

LIBA 217: Ordinary America
Fall 2009

JR Donath

Office: MND 2011B/office phone: 278.5895

Office Hours: M 4:00-5:00, T 1:00-2:00 and by appointment

donathjr@csus.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides a graduate-level introduction to critical issues and approaches in the study of American popular and material culture. We will explore the ways in which each of us is both a user of and is used by these two expressive cultures. The world created by these cultures is all around us, influencing how we think, how we feel, how we vote, how we live our lives in countless ways. This course will use our own expertise as participants in contemporary culture as a take-off point for exploring the various roles available to us in ordinary America.

Cultural analysis occurs in a number of different fields, including Sociology, Communications, Anthropology, History, Cultural Studies, English, Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, and American Studies. Part of the task of this course will be to refine your ability to read, evaluate, and synthesize materials from these different disciplines into your own interdisciplinary analyses.

We will look primarily at the word of ordinary "stuff." We will analyze how such critical factors as ethnicity, race, gender, class, age, region, and sexuality are shaped by and reshaped in everyday culture.

The course offers you a chance to learn to use a variety of critical approaches to studying culture through readings, discussions, assignments, research and writing.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

- Marcel Danesi. *X-Rated! The Power of Mythic Symbolism in Popular Culture*.
- Karal Ann Marling. *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*.
- Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause. *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*
- John Storey. *An Introductory Guide to Culture Theory and Popular Culture*.
- A work of formula fiction of the student's choice
- Student's choice of text from LIBA 217 Enrichment Reading List
- *LIBA 217: Ordinary America Reader*. Available from University Copy + Print. 446 Howe Ave (behind Tokyo Fro's on Fair Oaks Blvd) 916.929.6147

EVALUATION

- Active participation in class discussions. Grade value: 50%
This is a discussion class in which your active participation is an essential part of your grade. ---The best way to feel confident to talk in class is to come prepared, having read and thought about the assigned readings.

At the minimum, seminar participation requires that you prepare one written question or comment on some aspect of the assigned reading each week---and provide it to me by 12 noon of the Monday the seminar meets (e-mail is best)

25% of the participation grade will be assigned to the student's presentation on a text from the LIBA 217 Enrichment Reading List.

- Research paper. Grade value: 50%

CALENDAR

WEEK 1/August 31: Why are we here??

WEEK 2/September 7: NO CLASS/LABOR DAY HOLIDAY

Read: Danesi: pp. vii-29, 141-163

WEEK 3/September 14: studying culture

read: Mechling: "An American Culture Grid, with Texts" (R)

Jenkins, et al: "Defining Popular Culture" (R)

Storey: chapter 1

WEEK 4/September 21: defining the field and a "sermon"

read: Nachbar: pp. 1-35

Gass: "Even if, by all the Oxen in the World" (R)

Storey: chapter 2

WEEK 5/September 28: popular culture and power

read: Storey: ch. 9; recommended: ch. 4

Gans "American Popular Culture and High Culture. . . (R)

**watch something on television that you'd otherwise NEVER choose to view

Enrichment Reading presentations

WEEK 6/October 5: the medium is the message

read: Nachbar: pp. 39-54, 82-120

Storey: ch. 8

Danesi: pp. 83-110

Enrichment Reading presentations

Step 1 of paper due

WEEK 7/October 12: formula

read: Nachbar: pp. 414-429, 476-488

Storey: ch. 7

Danesi: pp. 31-58

a "genre" novel of your choice (bring to seminar meeting)

Enrichment Reading presentations

WEEK 8/ October 19: Better Living through "isms"

Read: Storey: ch. 5

Danesi:

Nachbar: pp. 292-311

Enrichment Reading Presentations

WEEK 9/October 26: Living in a Material World

read: Willis: "Learning from the Banana (R)

Storey: ch. 8

Nachbar: pp. 169-185, 196-210 OR 211-234

Enrichment Reading presentations

WEEK 10/November 2: Classification, meaning and "value"

read: Ames: "Material Culture as Non-Verbal Communication" (R)

Gordon: " Material Culture in a Popular Vein (R)

Enrichment Reading presentations

Step 2 of paper due

WEEK 11/November 9: Consumption culture

read: Nachbar: pp. 245-261

Solomon: "You Are What You Eat" (R)

****Enrichment Reading presentations****

WEEK 12/November 16: Conspicuous Consumption

read: Handy: "Sweet savage teapot. . ." (R)

Danesi: ch. 3

****As needed: paper presentations****

WEEK 13/November 23: catch up day

****exchange of student papers (bring two copies of your draft to seminar meeting)****

WEEK 14/November 30: appointments with Donath

WEEK 15/December 7: return drafts to student partner and appointments (as desired)

WEEK 15/December 14: papers due by 5:30pm in MND 2011

ASSIGNMENTS

- **ENRICHMENT READING REPORT/25% of final grade**
Each student will present a text from the Enrichment Reading List and lead discussion. Presentation should go 10-15 minutes and discussion about 15-20 minutes.
 1. Prepare a précis: a short summary of the work that includes:
 - Information about the author's thesis
 - The type/body of evidence the author presents
 - Research Methods employed by author
 - Main Arguments /The work's structure
 - Conclusions

Don't make the mistake of "simply" reviewing or summarizing the reading

 2. Add 2-4 discussion questions at the end of your précis
 3. Make copies of your presentation materials for each seminar participant

- **RESEARCH PAPER/50% of final grade**
Undertake both primary and secondary research on an aspect of contemporary American culture of your choice. There is no formula expected for the paper, but it should be grounded in an explicit discussion of some specific historical and/or theoretical context. Your paper should frame your focal subject within least one of the issues (race, class, gender, sexuality, consumption, technology, power, subculture, etc.), and approaches (production, textual, audience, historical, "ism," etc.) considered by the seminar's texts and discussions..

Generally speaking, papers and projects focused on a relatively confined topic (i.e., a single movie rather than a whole genre, Barbie rather than children's toys) will be more successful than ones trying to tackle too large of a topic.

PAPERS should be approximately 15-20 pages and use one of the standard footnoting and bibliography formats (MLA, or APA). Include an annotated bibliography with at least 5 books beyond the course readings that locate your subject in both historical context and scholarly discourse.

Step 1: Due October 5

*Come up with an idea for your seminar paper and think up a working title.

*Using only **one** side of a piece of paper:

- Place your name and working title at the top of the page
- Describe the materials/ideas with which your paper will deal
- Identify a couple of potential primary sources/artifacts (and where you located/will locate them)
- Identify a couple of secondary sources that you think might be helpful
Include a source of information about a method or theory that might help you
- Write down any questions or problems you see/have encountered/need to think about

*Bring a copy of your page for each member of the seminar

Step 2: Due: November 2

*Using only one side of a piece of paper:

- Write an introduction to your paper
Include a thesis statement that you have highlighted or underlined
Outline your argument or the main ideas of your position
- At the bottom of the page, prepare an annotated bibliography of three of the resources you have consulted thus far

*Bring a copy of your page for each member of the seminar

Step 3: Due November 23

*Complete a working draft of your paper.

- The draft should be at least 10-15 pages long
- The draft should include endnotes or footnotes and a bibliography
- Bring 2 copies of your draft to the seminar meeting

*Each student will be assigned a “reading partner” and that person will provide a short, but detailed written evaluation/critique of their partner’s paper for the seminar meeting on **December 7**.

NO LATER THAN 5:30 pm on Tuesday, December 14, each student will turn in a portfolio that includes:

- The completed and evaluated step 1 assignment
- The completed and evaluated step 2 assignment
- Your readers’ responses and comments to the step 3 assignment
- The final copy of your paper