American Popular Culture  
5AAEB073

Level/Semester taught: Level 5, 2nd year module, semester 1  
Convenor/Teacher: Dr Clare Birchall < clare.birchall@kcl.ac.uk>  
Office: VWB 627  
Credit Value: 15 credits  

Assessment:  
1) 1000-word critical glossary of key terms due 10\textsuperscript{th} Nov 2015 1pm, worth 15\% of final mark;  
2) 3000-word essay, due 12th Jan 2016, 1pm worth 85\% of final mark.  
[Please check these dates on the department website and Keats. They were correct at the time of going to print!]  
3) Formative, unassessed work: Group seminar presentation

Module Description  
The focus of this module will be on critically evaluating the place and meaning of American popular culture in contemporary life. In order to fully understand the contemporary moment, however, we will locate the complex historical and transnational roots of American popular culture. For example, we will consider how ambivalent Puritan attitudes towards "worldly delights" has shaped wider cultural perceptions of popular culture, and the politics of imported (and distorted) African cultural traditions that became a feature of Plantation life and shaped centuries of music production and consumption. We will also discuss how American ideals, both constitutional (such as freedom of the press, and also the right to keep and bear arms) and mythic (the American Dream, the frontier, individualism) have influenced the place and content of popular culture in the US. These histories will give us a fuller understanding of contemporary forms.

This module will teach you how to perform close readings of popular cultural practices and forms, and how to contextualise those forms at the national and transnational level. We will look to historical and contemporary forms to explore the politics of popular culture. Forms we will consider include tabloids such as The National Enquirer, Hollywood film, music videos, television shows, social media and digital platforms, theme parks, video games, and comics. But we will also examine popular phenomena, practices and events such blackface, drag, African-American "Indians" in New Orleans Mardi Gras, the 1963 March on Washington, plastic surgery, hipsters, and Disneyland. Contemporary processes such as pornographication and gentrification, and theoretical approaches like postmodernism, postfeminism and posthumanism will inform the most recent examples of popular culture.

We will be seeking to understand how self- and collective understanding today is produced culturally; how power operates through such culture; how freedom is realised and constrained; how cultural values and tastes are produced and reproduced; and how injustice is both perpetrated and resisted in popular culture (many people know that \textit{The Simpsons},
for example, is replete with critical parodies of bourgeois values, cultural prejudices and
global capitalism; but not many realise that the production company uses cheap labour in
Korea). This will be an interdisciplinary course drawing on American cultural studies, history,
media studies, political theory, and literary theory. Popular culture as an 'object' of inquiry
belongs to no single discipline, not least because it plays a significant role in many aspects
of the contemporary life of social groups and individuals living in a multicultural and
extremely diverse modern America, one which is increasingly 'globalised' and connected - in
many senses - to other societies around the world.

Lecture/seminar programme

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<td>American Dreams: Myth, Immigration, Celebrity and Popular Culture</td>
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Useful background reading

## The Emergence of American Popular Culture: Puritan “worldly delights”, slave culture, folk tradition, leisure time, press freedom, and technological innovation

**Set Reading**

**Further Reading**

## Week 2
### American Dreams: Myth, Immigration, Celebrity

**Set Reading**

**Further Reading**

## Week 3
### The Politics of Performance: Blackface, Buffalo Bill and Drag

**Set Reading**

**Further Reading**
**Gender Performance**

Blackface

Buffalo Bill and the Wild West

**Week 4**
**Street Life: Protest, Festivals, & Mardi Gras**

Set Reading

Further Reading

**Week 5**
**Hollywood and Ideology: Reading Adorno against HUAC**

Set Reading

Further Reading
* D. Strinati, An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture, Routledge, 1995, pp 45-76.

**Week 6**
Reading Week

**Week 7**
The Politics of Taste: Trailer Trash, Kitsch, Hipsters, & Gentrification

Set Reading

Further Reading
Hipsters
(See Keats for news articles)
* M. Grief et al. (Eds) What was the Hipster? N+1 Foundation, 2010.

Subcultures
* Dick Hebdidge, Subculture: The Meaning of Style, London Routledge, 1979. (Note, this book is about British punk, but it is considered a classic in subculture studies.)

Bourdieu

**Week 8**
Postmodern Pop Culture: Disneyland & Vegas
Set Reading

Further Reading

Week 9
**Postfeminist Pop Culture: Pageants, Pornographication & Rape Revenge Fantasies**

Set Reading

Further Reading
**Postfeminism**

**Pornographication**
Posthuman Pop Culture: Superman, Cyborgs, Plastic Surgery & Zombie Politics

Set Reading

Further Reading

Week 11
Postnational Pop Culture: Cultural Imperialism, Hybrid Forms, & Globalisation

Set Reading

Further Reading