



UWO  Winter 2020
MIT 2153B  Entertainment
Industries and Popular Culture
Tues 11:30-12:30 & Thurs 10:30-11:30  SH2355
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Pop culture is all around us. It leaps from website headlines, glows from our television screens, and flickers across the screens of our mall multiplexes. We swim in it like fish in water, usually oblivious to its effects. Yet how often do we really think about it critically? Does pop culture tap into our collective unconscious? Are there structures in popular narratives that can give our lives meaning? Are we commodity people? Are we lost in a postmodern virtual matrix of mass-produced images? Or do we still have the agency to make meaningful individual

choices? We'll use critical readings of popular culture from four schools of thought to try to answer these questions, focusing these critiques on a wide variety of cultural artifacts, visiting everything from the Death Star to Gotham City.

Books and Other Texts

- Dominic Strinati. *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Suzanne Collins. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, 2010.
- Chuck Palahniuk. *Fight Club*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.
- Frank Miller. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics, 2016.
- *Courseware Reader*: Contains all the articles used in the course plus some notes.
- Required Films: *Star Wars* (1977), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).
- Required TV: *Game of Thrones* S1, *Black Mirror*, *Rick and Morty* (selected episodes).

Workload

- Warmup Test (February 13): 20%
- Report (various due dates – see Owl under Announcements): 20%
- Participation (with a second report option if you're quiet): 15%
- Final Exam (3 hours): 45%

Synopsis of the Course (numbers indicate order of topics; some topics are double length; some later topics might be reduced or skipped if we run out of time; readings are in the reader or under Owl resources)

1. Prologue: Four Ages, Audience Engagement, Encoding/Decoding

A quick look the four ages of pop media, levels of audience engagement, and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model: are mass audiences ideological dupes? **Text:** ☺ Wikipedia article on Encoding/Decoding.

2. Theory One: Structuralism and Semiotics

The way narratives are structured by pop culture. How pop plays on mythic archetypes. Fun with Lévi-Strauss, Eco, Barthes and advertising. **Text:** ☺ Strinati Chapter 3. **Video:** "The Fantasy of Ultimate Purpose."

3. The Classical Monomyth and *Star Wars*

Archetypes again. The heroic mono-myth in ancient sagas and the modern cinema. Joseph Campbell on *Star Wars*. **Videos:** ☺ *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) [clips from the film]. **Text:** ☺ Doug Mann, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces and its Application to *Star Wars*."

4. The Structure of Dystopia and *The Hunger Games* [double length unit]

Utopia vs. dystopia. Dystopia as social nightmare. Its eight essential elements. Katniss Everdeen.

Text: ☺ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* [novel]. **Articles:** ☺ David Sisk, "Dystopia", *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Dystopia.aspx>. ☺ Valerie Estelle Frankel, "Reflection in a Plastic Mirror," *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games*, eds. Mary F. Pharr & Leisha A. Clark, Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 2012, pp. 49-58.

5. Theory Two: Mass Culture and Popular Culture

A look at the distinction between High, Folk and Mass Culture made by theorists like Arnold and Leavis. The decline of organic communities. Is pop culture a degraded form of high culture? **Text:** ☐ Strinati Chapter 1.

6. The Dark Knight Returns: Batman

The Bubblegum Fallacy and comic books. A look at the history of Batman in comics and the cinema, concentrating on his "dark knight" persona, and whether he's a popular avenger or a pseudo-fascist plutocrat defending property. **Texts:** ☐ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, "Introduction" and "Star Trek and the Bubble-Gum Fallacy." *The American Monomyth*, Garden City: Anchor, 1977, xvii-xxi, 1-4, 20-22, 249-251. ☐ Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* [graphic novel]. **Films:** ☐ *The Dark Knight* (2008). ☐ *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). **Short Articles on the Films:** ☐ Jordan Zakarin, "The Dark Knight Rises' Politics: Is Christopher Nolan's Batman Series Liberal or Conservative?", *Hollywood Reporter/Heat Vision*, July 18, 2012. ☐ Catherine Shoard, "Dark Knight Rises: Fancy a Capitalist Caped Crusader as Your Superhero?", *The Guardian Film Blog*, July 17, 2012. ☐ Steve Lafleur, "Batman and the French Revolution: The Political Meaning of *A Dark Knight Rises*", *C2C Journal*, August 30, 2012.

7. Is the Winter of Literacy, Rationality and Complexity Coming? *A Game of Thrones* [long unit]

Is mass culture hostile to deep, complex narratives? Is it causing us to become less literate and therefore less rational? Can serious television replace serious reading? The case of *A Game of Thrones*. **Texts:** ☐ F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930, pp. 3-5, 9-11, 18-19, 30-31. ☐ Carolyne Larrington, "Introduction." *Winter is Coming*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, pp. 16-25. ☐ Greg Littmann, "Maester Hobbes Goes to King's Landing" and David Hahn, "The Death of Lord Stark: The Perils of Idealism." *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper than Swords*. Ed. Henry Jacoby. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012, pp. 5-18, 75-85. **Must-See Television:** ☐ *Game of Thrones*, as much of Season 1 as you manage to watch (trust me: it's excellent).



