Popular culture has taken on increasing importance over the past several decades, for a variety of reasons we will discuss during the term. The very fact that finally university courses that take popular culture as their object of study are emerging in significant numbers is itself an important indicator of the growing reach of popular culture.

This course is dedicated to investigating popular culture, its nature, its role in our lives, and its broad effects on (primarily) American society, culture and politics. All of you will come into the class with some knowledge of the subject under investigation, and this course is designed to take advantage of that fact, but at the same time you will often have to think beyond the knowledge you already have about pop culture in order to begin to understand it as a cultural sociologist. *Understanding pop culture (solely) as a participant in the culture and as a fan is not sufficient for mastery of the concepts in this course.* You will have to absorb some cultural theory in order to approach the perspective of ‘culturologist.’ You should not expect this to be a course made of repeated fan appreciations of particular pieces of popular culture. The scholarly study of anything in the human world requires a certain distancing from the phenomenon and the
application of critical tools designed to examine the object in ways it is not typically examined by the layperson. Each of the books we are reading draw to some extent from theoretical and critical sources.

The purview of popular culture is vast, and we cannot hope to cover anywhere near the entirety of the material that could be included under that aegis. We will therefore concentrate heavy attention on a few realms of popular culture of specific importance, especially popular music, sport, and celebrity, with some more sporadic treatment of a number of other less central topics.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:
By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1) name and describe various theories of popular culture production and reception;
2) critically read popular cultural products as cultural objects, i.e., you should be able to understand how pop culture objects are encoded with information about society, the individual, social relations, social stratification, and the possibilities of social life; and
3) formulate research questions in the sociology of popular culture.

REQUIREMENTS:
Attendance is essential in this course. Virtually every class meeting has at least some focus on discussion of reading and related matters and you cannot profit from this element of the course if you are not here. Additionally, we will see in whole or part a number of videos, some of which are not in the library collection and which I therefore cannot make available for you to see if you miss the class session in which they are viewed. I will not regularly take attendance, but the class is small enough that I will know it if you regularly miss class, and I will reserve the right to penalize you in your final grade if I find you are frequently absent from class without medical excuse. If you feel you cannot attend class consistently, this is probably not the class for you.

To be in attendance in this class means not simply to be physically present, but to be here now. When John Lennon was asked to describe the meaning of the Beatles’ music in a nutshell, he replied “Be here now.” This is a simple yet powerful idea: to experience the moments of your life truly, authentically, fully, rather than walking about in a kind of half-present trance, failing to actually live life because one is constantly elsewhere, perhaps dwelling on a past that cannot be altered, perhaps anticipating a future that may not even come. Lennon’s idea is one I take as fundamental for the experience we share in our collective meetings in this class. I promise that I will be here now, and I insist that you do the same.

Being here now is not as easy as it might sound, perhaps especially in the present age. Much of the communicative technology that now exists in our world, and indeed many other elements of our contemporary culture work hard against being here now. Many people (including many students on this campus) seem almost never to be here now; they
are so busy texting and checking Facebook and generally living in a virtual space presented to them by their portable communicative technology that they find it difficult to actually be present in many of the situations of their lives. Additionally, too frequently, students do not adequately prepare themselves for being here now in the classroom because they do not rest properly and they wind up half-sleeping through classroom experience.

To facilitate being here now, the following is my policy in this class: *Laptop computers may not be used during class, period.* If you bring one to class and turn it on, expect that I will ask you to turn it off. In my experience, laptops in the classroom encourage passivity and draw students away from what is happening in the classroom to other virtual entertainments. If you own a cell phone or other small communicative device, I strongly advise you not to bring it to class. If you insist on doing so, it must be turned off. If I see you consulting your cell phone or other such device while we are holding class (and, trust me, I will see you if you do so, no matter how clever you think you are), or if you appear to be sleeping (i.e., your eyes are closed for more than a few seconds in succession, or you are emitting a sound I identify as snoring), you may expect a displeased reaction from me.

On two occasions during the term, you will be responsible (with two of your classmates) for facilitating the discussion of some of the readings for the day—a tentative schedule will be posted online. On those days, it is imperative that you come to class exceptionally prepared. You will also be responsible for composing a short summary of the class proceedings for each of those two days to be posted to Blackboard. These responsibilities count for 10% of your final grade.

A significant percentage of the course grade (30%) consists of a course journal that you should begin keeping on the first day of class. This is where you will write up your notes, commentary, and reflections on the reading. You may also write about other course-related thinking here. Your journal must be complete, that is, you must have at least one entry for every single book chapter or article that we read and each entry should be written before the class meeting in which we discuss the related reading. This is a total of 39 entries for the term. You should give each journal entry a unique number to make counting them simpler. The due dates are indicated below. If you turn the journal in late, the penalty is one full grade per calendar day (i.e., if it is two days late, a journal that would have received an A will turn into a C). I have provided you with a sample of a journal entry on Blackboard.

I will informally check your journals once at the beginning of the term to see how you are progressing. At two points during the term, once at mid-term and once at the end of the term, I will formally evaluate your journal (i.e., you will receive a grade). At each of these times, I am looking for

a) completion (the journal should be up-to-date with readings that we have completed at the time I check the journal); and
b) volume and substance of entries (i.e., the entries should be more than just brief and disorganized notes and they should demonstrate close reading of the relevant text).

