

# English 258

Jeanne Hamming, ENGL 258, Fall 2000, Popular American Culture

## Popular American Culture

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English 258 (178), Section 1 Fall, 2000  
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### Texts:

Maasik, Sonia and Jack Solomon, eds. *Signs of Life in the USA*, 3rd edition. Boston: Bedford, 1999.

Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Dick, Philip K. *Blade Runner (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep)*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982.

Selected Handouts

### Course Description:

This course provides an introduction to the study of contemporary American popular culture. We will explore the ways in which each of us is both a user and is used by popular culture. Moreover, this class is loosely organized to allow us to view popular culture from two perspectives: "dominant" and "resistant." In other words, do the texts advocate "fitting in" or "standing out?" What are the benefits and detriments of fitting in or standing out? Finally, how do we use what we know of popular culture to "fight back"? We will look at such things as television, film, advertising, consumerism, and cyberculture. We will consider critically issues such as consumerism, gender, sex, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity, and the environment. Of course, the course is open to discussions of numerous issues not listed here.

Through course readings, classroom discussions, focusing questions, exams, and short writing assignments, we will engage questions such as:

How do television, advertising, film, our bodies, etc., constitute readable "texts"? Who makes these texts? With what intention and under what circumstances/constraints?

How do surface meanings of texts differ from ones below the surface?

How does popular culture consciously or subconsciously influence us?

How do different groups of popular culture consumers or users make similar or different sense of the same text?

What can be considered beneficial and/or detrimental about certain cultural texts?

How does popular culture construct our individual desires?

What do popular culture texts teach us about our position within American culture?

**Attendance:**

Attendance is mandatory. I will also excuse students for religious reasons as long as you notify me at least two days in advance. You are responsible for any assignments on the syllabus, although any in-class writings you miss due to absences cannot be made up. Any more than 3 absences will result in a 1/3 letter reduction in your final grade.

**Lateness:**

Lateness for any reason counts as one half an absence. If you have a schedule conflict that prevents you from getting to class on time (planned lateness) or that makes it necessary for you to leave class early, drop this course.

**Late work:**

I accept no late work. Your work is due on the given date in class. If you are absent, you may not make up work due that day. You will receive a zero (not just an "F") for work that you do not turn in.

**Evaluation:**

English 178 is a reading intensive course so a large portion of your grade will be determined by responses to focusing questions and the final exam which allow you to demonstrate that you have done and have understood the readings. Finally, you will do a 3-4 semiotic analysis of an advertisement.

Unannounced Collections of Responses to Focusing Questions (10 @ 3% ea.) 30%  
Paper (3-4 pages) 30%  
Final Exam 40%

Please familiarize yourself with the university's policies on academic honesty. Plagiarism and any other form of cheating will not be tolerated in this class and will result in a failing grade.

It is assumed that you are familiar with and can reproduce standard written English. All work written in this class will illustrate college-level proficiency with respect to grammar, punctuation,

syntax, and so on.

### **Social Justice Statement:**

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I support that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect and non-discrimination. WVU does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color, or national origin. Any suggestions about ways to further a positive and open environment in this class will be welcome.

### **Syllabus (subject to revision at any time):**

Week 1: Introductions: "Run, Forrest, Run!"

8/21: Introduction to course.

8/23: Policies and Procedures; What is popular culture?

8/25: View *Forrest Gump*; "Popular Signs" (1-19).

Week 2: Americans Dreaming: Or, "Forest Still Running"

8/28: View *Forrest Gump*; "The Hollywood Sign" (289-296), Seger (308-316).

8/30: View *Forrest Gump*; Solomon (137-148), Engle (677-685).

9/1: Discuss *Forrest Gump*

Week 3: "I have GOT to have that!"

9/4: Labor Day: no class.

9/6: Case study: stuff we buy and don't need; Shames (55-61), "Consuming Passions" (45-54).

9/8: Case study: Automobiles; Goewey (105-116).

Week 4: "Buy Now, Pay Later"

9/11: "Brought to you B(u)y" (117-128), Marchand (129-136).

9/13: Case study: the mall; Norton (62-68).

9/15: Case study: your closet; Gladwell (handout).

Week 5: "Buy Now, Pay Later" continued

9/18: Case study: magazine ads: bring 3 advertisements.

9/20: No regular class: open office hours.

9/22: Due: Essay (3-4 pp, 30%)

Week 6: The Dating Game: Where are you from?"

9/25: *The Rules* (excerpted handouts); "We've Come a Long Way, Maybe" (437-446).

9/27: "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" boardgame; Scanlon (472-480).

9/29: Discuss "Men are from Mars..." boardgame; Devor (447-452), Blum (453-459).

Week 7: "The New Cyber-You": Gender Codes and the Internet

10/2: Miller (505-514), Croal and Hughes (702-705).

10/4: Stone (handout).

10/6: (Midterm) No class.

Week 8: Man and "Nature"

10/9: Smith, White (handouts).

10/11: View *Crocodile Hunter*.

10/13: Discuss *Crocodile Hunter*.

Week 9: Pop Culture and Its Discontents

10/16: *Generation X*, pp 3-60.

10/18: *Generation X*, pp 61-122.

10/20: No class.

Week 10: Standing Out(?)

10/23: *Generation X*, pp 123-179; Willis (744-756).

10/25: View *Wonder Woman*; "Representing the 'Other' in American Culture (599-608), Ray (299-307).

10/27: View *Xena: Warrior Princess*; Discuss *Wonder Woman* and *Xena*.

Week 11: Standing Out(?), continued

10/30: View and discuss Pink and Carey videos; Rose (279-288).

11/1: View and discuss Will and Grace.

11/3: No Class

Week 12: Apocalyptic Visions / Fighting Back(?)

11/6: View and discuss *La Jetee*.

11/8: Discuss *12 Monkeys* (view outside of class).

11/10: Discuss *The Matrix* (view outside of class).

Week 13: Apocalyptic Visions / Fighting Back(?)

11/13: *Blade Runner*, chapters 1-7.

11/15: *Blade Runner*, chapters 8-14.

11/17: *Blade Runner*, chapters 14-21.

11/18-11/26: Thanksgiving Break

Week 14: Fighting Back(?), continued

11/27: View *Fight Club*; Doskoch (618-624).

11/29: View *Fight Club*.

12/1: View and discuss *Fight Club*.

Week 15: The End

12/4: Discuss *Fight Club*; Evaluations.

12/6: No regular class: open office hours.

12/8: Take-home final exam due by noon in my mailbox: 231 Stansbury Hall