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Course title:	Popular Culture: Berlin and Beyond
Track:	B-Track
Language of instruction:	English
Contact hours:	48 (6 per day)
ECTS-Credits:	4

Course description

John Story has pointed out, correctly, that ‘popular culture’ is essentially “an empty conceptual category.” That does not mean, however, that the many things and practices the term potentially signifies are not real or meaningful. Popular culture, as it is understood in cultural studies, surrounds us in our daily lives; it informs our values, our habits, and our desires—it provides us with ever-changing visions of the good life, it entertains us, and it moves us. Popular culture simultaneously mirrors and generates cultural imperatives and, in doing so, not only provides us with a variety of pleasures, but also holds decisive powers over the lives of people. From a cultural studies perspective, then, popular culture constitutes a rich and important field, one in which we can study and try to understand how societies create, negotiate, and strengthen or undermine values, identities, and behaviors. A city like Berlin moreover lends itself as the perfect context in which to experience the phenomena we talk about in class first hand.

When the eponymous heroine of the 1990s television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* attends her first college class, titled “Images of Pop Culture,” her professor points out that “[t]he point of this course is not to critique popular American culture. It is not to pick at it, or look down upon it. And it is not to watch videos for credit.” This same applies to this seminar. We will follow cultural critic Eva Illouz, who argues that the “point of cultural analysis is not to measure cultural practices against what they ought to be or ought to have been but rather to understand how they have come to be what they are and why, in being what they are, they ‘accomplish things’ for people.” This does not mean, however, that our approach will be un-critical; but we will concentrate on trying to understand what the various instances of popular culture mean, how they work, and why they “‘accomplish things’ for people,” as Illouz puts it.

We will approach the heterogeneous cultural landscape subsumed under the moniker ‘popular’ by focusing in each session on a specific form or mode of popular culture—art, for instance, or music, or food—and using examples from the contemporary (mostly) American context to discuss the manifold ways in which the things, practices, and discourses acquire meaning for the people engaging with them. We will address politics and economics as well as aesthetics and form; we will discuss the pleasures we derive from popular culture as well as the destructive potentials it may hold. And we will turn to the practical side of things by going on a number of field trips to explore the pop cultural landscape of Berlin.

Student profile

This course is open to all students. No previous experience with (pop) cultural studies is necessary.

Prerequisites

Students should be able to speak and read English at an upper intermediate level (B2/C1).

Course requirements

- Consistent **preparation**, regular **attendance**, and active **participation**: the more you contribute, the better the class is going to be.
- Two **response papers** (approx. 1 page/350 words) due via email on the day before class: You can use these papers to pose questions, point out issues that interest, confuse, or anger you, and/or offer a short reading of any of the materials we will discuss in the respective class. These response papers will jumpstart the discussion in class and help me decide which aspects to emphasize.
- **Study questions** and **mini-presentation** (due via email the week before the respective class): Come up with 3-5 questions to guide the session’s reading and prepare a short presentation (approx. 5 minutes) to introduce the material at the beginning of class.

Grading

Participation: 30 %
 Response Papers: 40 %
 Study Questions & Presentation: 30 %

Reading

A course reader will be provided at the first course meeting.

Course schedule

Date	Program*
Tuesday, July 24, 2018	<p>Session 1 Introduction: Theory, History, Forms.</p> <p>What is culture? What is popular? What is popular culture? In this session, we will map the territory of popular culture by thinking about the term, its history, and various related or oppositional concepts, e.g. mass culture, avant-garde culture, subculture, and high culture. Building on these theoretical considerations, we will move on to an overview of the different forms of pop culture that we will discuss in this seminar, such as street art, pop music, food, and advertising.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Illouz, Eva. "Introduction." <i>Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help</i>. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. 1-20. Print.</p> <p>Eagleton, Terry. "Culture and Civilization." <i>Culture</i>. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 1-29. Print.</p> <p>Story, John. "What is Popular Culture?" <i>Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction</i>. London: Routledge, 2015. 1-17. Print.</p>
Friday, July 27, 2018	<p>Session 2 Art: Popular Art, Street Art, and the Market.</p> <p>In this session, we will delve into our first case study: art. We will get acquainted with various forms of popular art, in</p>

	<p>particular with the relatively recent trend of street art. An additional focus of this session will be on capitalism and the market, since the oscillation of popular culture between commercialization and counterculture is an important factor in all the different cultural arenas we will discuss in this seminar.</p> <p>Field Trip: Explore street art and graffiti at Teufelsberg.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Ferrell, Jeff. "Graffiti, street art and the politics of complexity." <i>Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art</i>. Ed. Jeffrey Ian Ross. London; New York: Routledge, 2016. xxx-xxxviii. Print.</p> <p>Wells, Maia Morgan. "Graffiti, street art, and the evolution of the art market." <i>Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art</i>. London; New York: Routledge, 2016. 464-473. Print.</p> <p>Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." <i>Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938</i>. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. London: Harvard University Press, 2002. 101-133. Print. (Excerpts).</p>
<p>Tuesday, July 31, 2018</p>	<p>Session 3 Music: Genres, Genders, and Aesthetics.</p> <p>Ranging from funk, heavy metal, punk rock, and rap to the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears, music is perhaps the most popular form of popular culture. This extremely heterogeneous field allows us to talk about economics, production techniques, and new media, while at the same time addressing politics, identity, and aesthetics. A special focus of this session will be visual culture (i.e. music videos), gender, and race, which we will discuss via Beyoncé's 2016 visual album <i>Lemonade</i>.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Bennet, Andy, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee. "Introduction." <i>The Popular Music Studies Reader</i>. London; New York: Routledge, 2006. 1-7. Print.</p> <p>Holt, Fabian. "Music in New Media." <i>The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture</i>. Eds. Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard. New York; London: Routledge, 2014. 301-09. Print.</p> <p>Railton, Diane, and Paul Watson. "Introduction: The Kleenexes of Popular Culture?" <i>Music Video and the Politics of Representation</i>. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. 1-14. Print.</p>
<p>Friday, August 3, 2018</p>	<p>Session 4 Food: Identities, Bodies, Economies</p> <p>As the editors of <i>Food and Culture</i> point out, "food touches everything." Ethnicity, consumption, identity and embodiment are just a few issues actualized and negotiated</p>