You are not limited to talking narrowly about the readings or what happened in class on a given day in your journal; you might also write down thoughts on how one could apply some idea or concept from class to a contemporary event, or just record questions you have about something we have read or discussed in class. You must however summarize and demonstrate an effort to understand the reading in question. Your course journal must be a minimum of 10,000 words by the end of the term, which is an average of about 250 words per entry. These words should be your own, which means (and this is quite important) you should not quote the texts you are reading beyond a few words here and there. If you insist on filling up your journal with mere repetition of the actual text itself, your grade will suffer.

I will talk more about course journals on the first day of class. At this point, it is probably enough to note that if you do not take the course journal sufficiently seriously from the beginning of the course, it will be almost impossible to get a decent grade in the course. Unlike exams or substantively-evaluated papers, the course journal is not evaluated according to how well you master or interpret material: it is evaluated simply on the basis of how diligent you have been in completing entries for each reading. If there is a method of evaluation that leaves more power in the student’s hands, I do not know of it. Simply putting in the time and energy on a regular basis ensures you will do well on this very substantial portion of the course grade. If you are lazy or procrastinate, however, there will be serious consequences.

Please note that all journals should be turned in as emailed text files. I do not want hard copies. Needless to say, you should back up all files routinely throughout the term, and you are solely responsible for doing so and for the consequences of failing to do so (i.e., if you lose your course journal because your computer melts down and you didn’t have the file backed up somewhere).

In addition to the course journal and the two reading discussion days, we will have two papers, a short (4-5 pages maximum) mid-term paper (25%) and a longer (7 pages maximum) final proposal for a research project (35%). More on both as the term gets underway.

Here then is a brief summary of the grade breakdown:
1. Two presentations of readings with group = 10%
3. Course journal = 30% (15% first half of term; 15% second half of term)
4. First Paper = 25%
5. Final Paper = 35%

Books:
1. Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*
2. Andy Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music*
4. Alexander Riley, *Impure Play*
5. Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans*

**COURSE THEMES AND SCHEDULE:**

**The Study of Popular Culture: Basic Terminology, Concepts, Methods**

are its Origins? Who are ‘the masses,’ anyway? What are Taste Cultures?

In these first few class meetings, we will read about and discuss some basic historical information on
popular culture and its emergence in modern mass societies in the forms in which we know it today. We
will look at the analysis of taste cultures in sociology and examine one of the earliest and still most
important theoretical traditions in the study of popular culture, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.

Reading:

1. *Mix It Up*, chapters 1-4
2. *Impure Play*, chapters 1 and 7

**Mass Media, Advertising and Commercial Leisure**

February 2, 7, 9, 14, 16: The Rise of Mass Media and Advertising: Commercial Culture

In capitalist societies, popular culture is in its most basic incarnations essentially commercial culture. In
this section of the course, we look at the emergence of capitalist commercial leisure in the form of pop
culture and some of the earliest mass media venues through which that culture was communicated to
consumers. Advertising is central among these forms of mass media.

**February 9: First paper assignment out, essays due in class on February 16**

Reading:

1. *Mix It Up*, chapter 9
2. Michael Schudson, “Historical Roots of Consumer Culture” (online)
3. Roland Marchand, "Advertisements as Social Tableaux" and "Visual Clichés" (online)
4. *Celebrity/Culture*, chapters 1, 3-4 and 9
Fame, Celebrity, and Fandom

February 21, 23, and 28 and March 1, 6, and 8: Celebrity and Fandom

In modern democratic societies, celebrity has taken on an increasingly important role in culture. Celebrities exercise tremendous influence over our lives, even if we do not count ourselves among the ranks of serious fans. The celebrity-fan relationship is one of tremendous complexity and interest. For many in modern societies, fandom is an important part of personal and social identity.

March 8: Course Journals due for grading

Reading:

- *CelebrityCulture*, chapters 5-8, 10-13
- *Fans*, chapters 1-2, 4-5

Popular Musics

March 20, 22, 27, and 29 and April 3 and 5: Rock 'n' Roll Subcultures and Youth Cultural Rebellion; Hip Hop Culture and Music

Popular music in its various and constantly changing incarnations has exercised considerable influence on contemporary culture. From its role in youth subcultural movement to the ways in which it has contributed to the transformation of the relationship between high and low culture, popular music must be understood by anyone who wants to understand cultures like that of contemporary America.

Reading:

- *Cultures of Popular Music*, chapters 1-6
- *Mix It Up*, chapters 5 and 8
- *Impure Play*, chapter 3

Sport as Popular Culture

April 10, 12, 17, and 19: The Culture and Politics of Sport: More Than Mere Games

Sport has long played an important role in culture, but its significance has grown in commercial, mass media societies like our own over the past century. Sports figures are frequently among the most important celebrities and sporting competitions are the focal point of massive attention and identification from large segments of modern societies.

Reading:

- *Mix It Up*, chapter 7
- *Impure Play*, chapter 4
- Pierre Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class" (online)

New Media and Popular Culture
April 24 and 26 and May 1: Video Games and Internet Popular Culture

Popular culture has experienced some essential shifts over the past few decades as new media formats and technologies have emerged and taken up more dominant positions in the leisure activity of many in contemporary societies. This field is huge and we cannot hope to give it broad coverage in just the few days dedicated to it, so we will focus mostly on video games.

May 4: Course Journals due for grading

Reading:

- *Mix It Up*, chapter 10
- *Impure Play*, chapter 5