

Ads, Fads and Pop Hits: How Commercial Culture Speaks

Syllabus

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Tuesdays 6-8:30 p.m.
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Course description

What are the choices of message and form 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 *Ads, Fads, and Pop Hits: How Commercial Culture Speaks*, delves into the formal communication 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 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 artistic and commercial 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 the humanities provides critical tools that are helpful and necessary for understanding the complexities of our contemporary lives, and to be able to use a variety of humanistic methodologies in students’ own analyses.
- Lastly, to come to view critical 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!

Throughout the course, I will expect you to move through your everyday cultural environment with a heightened attention to what is going on around you. Observe the ads you encounter on your commute, pay attention to the music you hear in cafes, or simply engage with your usual means of entertainment (movies, shows, sports events) with more attention to the ways in which the event is framed. Your observations will be valuable input for our class discussions and are also welcome in your blog posts.

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*. 2nd edition. 1991.

Course policies: Please refer to separate course policies document.

Course assignments

- **Weekly responses:** Every week (by the morning before our class), 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 analytical 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 analytical skills learned in class. I expect you to follow general academic writing guidelines. **(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 Tuesdays, 6-8:30 p.m.

	Topic	Readings	Assignments Due
Week 1 Sept 5	Introduction: The Commercial Cultural Landscape		
<i>UNIT 1: ADS</i>			
Week 2 Sept 12	Seducing to Buy	Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" (<i>Capital Vol. 1</i> , 1-4, until: "determination takes place"); Colette, "Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising." LG appliances 2016 ad Amazon Echo Dot commercial Lexus There's No Going Back ad	Introductory paper (Sunday before class)
Week 3 Sept 19	Ads We Like, and Why	Stole, "Advertising;" Green and Van Oort, "We Wear No Pants: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials;" Built with Chocolate Milk ad Mini #DefyLabels ad	Student presentations begin
Week 4 Sept 26	Political (Ad) Campaigns	Fitz, "Crafting the Presidential Story: The Electoral Narrative in Recent Presidential Campaigns." Excerpts from recent presidential speeches, tweets, White House	

		communication (specifics TBD); potentially compared with political ads.	
Week 5 Oct 3	How to Convince when It's Important	Jameson, excerpts from <i>Postmodernism</i> (1-15, 31-50). Ads for Planned Parenthood, charity etc. (TBD)	
<i>UNIT 2: FADS</i>			
Week 6 Oct 10	Hipsters	Marcuse, from Chapter 1 of <i>One- Dimensional Man</i> (pp. 1-14).	Practice paper
Week 7 Oct 17	Ecoconsciousness™	Adorno and Horkheimer, "Culture Industry" (pp. 94-104, 115-122, 131-136).	
Week 8 Oct 24	Outsiderness	Sanneh, "Pop for Misfits;" Hoby, "One to Watch." Grimes, <i>Halfaxa</i> (whole album: background listening for most if it is fine. Pay more attention to her as a phenomenon: looks, music distribution channel, self-presentation, etc.)	
<i>UNIT 3: POP HITS</i>			
Week 9 Oct 31	Language outside of Language	Pence, Charlotte, "Introduction" to <i>American Made Music</i> ; Dettmar, "There Must Be Some Misunderstanding;" Ventzislavov, "Singing Nonsense." Rihanna, "Needed Me" Ed Sheeran, "Shape of You"	
Week 10 Nov 14	Linguistic Appropriation	Coupland, excerpts from "Voice, Place and Genre in Popular Song Performance" (573-581, 584-589, 592-597); Eberhardt and Freeman. "'First Things First, I'm the Realist': Linguistic Appropriation, White Privilege, and the Hip-Hop Persona of Iggy Azalea." Luis Fonsi feat. Daddy Yankee, "Despacito" and the Justin Bieber version; Iggy Azalea, "Mo Bounce"	

Week 11 Nov 21	Race as a Marketing Aesthetic?	Hunter and Soto, “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze;” Demby, “I Guess We Gotta Talk About Macklemore’s ‘White Privilege’ Song.” Beyoncé, “Formation” (music video) Macklemore, “White Privilege II” Reconsider also the Bieber version of “Despacito.”	
Week 12 Nov 28	Paper Workshop	Pollard, “Conflicted State of Mind: Race, Masculinity, and Nas’s Lyric Public Pedagogy.”	No more student presentations.
Week 13 Dec 5	Wrap-up		Final paper is due one week after class

Bibliography of secondary sources:

Colette, Shelly. “Eroticizing Eve: A Narrative Analysis of Eve Images in Fashion Magazine Advertising.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31.2 (2015): 5–24. Print.

Coupland, Nikolas. “Voice, Place and Genre in Popular Song Performance.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15.5 (2011): 573–602. Print.

Dettmar, Kevin J. H. “There Must Be Some Misunderstanding: Unintelligible Rock Lyrics Can Teach Us What We Think.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 60.27 (2014): B13–b14. Print.

Eberhardt, Maeve, and Kara Freeman. “‘First Things First, I’m the Realest’: Linguistic Appropriation, White Privilege, and the Hip-Hop Persona of Iggy Azalea.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 19.3 (2015): 303–327. Print.

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- Green, Kyle, and Madison Van Oort. "'We Wear No Pants': Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38.3 (2013): 695–719. Print.
- Hoby, Hermione. "One to Watch: Grimes." *The Guardian* 28 Jan. 2012. *The Guardian*. Web. 6 Mar. 2016.
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- Hunter, Margaret, and Kathleen Soto. "Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze." *Race, Gender & Class* (2009): 170–191. Print.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. 2nd edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production: London 1887*. Vol. 9. Berlin: Dietz, 1990. Print.
- Pence, Charlotte, ed. *American Made Music : Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. *ebrary*. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.
- Pollard, Tyler J. "Conflicted State of Mind: Race, Masculinity, and Nas's Lyric Public Pedagogy." *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research, and Education* 27.1 (2014): 1–11. Print.

Sanneh, Kelefa. "Pop for Misfits." *The New Yorker* 28 Sept. 2015. *The New Yorker*. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

Stole, Ingrid. "Advertising." *Culture Works: The Political Economy of Culture*. Ed. Richard Maxwell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. Print.

Ventzislavov, Rossen. "Singing Nonsense." *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 45.3 (2014): 507–522. Print.