	<p>through food. Fatness and thinness furthermore remain crucial aesthetic and identitarian categories in the economy and culture of the neoliberal age. In this session, we will first discuss a variety of practices and discourses surrounding food, and then turn from theory to practice: guided by the popular blog <i>Berlin Food Stories</i>, we will explore the city's culinary landscape and see which dimensions of meaning making are at work.</p> <p>Field Trip: Explore Berlin's 'foodscape'.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Parasecoli, Fabio. "Pop Culture Drama: Food and Body Politics." <i>Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture</i>. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2008. 1-14. Print.</p> <p>Gunkel, Ann Hetzel. "Food and Culture." <i>A Companion to Popular Culture</i>. Ed. Gary Burns. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2016. 245-263. Print.</p> <p>Guthman, Julie. "Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies." <i>The Fat Studies Reader</i>. Eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay. New York: New York University Press, 2009. 187-196. Print.</p>
<p>Tuesday, August 7, 2018</p>	<p>Session 5 The Internet: Leisure, Procrastination, and Tiny Hamsters.</p> <p>The Internet is rapidly becoming the primary medium through which we experience popular culture, but at the same time, it has also produced entirely new forms of expression and entertainment. From social media to political memes, from selfies to hashtags, from Wikileaks to "Tiny Hamster Eating Tiny Burritos," the Internet and its attendant technologies structure our lives, tastes, and activities. In this session, we will address the various dimensions on which popular culture exists and operates online and focus specifically on the dynamics of work and leisure, on procrastination and self-expression.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Van Dijck, José. "Engineering Sociality in a Culture of Connectivity." <i>The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 3-23. Print.</p> <p>Spracklen, Karl. "A Theory of Digital Leisure." <i>Digital Leisure, the Internet and Popular Culture: Communities and Identities in a Digital Age</i>. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 74-92.</p> <p>Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Why I am Teaching a Course Called 'Wasting Time on the Internet'." <i>The New Yorker</i> 13 Nov. 2014. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.</p>
<p>Friday, August 10, 2018</p>	<p>Session 6 Television</p> <p>A popular favorite for decades, television has entered a new</p>

	<p>stage of cultural influence through the implementation of online streaming services. While much has been said about the advent of so-called Quality TV and the golden age of the TV series, we will focus in this session on a development that has garnered much attention recently: the success of the documentary format, or, more specifically, the crime documentary. HBO's <i>The Jinx</i> and <i>The Cheshire Murders</i>, and Netflix's <i>Making a Murderer</i> and <i>Amanda Knox</i> are just a few examples of a trend that touches upon our distinctions between trash and quality, sensationalism and empathy. Which pleasures lie in binge watching? What role does affect play in the success of these documentaries? These and other questions will be discussed in class.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>Jenner, Mareike. "Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching." <i>New Media & Society</i> 18.2 (Feb. 2016): 257-273. Print.</p> <p>Sharma, Sudeep. "Netflix and the Documentary Boom." <i>The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century</i>. Eds. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey. New York et al.: Bloomsbury, 2016. 143-154. Print.</p> <p>Friend, Stacie. "The Pleasures of Documentary Tragedy." <i>British Journal of Aesthetics</i> 47.2 (April 2007): 184-198. Print.</p>
<p>Tuesday, August 14, 2018</p>	<p>Session 7 Materiality and Consumerism: Things and their Contexts.</p> <p>Much of the popular culture addressed so far in this seminar comes in the form of material objects: art works, DVDs, sports equipment, food, iPhones, etc. In this concluding session, we will thus focus on popular culture as material culture. We will talk about mass-produced objects that acquire important meanings for the individuals who use them; we will talk about aesthetics and distinction; and we will talk about advertising and consumerism.</p> <p>Field Trip: The Mall of Berlin.</p> <p>Readings:</p> <p>McKee, Alan. "Introduction." <i>Beautiful Things in Popular Culture</i>. Malden: Blackwell, 2007. 1-14. Print.</p> <p>Story, John. "The Materiality of Popular Culture." <i>Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction</i>. London: Routledge, 2015. 225-38. Print.</p>
<p>Friday, August 17, 2018</p>	<p>Session 8 Wrap Up: Discussion and Roundtable</p>

*Field trips may be subject to change depending on the availability of appointments and speakers. On field trip days, adaptation of class times is possible.