

Content & its Discontents

PAYING ATTENTION IN THE POP CULTURE ECONOMY

ANTH 360: Anthropology of Popular Culture



Photo: members of EXP, a K-pop group without Korean members whose tagline reads "born in NY, made in Seoul."

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SYLLABUS

THE ANTH OF POP

Rose gold iPhones, designer sneakers, K-Pop, youtube beauty tutorials: we tend to speak of pop culture as either mindless candy or as a technique of mass control. How might we find other ways to excavate popular culture “in the field” – and enmeshed and entangled with the politics and pleasures of everyday life around the world? And is it possible—or necessary—to both interrogate cultural meanings of mass media and actually enjoy the pleasures of pop?

We'll use a set of diverse theories to investigate pop culture's plural registers: cultural critique from the Frankfurt School before World War II, linguistics and literary theory from early 20th-century Russia and Switzerland, psychoanalysis, U.S. and global feminisms in the 1980s onward, contemporary Science and Technology Studies and Software Studies, and intersectional and postcolonial inversions of these traditions.

We are interested in the "sharing economy" of likes, tags, and shared content -- but also the idea that pop culture produces shared, collective social experiences that demand our attention as anthropologists. We'll also take sharing quite literally as a learning philosophy in class by keeping shared notes and documents, and developing pop projects of our own.

CONTACTING YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Best way to contact me is through email (chanman@uw.edu) or a message on Canvas. Please consult your syllabus before asking me about logistical questions about due dates and policies; that said, please feel free to message any time but do expect up to a 48 hour delay before a response, so best to ask classmates for last-minute questions.

My office and mailbox are at Denny Hall this quarter. **I will not be holding regular office hours**, but please do not hesitate to contact me to schedule a meeting. I can meet on campus, off-campus, or online via Skype, Google Hangouts, or Canvas either individually or in small groups.

I'm available to discuss your performance in the class, help you read closer into the assigned texts, offer one-on-one advice or mentoring for planning research projects, applying for scholarships, grad school, or jobs. *Please note: if you would like to use me as a reference for a job or other application, I will be able to write a stronger reference if I have had more contact with you throughout the quarter.*

COMMUNITY GUIDELINES

Your contribution to our classroom community is a major component of your grade (30%), so please read and understand everything listed below!

PROFESSIONALISM: I EXPECT THAT WE...

- **Respect deadlines and craftsmanship** (we turn everything in on time, and everything we produce is as polished, proofread, and as beautiful as it can be).
- **Respect the atmosphere of collegiality and teamwork:** we come to class prepared to discuss readings and other assignments, we come on time, we use our phones or other devices discretely (or not at all), and we speak to each other as colleagues who are called to work together to solve a challenge.
- **Exercise gumption and grit**—I am going to ask you to read challenging texts; do your best to “crack open” each reading and see where it can take you.
- **Please tell me in advance** if you need to miss a class, cannot turn in an assignment, or have reservations about the quality or rigor of your work before it is due. I am willing to work with anybody’s circumstances if I have enough context beforehand. That said,
- **Late or missing assignments** cannot be made-up, barring an unforeseen emergency and accompanying documentation. Sorry—it’s summer quarter, and there’s just not enough time for makeup work!
- **Regularly check in with the instructor and fellow classmates** about emergent needs in the classroom, learning styles and approaches, or opportunities for deeper learning. Check in with instructor if the classroom can be more inclusive or productive.
- **Build a culture of tolerance, inclusion, integrity, and the idea that we all have unique opportunities to develop intellectually, personally, and professionally.**
 - Let’s agree on a commitment to call each other in—rather than “call out”—biases, prejudices, and other blind spots when we can (and have the emotional space to do so.) Let’s also do our best to anticipate the effects that our words have on people with diverse experiences.

A NOTE ABOUT PLAGIARISM

All student work must be free of plagiarism. Plagiarism is defined in the University catalog and in the Student Handbook. Consult me if you have any questions.

A major part of your experience in the class will be reading, synthesizing, and using the knowledge and

ideas of others. It is the responsibility of the instructor to help you in this process and to be certain you learn to credit the work of others upon which you draw. To plagiarize is to appropriate and to pass off, as one's own ideas, writing or works of another. Plagiarism is no less of a misconduct violation than vandalism or assault. Ignorance of proper documentation procedures is the usual cause of plagiarism. This ignorance does not excuse the act. Students are responsible for learning how and when to document and attribute resources used in preparing a written or oral presentation. For more information, please refer to the Academic Honesty: Cheating and Plagiarism document prepared by the Committee on Academic Conduct in the College of Arts and Sciences, UW Seattle: <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/honesty.htm>

SKILLS WE WANT TO CULTIVATE HERE:

1. Sophisticated reading and mastery of theory
2. Writing incisively, and writing-on-the-real
3. Thinking analytically and practicing logical argumentation
4. Learning socially and collective responsibility
5. Persuasive rhetoric

WHAT IS AN *ARTIFACT*?

