference between the versions of a song will be relevant to us; therefore links will only be provided in those cases where there is one specific version I want you to

consider. NOTE: the material we look at in this class is subject to change based on contemporary events and your input. This also means that I will always be open to your suggestions!

All secondary material will be made available on the course site (Trunk). The following theoretical texts, however, are recommended for purchase:

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 2002.  
Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 1992.  
Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. 1991.

Course policies: Please refer to separate course policies document.

### Course assignments

- **Weekly responses:** Every week, you should reflect on and ask meaningful questions about the reading on our course blog ([link here](#)). I will post a prompt online each week which will serve as a guide for your response, but you can ask your own questions, voice your own thoughts or respond to your peers, too. This activity will provide inputs for our class discussions and help me see whether there are points in the reading that are unclear. Individual responses are not graded but responses are mandatory and graded as a whole. **(25%)**
- **In-class presentation:** in pairs or groups, you should identify and present on a song or another cultural phenomenon. The aim is to critically engage with your material and to generate meaningful analytical discussions for the whole group. **(25%)**
- **Introductory paper:** 1-2 page paper, due electronically on Sunday (11:55 p.m.) before second class. This paper is meant to allow me to assess your critical thinking and literary analysis skills. Not graded but required; failing to complete it will reduce your final grade.
- **Practice paper:** 5-6 pages, due electronically by fourth class (i.e. by 5:30 p.m.). This paper is meant to allow you to test out some of the skills, tools, methods and theories that we have learned in the first sessions of class. **(20%)**
- **Final paper:** 7-10 pages, due electronically four days after class (that is, by midnight on December 12). This is your opportunity to take the methodologies we have encountered in class and apply them to any object of cultural production that interests you. This paper can take a very creative format, but it must apply the “literary reading” skills learned in class. **(30%)**
- **Student presentations on paper ideas:** These presentations are meant to allow you to engage with each others’ final paper ideas, to be inspired by each other and to provide constructive feedback. The presentations will take place in Week 12 so that there is still time to incorporate peers’ ideas or respond to their questions. You should meet with me in advance to discuss your ideas—not in order to get them approved, but to give you adequate help as you’re developing your ideas!

Schedule of Classes

Class meets on Thursdays, 6-8:30 p.m.

	Topic	Readings	Assignments Due
Week 1	Introduction		
<i>UNIT 1: CAPITALISM AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE</i>			
Week 2	Capitalism as an Aesthetic Practice	Adorno and Horkheimer, “Culture Industry” (pp. 94-104, 115-122, 131-136); Marcuse, Chapter 1 of <i>One-Dimensional Man</i> (pp. 1-18). Engage casually in some cultural activity: examples include tune in to Kiss 108 or 103.3 Amp Radio, watch a movie in the theater or on TV, stream a show or watch a sports event. Observing the ads you encounter (on your commute, on the street, in the cafes) works too.	Introductory paper (Sunday before class)
Week 3	Culture as a Consumer Good	Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” ( <i>Capital Vol. 1</i> , 47-59); Jameson, excerpts from <i>Postmodernism</i> (1-15, 31-50). Same casual engagement task as last week.	
<i>UNIT 2: MUSIC ON THE MARKET</i>			
Week 4	Consuming Pop Songs	Pence, Charlotte, “Introduction” to <i>American Made Music</i> ; Coupland, excerpts from “Voice, Place and Genre in Popular Song Performance” (573-581, 584-589, 592-597). Lana del Rey, “ <a href="#">Summertime Sadness</a> ”	Practice paper
Week 5	Meaning-making in Nonsense Songs	Dettmar, “There Must Be Some Misunderstanding;” Ventzislavov, “Singing Nonsense.” Rihanna, “Work” (or if you’re tired of it, try her new one, “Needed Me”)	Weekly presentations start

Week 6	Race as Marketing Aesthetic?	Hunter and Soto, “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze;” Stephoe, excerpts from “Race in the Modern City” (223-233); Hsu, “The Struggle;” Demby, “I Guess We Gotta Talk About Macklemore’s ‘White Privilege’ Song” Beyoncé, “Formation” ( <a href="#">music video</a> ) Macklemore, “White Privilege” I and II	
<i>UNIT 3: COMMERCIALS AND CULTURE</i>			
Week 7	Systemic and Feminist Readings of Advertising	Stole, “Advertising;” Colette, “Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising.” <a href="#">"Gold Feelings" Olympics Coca Cola ad?</a> <a href="#">Built with Chocolate Milk ad</a>	
Week 8	Super Bowls and Super Tuesdays: The Different Cultural Functions of Advertising	Green and Van Oort, “We Wear No Pants: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials;” Crouch, “Super Bowl Commercials: The Best and Worst of 2016;” Fitz, “Crafting the Presidential Story: The Electoral Narrative in Recent Presidential Campaigns;” John Oliver, “Make Donald Drumpf Again.” Recent presidential debates (specific speeches and excerpts TBD: Oct 19); <a href="#">"Our Children Are Watching" spot</a>	Trump spot
<i>UNIT 4: IS THERE AN OUTSIDE TO THE MARKET?</i>			
Week 9	Subvertising	Dery, “The Merry Pranksters and the Art of the Hoax;” Berlant and Freeman, “Queer Nationality.” <a href="#">Mini #DefyLabels ad</a>	
Week 10	Selling “Bad” Pop Songs	Meier, “In Excess? Body Genres, ‘Bad’ Music, and the Judgment of Audiences.”	

		The Chainsmokers, “Selfie”; + other bad song(s) chosen by class	
Week 11	Music outside the Market?	Sanneh, “Pop for Misfits;” Hoby, “One to Watch.” Grimes, <i>Halfaxa</i> (whole album: background listening for most if it is fine) Terra Naomi, “Say It’s Possible”	
Week 12	Paper Workshop	Eberhardt and Freeman. “‘First Things First, I’m the Realest’: Linguistic Appropriation, White Privilege, and the Hip-Hop Persona of Iggy Azalea;” Pollard, “Conflicted State of Mind: Race, Masculinity, and Nas’s Lyric Public Pedagogy.”	No more student presentations.
Week 13	Wrap-up		Final paper is due on midnight of Dec 12

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