

ANTH 360

Denny 212, 3:30-5:40 PM

Summer 2018

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Denny Loft (4th floor)

Anthropology of Pop Culture

Pleasure, politics, and possibilities in the excavation of popular cultures



“Art is magic
delivered from
the lie of being
truth.”

-Theodor Adorno

(photos: McDonald's Fry Art Box,
Camille Juno)



Vampire romance, designer sneakers, K-Pop, youtube beauty tutorials: we generally speak of these products as either mindless candy or as techniques 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 what does pop culture tell us about ourselves as observers, audiences, subcultures, a species, or an ecosystem?

The anthropology of popular culture is part of an ongoing move to invert the dynamic between the observing social scientist and her static cultural subject—pop culture is itself a commodity and practice that confuses audiences and subjects, timespaces, politics, and forms. This is how Hello Kitty can now find herself adjacent to a 17th-century kabuki mask in an art museum in Sweden: they are both artifacts, produced in a time and place with layers of context, but still ensconced in the mutating fields of observation, attention, memory, marketability, and reference. Put plainly: pop culture is at once novel and historical, seen yet still undiscovered, an object of value but still an abstraction.

We'll borrow from the language of archaeology to think of pop culture's products as artifacts that can be excavated. But we'll also borrow the language of the laboratory and scientific experimentation to paradoxically think of the **artifact as something accidental—something we observe that is not naturally present but occurs because of the experimental procedure** (think of dust or static). We'll bring into anthropological practice a toolkit of conceptual theories from a century of prominent thinkers in the field of cultural studies, linguistics, art history, literature, and film studies; in the process, we'll become scientists that can also diagnose the artifact to imagine its means of production, its impact in the world, its capacity to transform, and its agency as it traverses hands and eyes.

Learning Outcomes

After this quarter, students should:

- think like anthropologists: be able to observe and describe the political economy of popular culture.
- be able to analyze (in writing and speech) artifacts from pop culture in the context of broader social, political, and historical phenomena.
- account for popular culture's role in shaping and transforming individual identities, social belongings, local and global politics.
- develop familiarity with social theory and be able to address and critique these theories in contemporary contexts.

Your Outcomes

I encourage you to develop a personal plan at the start of the quarter for your own learning outcomes. What concrete skills do you want to leave this class with? What lines would you like to add to your resume? What work do you want to add to a portfolio? Thinking about these goals now will help you structure your activities in class in a way that are useful to you, and engage you with the material in real ways. For example:

- If you are interested in writing professionally as a cultural critic (like a film reviewer, a sports or music journalist, etc,) you might use your writing assignments as practice, and then compile these writings into a portfolio when you are applying for writing gigs.
- If you are a performer or musician, you might tailor your fieldwork assignment to focus on the production of a creative piece, and your weekly assignments can be used to motivate the completion of this piece.
- If you want to apply to graduate school, you might consider writing your final paper as a first draft for a writing sample that you will submit with your graduate applications.

The more you and I both know about your learning outcomes, the more I can help you with these projects! You will be most successful in this class if it can be materially useful for you later in life.

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 for the summer. Please message me to schedule an appointment, as I will not be holding regular office hours.

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 the biggest part of your grade (40%), 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, and we speak to each other as colleagues who are called to work together to address a challenge collectively.

Communicate needs and concerns and anticipate the needs of others

- **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 that are really working, or opportunities for deeper learning. Check in with instructor if the classroom can be more inclusive or productive for you.
- **Build a culture of tolerance, inclusion, integrity, and the idea that we all have unique opportunities to develop intellectually, personally, and professionally.**

Attendance Policy

This class has no formal attendance policy; your attendance is voluntary and ungraded. Thus, there is no need to contact me to disclose absences (unless you anticipate missing multiple days and want to build a plan to mitigate lost class time.) In respect for your privacy and agency, I do not require you to disclose the nature of your issues (unless you want.)

That said, your performance in this class will be evaluated and supported by your participation in class discussions and in response to your peers' presentations. Historically, students who regularly miss class find writing the final paper and other assignments exponentially more difficult, and thus, do not perform as well. Additionally, I will occasionally grade in-class activities and writing prompts, for which we cannot recreate in the form of make-up work.

To the best of your ability, please show respect for your classmates by coming to class on time and respecting time limits for breaks and activities. This helps us stay on schedule and be equitable.

Technology Policy

You can use your cell phone or other devices in the classroom, and may even be encouraged to do so to participate in in-class activities. You may also use your phone for personal purposes, but I request that you do so discretely so as not to distract other students.