An artifact has two distinct—and strangely contradictory—meanings:

1. An object made by a human being, typically an item of cultural or historical interest. (*synonymous with: relic, article, handiwork*)
2. Something observed in a scientific investigation or experiment that is not naturally present but occurs as a result of the preparative or investigative procedure. (Such as a speck of dirt in a microscope, or a scratch on a telescope's mirror.)

What does it mean to think about pop culture's infinite products as an artifact, through both senses of the word? In this class, I will call upon you to always consider the dual nature of this word—an artifact is both the subject of cultural and historical interest and attention, but also as a side-effect or an accident of an ongoing practice or procedure.

EVALUATIONS & GRADES

You'll be evaluated in three categories. I will do my best to keep your grades transparent and regularly-updated, so you can check your progress on Canvas

30% CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

- stewardship and contribution to shared notes each week
- participation in classroom discussion, including leadership in posing questions, sharing materials, and encouraging your peers to share their thoughts freely.
- commitment to timeliness, punctuality, originality, and professionalism inside the classroom as well as in correspondence and written assignments.

30% ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD NOTES

- Choose a field site that you know you'll return to weekly throughout the quarter — pop culture is everywhere, so your field site can be anywhere, too. It might be the mall, a coffee shop, a bar/ music venue, a grocery store, your band's practice night, happy hour with your friends, an art gallery, or even a night in with your roommates watching Netflix. **Pick a social environment, where you can describe how people interact verbally and physically in a space.**
- Once a week, submit a 2 page (double-spaced, 12 point font) micro-essay that describes your participation in the field, your observations, and any insights you have about the people or practices you encounter.
- **For full points, your field notes should**
 - respond to major themes or ideas from class readings and discussions — this is a “sandbox” for you to experiment with the themes posed in class.
 - be well-crafted pieces of writing, proofread for grammar and spelling errors
 - demonstrate analytic curiosity and creativity and scholarly rigor

40% FINAL EXAM

- (see details below)

FINAL EXAM

Your final exam is a set of three take-home essays (4-5 pages each, double-spaced and 12 pt font) that are designed to demonstrate competency in three key areas.

- Persuasive writing skills, logic, and critical reasoning
- Mastery and application of major theoretical frameworks throughout the syllabus
- Creativity and interpretive skills

We will spend the entire quarter sharpening these skills through low-stakes writing assignments. Our collective task this quarter is to train one other to write a successful exam by reading and responding to each others' writing in shared documents and field note assignments.

Each essay should be organized around a strong thesis which makes an original claim that can be supported by evidence from key texts and artifacts. Your exam is open-book and open-note, and I will give you two of your questions at the beginning of the quarter—you are free to begin drafting your responses as soon as you like, though you will definitely want to begin finalizing your exam towards the end of the quarter. You are also free to collaborate with your peers to interpret theoretical nuances or ask for feedback, but exam answers should be individualized and novel. **Remember to adhere to University guidelines about academic integrity; cite your sources (including classroom discussions with your peers and instructor.)**

Two of your three questions are as follows:

1. You spent some time in your field site gathering notes about your observations and intuitions. **Form a strong thesis about what your field site reveals about the state of contemporary capitalism.** Describe how social meanings are made by human actors, as well as by non-human actors, in your field. Are those meanings contradictory, or are they complimentary? Do human actors and non-human actors cooperate, collaborate, or compete in the production of capitalism's meanings? And are those meanings produced by capitalism, or are they outside it? Make your argument using your own notes as evidence and in discussion with at least two thinkers from this class reading list.
2. What is the relationship between vision (the practices and technologies of viewing, watching, looking, and seeing) and political subjectivity? To ground your answer in a case study, pick any pop culture artifact — it can be an episode of a TV show, a music video, a taco from the taco truck, etc — and describe its social history. **Form a clear and persuasive argument using at least two theories from the class reading list.**

SHARED NOTES

We'll share a document (on Google Drive) that will serve as our master notes. I expect everybody to contribute in some way as part of your classroom community grade; you can use this space to

- document in-class discussions
- perform close readings of class texts
- pose questions to peers and create discussions

Feel free to bring your laptop or device to class to live-edit these notes. I will be checking in on the document to monitor our progress. Remember, you can use these notes (with citations) on your final exam. We will keep fresh notes for each of the four course modules; I will post links to the shared notes as we go.

Vandalism and harassment will never be tolerated within our shared documents. Remember, I will have full access to the document's revision history — and that changes are tracked by user.

