

Politics and Popular Culture  
Political Science 330  
Spring 2007

John Reynolds  
Comenius 113  
610-861-1408  
[Mejvr01@moravian.edu](mailto:Mejvr01@moravian.edu)

Office Hours: M, W, F 10:00 – 11:00; T, Th 11:00 – 12:00 and by appointment

## **Introduction**

This course presumes that a powerful determinant of political behavior in any society can be found in the way culture shapes an understanding of the nature of human activity. That is, human beings necessarily must develop a way to help the world make sense. Without a framework for such understanding, human action is constantly problematic, human emotion is incomprehensible and social life impossible. To allow humans to establish and maintain satisfying and productive social relations, it is necessary to establish a common set of meanings and patterns of interaction that provide the context in which purposeful and moral action is possible.

These interactions are understood in a normative context. That is, they are characterized by definite but not always explicit values which members of a culture feel in varying degrees obligated to obey. These values are expressed through symbolic communication and manifest in symbolic action whereby members of a society reaffirm and recreate the fundamental commitments and beliefs which characterize the social order. Together, these symbols, commitments, values, meanings, and patterns of interaction shape behavior and prescribe the range of possible human activity within a given society.

Politics is among the behaviors that are shaped by culture. While the power relations which are the most fundamental aspect of politics are grounded in material as well as cultural factors, the experience of politics depends to a large extent on the symbolic context in which the citizen operates. Indeed, any citizen's understanding of his or her place in the political order depends fundamentally on the symbols, myths and rituals that define and express the society's basic political beliefs. Furthermore, the use of symbols for the expression of authority and the mobilization of interests is as fundamental to the operation of any political system as is the use of economic incentive and military coercion. **This is not to say that the political can be reduced to the symbolic. Nor is the cultural an artifact of the arrangement of power relations. Rather, to understand politics, it is necessary to be cognizant of the role of cultural processes in the exercise of power in any society.**

This course contends that political symbolic action extends to popular culture. While ideologies and belief systems are directly inculcated in formal institutions such as schools, corporations, and government, individuals are also exposed to the precepts of specific cultures through popular culture. Television, radio, literature, and movies all include symbolic communications and actions which express current and prevailing

ideas, values and social relations in a given society. These expressions often serve to reinforce the power of the dominant groups in a society but can be sources of innovation, change and even revolution. In an era when human beings in advanced industrial societies increasingly devote time to the consumption of popular culture, it becomes increasingly important to recognize that popular culture supports or challenges existing social organization.

### **Writing Intensive**

This is a writing intensive course. Consequently, it includes assignments that require students to engage in writing as a process, work in multiple drafts, revise written work, complete ungraded writing assignments, write in different genres and produce a certain quantity of written work. As such, the quality of writing will be a significant factor in evaluating all graded assignments.

### **Books**

Ben Agger, **Speeding Up Fast Capitalism: Internet Culture, Work, Families, Food, Bodies**, (Paradigm Publishers, 2004)

Benjamin Barber, **Jihad v McWorld**, (Ballantine Books, 1996)

Paul Cantor, **Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization**, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001)

Neil Postman, **Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Television**, (Penguin, 1985)

John Storey, **Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture**, (University of Georgia Press, 2003)

Lisbet van Zoonen, **Entertaining the Citizen**, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005)

### **Evaluation of Student's Work**

The student's grade will be determined on a 300 point basis through the following assignments:

Research paper final draft	100 points
Annotated bibliography	10 points
Thesis statement and outline	10 points
Peer editing report	5 points
Globalization essay	50 points
Entertainment and Citizenship Essay	50 points
Instructor evaluation	50 points

and journal

### Course Journal

Students will keep a course journal. Journal entries for each class and visual presentation are required. Frequently, the journal entry for a particular class meeting will be a response to a specific statement or assignment from the instructor. In the absence of specific instructions, however, the student is free to respond as they see fit. This could entail a summary of the class discussions, the identification of questions raised by the class meeting but not answered, a critical (positive or negative) reflection on the reading or ideas presented in class or **writing in support of any of the graded assignments in the course**. The journals will be collected periodically and returned with comments but **individual entries will not be graded**. The instructor will provide feedback as to the overall quality of the journals, however, and the journals will be assessed for consideration in the instructor evaluation portion of the grade.

### Research Project

Each student will complete a research project regarding the POLITICAL OR IDEOLOGICAL content of popular culture. The specific focus of the research will be determined by the student in consultation with the instructor. Research can be done on specific forms or popular culture or examples of popular culture (e.g. television shows, movies, music) or it can be done on issues that have political dimensions that are manifest or “negotiated” in popular culture (e.g. race, gender, religion, war). The final project will be at least 10 typewritten pages, will be completed using the writing process described below and will entail an oral presentation of the research at the end of the term. **THE DUE DATE FOR THE FINAL DRAFT OF THIS ASSIGNMENT WILL BE 4/23.**

In completing this assignment, students will be required to submit the following on the due dates specified immediately below:

#### Due dates

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1/24 | A preliminary statement identifying topic and explaining what the student anticipates doing  |
| 2/5  | A statement of the student’s plan’s for the research paper including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A preliminary thesis</li><li>• The types of sources to be used</li><li>• Thoughts about the form or genre to be used (analytical, narrative, persuasive, descriptive)</li><li>• A calendar for completion of the project</li></ul> |
| 3/14 | Annotated bibliography   |
| 3/19 | Thesis statement and outline of the paper  |
| 4/4  | A rough draft for peer editing   |
| 4/11 | Peer editing report  |

This requires that students provide the bibliographic information on each of their selected sources and a paragraph summarizing the content or significance of the source.