Reading Theory: Challenges and Opportunities

As a 300-level class in anthropology, a major project in this class is to expose you to major theories in the field of cultural analysis. These texts, however, are notoriously challenging, difficult to parse, and riddled with context-specific jargon. Therein lies, however, an opportunity to develop discipline and fortitude around critical reading skills. Remember: you are not expected to fully grasp or understand the arguments of these texts; instead, you should demonstrate willingness to investigate and open up these ideas.

Here are some reading strategies that I think will be helpful in case you get frustrated:

- Give yourself 20 minutes to scan the text without dwelling on vocabulary, and then try to summarize what you've read in another 20 minutes on paper, using the text to guide you.
- Highlight or underline keywords that you don't understand. Find one or two instances embedded within a passage, and focus on deconstructing that single passage alone.
- Google is your friend! Search for book reviews, essays, blog posts, discussion forums, youtube videos, and other places where other students and scholars are discussing this piece. For example, you might use a search query like "Deleuze Cinema 1 notes" to find other scholars' analyses of the text.
- Work with your peers in small ad-hoc reading groups, or share a collective document (on Google Docs or Canvas) to split up the reading into portions or keywords.

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:

- verbal and written argumentation
- ethnographic observation
- reading theory & close reading
- critiquing theory — and advancing new theories

Grade distribution

30%: Weekly Fieldnotes

30%: Final Essay

40% Classroom community contributions

- Group presentation (On Mondays; more details below)
- Preparedness and participation to class discussions
- Completion of in-class activities and mini writing assignments

Assignments

Theoretical Presentation

Write and deliver an in-class presentation that describes a theoretical writing (assigned on Mondays). These texts are challenging for advanced scholars to read and discuss; your presentation should represent a “first take” of this text. Your group will compile and submit a written document to the Canvas

by **Sunday evening (5 PM)** so that we can all get a chance to read your thoughts and save them as notes for our discussions and final paper.

Your written document should include:

- An introduction to the main arguments of the text and some context about the author and the time the piece was written. (2-3 pages double-spaced)
- A list of at least five keywords, ideas, or concepts pulled from the text (including citations,) and your best attempt to define what these ideas mean. (1-2 pages)
- A brief analysis of a contemporary pop culture artifact of your choosing (include a paragraph summary of this phenomenon, book, issue, etc, or a link to a video or audio file) using the week's reading to "open up" problems, questions, or new interpretations. You may want to use your group's keyword list to help structure your analysis. (2-3 pages, double spaced.)
- A second analysis of another pop culture artifact of your choosing (2-3 pages.)
- A brief note in which each group member describes, in their own words, their contributions to the group presentation.

Your in-class presentation should be structured through:

- An opening icebreaker activity or question to "prime" us into thinking about the reading and its main issues. (5-10 minutes)
- A brief biosketch of the author, the time and place the piece was written, and how this context may inform the writing of the text in question. (5 minutes)
- A description of the text's main argument and an overview of the supporting arguments that help make this claim. (5-10 minutes)
- A presentation of the case studies of pop culture artifacts you analyzed in the written document. (You can play clips or synopses the content). (5-10 minutes)
- A facilitated class discussion about these case studies; please bring discussion questions that ask the class to use the text to interpret and read these pieces. (20 minutes)

It is up to your group to decide how to divide the labor of writing and presenting, but there is an expectation that all group members should both write and present some portion of the presentation.

Field Notebook

Anthropologists practice a kind of writing called ethnography; ethnographers observe human social activity and describe it in language. You will choose a site of pop cultural production and follow it for a quarter on a week-by-week basis, and describe what you see, hear, taste, smell, feel, say, etc. Think of this as a kind of anthropological journal; it need not be profound nor beautiful. But these notes will become the raw data for your final paper, as well as a kind of sandbox for you to work out curiosities and questions you have about the phenomena you observe.

Choose a field site that is manageable and interesting to you—it's helpful if it's something you already regularly do. For example: a coffeeshop, a music venue, the mall, a bar, a Facebook group, your instagram feed, band practice, dance class, Netflix night at home with friends, your own YouTube channel, etc.

By Wednesday evenings (11:59 PM) please submit a 2 page vignette (double-spaced) about what you did and experienced in your field site to Canvas. You may incorporate interviews, surveys, or other ethnographic activities as well as reflections about your observations.

Final Paper

On **August 22 (5 PM)**, you will submit a 6-8 page paper (double-spaced) that opens up a vignette from your fieldwork this quarter with a problem that can be answered using one of the theories we've read in class. We'll develop a rubric for how to evaluate this paper together, so expect a formal assignment that briefs you about these expectations.