COURSE SCHEDULE

MONDAY, JUNE 19: INTRODUCTIONS

Studying selfies / self-studies

Course overview & classroom community guidelines

Meanings

Our first module concerns *meaning*: the cultural practices that assign particular significations to certain words, images, sounds, and styles. Known as the field of semiotics, we'll think through cultural meanings alongside linguists and psychoanalysts, but we'll also abstract strategies for "reading" the embedded meanings within fashions, genres, melodies and rhythms, flavors, and other sensory stimulus in media.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21: SEMIOTICS / HOW THINGS MEAN



Marwick, *Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy* pp. 137-157



Drew, *Anyone can do it* pp. 254-268

MONDAY, JUNE 26: ADVERTISING AND MARKETING MEANINGS



Fieldnote #1 due



Hall, *Representation* (Introduction) pp. 1-29



Barthes, *Mythologies* (excerpt: *Soap Powders and Detergents*) pp. 36-38

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28: THE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION

📖 Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel* (excerpts, but scan the rest if you have time)

⚠️ You might want to get a head start on these excerpts—and consider collaborating on an outline in your shared notes (to split up the task.)

pp. 269-273; pp. 285-296; pp. 324-326; pp. 378-384

💬 Shared notes review

MONDAY, JULY 3:

📢 No class — holiday weekend

📅 Fieldnote #2 due (anytime before class on 6/5)



Graffiti in Paris

Markets

Is pop culture a natural organ of capitalism, or does it constantly produce new versions of capitalism altogether? The marketplace describes not only physical spaces where goods are bought and sold, but also economies of value wherein ideas, labor, consumer goods, and intellectual property transact. We are especially concerned with the cornerstone works of the Frankfurt School, a set of thinkers who asked how culture industries operate with/in marketplaces of the state and especially in anticipation of European fascism. We'll ask if their theories still hold water today—and how we might revisit their concerns in context of contemporary questions about authoritarianism, state violence, and political freedom both in the U.S. and around the world.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 5: ART & MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION



Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* **pp. 217-252**



In addition, please read Mark Greif's *American Idle*, published in *Harper's* ([link here](#))



Shared notes review

MONDAY, JULY 10: MUSIC MARKETS



Fieldnote #3 due



Adorno: *On Jazz* **pp. 470-492**

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12: WHAT IS NEOLIBERAL POP CULTURE?; OR, THE MILLENNIAL PROBLEM



Lukacs: *Dreamwork* **pp. 44-60**



Artifact: Please watch **Generation Like** before today's class (53:41)

MONDAY, JULY 17: BRANDING CULTURE

📖 Fieldnote #4 due

📖 Luvaas - Material Interventions: Indonesian DIY Fashion and the Regime of the Global Brand) **pp. 127-140**

💬 Shared notes review



Mark Zuckerberg at Oculus Rift demonstration in 2016

Montage

Montage refers to the processing of selecting, editing, and juxtaposing sections of film to reconstitute a whole sequence for the viewer. This everyday—and tedious practice—is performed by video editors around the world, but it is also a material activity that tells us how human audiovisual attention is valued, how time and space are re-imagined by collective audiences, and that unseen labor is always behind-the-scenes / behind the screens of popular culture.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 19: THE CINEMATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION II



Beller, *Cinematic Mode of Production* pp. 1-29

MONDAY, JULY 24: UBIQUITOUS LISTENING / CONSTANT CONTENT



Fieldnote #5 due



Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening* pp. xi-xxix

WEDNESDAY, JULY 26: CYBORG CULTURES



Haraway, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* pp. 291-316

MONDAY, JULY 31: POSTCOLONIAL COMPUTING



Fieldnote #6 due



Philip, et al. *Postcolonial Computing* pp. 3-23



Shared notes review

Matter

We often only read cultural productions at the level of their representation—that is, what meanings are inscribed upon the switches of hard drives, the textiles of fashion, or the celluloid of film. What would it mean to read materials and objects themselves as actors — as matter with vibrant meanings of their own, or as entities with their own creative potential in the world?

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2: VIBRANT MATTER



Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* pp. 2-38

MONDAY, AUGUST 7: CRITICAL FOODWAYS



Fieldnote #7 due



Padoongpatt, *Too Hot to Handle?* pp. 83-101

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9:



A Prehistory of the Cloud



Shared notes review

MONDAY, AUGUST 14: THE ENDS OF POP



Fieldnote #8 due

Revisit:



Marwick, *Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy*



Drew, *Anyone can do it*



Final exam question #3 revealed

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16: NO CLASS

Final exam due at 5 PM on Canvas (via online submission — please submit both a file attachment, and the body of your essay in the text box as backup)