Thesis Statement and Outline

This requires a clear statement of the principal thesis of the paper and a good topic outline for the entire paper. The quality of the outline will be judged on how easy it would be for the writer to construct the paper with only the outline in front of him or her. Single page outlines will be ineligible for full credit.

Peer Editing Report

The peer editing report will be a written statement of the principal comments developed by the peer editor for the writer. The peer editor will be expected to share those comments with the writer but a copy of the written comments will be submitted to the instructor as well. **KEEP IN MIND THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PEER EDITOR IS TO HELP THE WRITER PRODUCE THE BEST PAPER THEY CAN, NOT TO TRY TO DEMONSTRATE HIS OR HER OWN SKILL OR COMPETENCE.** The instructor reserves the right to discuss the peer editors written comments with the writer.

**Globalization Essay**      **DUE: 2/28**

One of the most significant developments of the past thirty five years is the process of globalization. In this process, not have global markets arisen but the spread of western popular culture has been a major factor in shaping international relations, political conflict and economic transformation. In this course, two of the books being read address these issues: **Gilligan Unbound** and **Jihad v McWorld**. Both books present an argument that popular culture serves as a key variable in understanding the contemporary global position of the United States, how it is understood by Americans and how it is viewed by others in the world. Students will write a 5 to 7 page typewritten essay comparing and contrasting the material in these two books. The essay should address the following questions:

- What are the principal theses of each book?
- Do the authors' perspectives converge or diverge? Are the author's theses consistent with each other?
- Do they recognize similar ideological content in the current American view of where the United States belongs in the world?
- Do they agree or disagree about the merits of the content of American popular culture as it pertains to the U.S. position in the world?

In completing this essay, students must demonstrate evidence of having read each book. The essay should include concrete references to materials in each book with appropriate reporting of examples, data or quotations from the books to support any observations being made. Use of outside materials to strengthen the essay is welcome but not required. All references to the course texts or any outside sources must be appropriately cited.

### **Politics, Entertainment and Citizenship Essay    DUE: 3/26**

In the contemporary culture, the line between politics and entertainment has become a significant matter of discussion. The role of politics as a form of popular entertainment is not a new phenomena and clearly 19<sup>th</sup> Century partisan political activities often served as a form of public entertainment. The advent of radio, television and other electronic media, however, has reconfigured how political messages are distributed and, increasingly, there have arisen concerns that these media have diminished the quality of public discourse and the meaningfulness of democratic citizenship.

In this course, the books **Amusing Ourselves to Death** and **Entertaining the Citizen** pose different perspectives on the possible impact of television on the performance of the responsibilities and quality of democratic citizenship. Students will write a 5 to 7 page typewritten essay contrasting and comparing the themes of these two books as a way of assessing the contemporary relationship between entertainment media and citizenship. In doing so, the essay should address the following questions:

- What are the principal theses of each book? How does each author see the connection between entertainment and citizenship?
- How do the authors' perspectives differ? What different conclusions do they draw?
- Which author is more persuasive and why?
- Are there any significant variables or elements of entertainment media that the authors omit or neglect?

In completing this essay, students must demonstrate evidence of having read each book. The essay should include concrete references to materials in each book with appropriate reporting of examples, data or quotations from the books to support any observations being made. Use of outside materials to strengthen the essay is welcome but not required. All references to the course texts or any outside sources must be appropriately cited.

### **Class Schedule and Reading**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Assignment</b>
1/15	Introduction	

1/17	Culture and structure	Storey, pp. 1-8; Agger, pp. 1-33 <i>Start reading Cantor</i>
1/22-1/24	Nature of culture: shared meanings, symbolic action and interpretation of experience	Storey, pp. 9-71
1/29	Symbolic forms and popular culture	Storey, pp. 72-109
1/31	Culture and individual behavior	Storey, pp. 130-151
2/5	<b>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</b>	
2/7	Functions of symbolic action and collective behavior	Cantor, <b>entire</b>
2/12	Popular culture and ideology	<i>Start reading Barber</i>
2/14	Modernity, democracy and citizenship	Hudson, pp. "Models of Democracy," (24 pages) (to be distributed in class)
2/19-2/21	<b>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</b>	
2/26-2/28	Globalization and democracy	Barber, <b>entire</b> <i>Read Postman and van Zoonen over break</i>
3/12	Postmodernism	Purdy, <b>For Common Things</b> , pp. 9-76 (to be distributed in class)
3/14	<b>Run Lola Run</b>	
3/19	Entertainment and political discourse I	Postman, <b>entire</b>
3/21	Entertainment and political discourse II	van Zoonen, <b>entire</b>
3/26	Entertainment and political discourse III	
3/28-4/2	Music and social change	Storey, pp. 110-129
4/4	Consumption as culture	Agger, <b>entire</b>
4/11	Cyberculture I	
4/16	Cyberculture II	

4/18 Research reports

4/23 Research reports

4/25 Closing