8. Theory Three: Marxism, Media Control and the Infantilized Consumer

An exploration of a series of related ideas: the Marxist ideas of commodity fetishism and alienation, Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and Barber's notion of the infantilized consumer. Who owns the mass media? What ideologies do they propagate? **Texts:** ☺ Strinati, pp. 49-52, 115-129, 142-157. ☺ Benjamin Barber (2007), "3. Infantilizing Consumers: The Coming of Kidults," *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens*, NY: Norton, pp. 81-115, 352-355.

9. Situationism and *Fight Club* (shhh! don't talk about it!)

Have we become the emasculated slaves of consumerism? Have we mentally melded with our credit cards and Ikea furniture? Is there a way out? Ironically breaking the first rule of *Fight Club*.

Texts: ☺ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* [novel]. ☺ Douglas Mann (2010), "Situationism," *Understanding Society: A Survey of Modern Social Theory*, Toronto: Oxford UP, pp. 125-133.

10. OUTRAGE! The Culture Wars on YouTube (Warning: unsettling ideas will be discussed!)

Since 2013 the Western world has been torn apart by rhetorical battles on campuses, in tech corporations, on entertainment and news networks and in social media over the role that universities, networks and the state should play in controlling thought and speech and over aesthetic and ideological problems with recent films and TV produced by major entertainment corporations like Disney. We'll designate the warring parties, their philosophies, and look at about a dozen creators on YouTube (see Owl for a list of videos). **Texts:** ☺ Douglas

Murray, "Interlude – The Influence of Tech," *The Madness of Crowds*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 107-120.
© Mark Ledwich, "We have been misled about politically incorrect YouTube," *Medium*, December 23, 2018.
<https://medium.com/@markoledwich/we-have-been-misled-about-non-pc-youtube-b6ffea5e34fa> © Kevin McCaffree. "Honor, Dignity, Victim: A Tale of Three Intellectual Cultures." [a review of Campbell and Manning's book]. https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/honor-dignity-victim-cultures/

11. Theory Four: The Frankfurt School and the Culture Industry

Is pop culture a product of a capitalist culture industry that tries to stupefy us and turn us into one-dimensional people? Does it manufacture false needs? Standardization, pseudo-individualization, predictable plot structures and celebrity culture. **Texts:** □ Strinati Chapter 4, pp. 116-121; Chapter 2.

12. TV as Critical Theory: *Black Mirror* and Digital Culture

The problems with digital capitalism, and how the brilliant British TV satire addresses them. But can we escape the wall of screens, or are those dopamine hits just too sweet? **Video:** □ "15 Million Credits," *Black Mirror* episode 1.2. **Texts:** □ Charlie Brooker. "The Dark Side of Our Gadget Addiction." *The Guardian*, December 1, 2011. □ Leigh Alexander. "Black Mirror decodes our modern dread of technology." *Boing Boing* February 18, 2013. □ Terri Murray. "Black Mirror Reflections." *Philosophy Now* 97, 2013.

13. Cosmic Pessimism: *Rick and Morty*

Mad scientist Rick drags his peevisish grandson Morty down a wild series of rabbit holes into alternate universes where dark humour and surrealism rule the day. Cartoons as critical theory: a serious meditation on Lovecraft's cosmicism and the meaning of life. **Episodes:** "Total Rickall", "Rick Potion #9", "Get Schwifty". **Video:** "The Philosophy of Rick and Morty", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWFDHynfIE&t=217s>

Participation

I'll keep track of your participation in each class then use the following marks schema:

- 0-1: You never participate OR I have no idea who you are OR you miss 80%+ of the classes OR you play video games, surf social media or text on your cell phone during class.
- 2-5: I know who you are AND you participated 2-5 times OR you missed 50-75% of the classes but participated regularly and intelligently in all the rest.
- 6-8: You attended almost all classes AND participated meaningfully 6-10 times OR missed 30-45% of the classes but participated regularly and intelligently in all the rest.
- 9-11: You attended most classes AND participate meaningfully in at least half of them.
- 12-13: You say something meaningful in *every* class but one or two and know the texts.
- 14-15: You *always* participate meaningfully, skipped *at most* one class, show clear evidence that you know the readings, and aren't afraid to critique your classmates. You're a super-student!
- For mark ranges your actual grade will be based on the frequency and quality of your participation. A high premium will be placed on knowledge of the texts and willingness to engage with key issues (even if your fellow students disagree with you!), while uninformed opinions will be lightly regarded.

BEWARE THE DIGITAL ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE! To encourage students to pay attention, take their studies seriously and show respect to the lecturer, I reserve the right to deduct a **1% penalty** from your **participation grade** each time you are seen using your cell phone, social networking web sites or playing video games during lecture. No warning or notification will be given of this penalty. This penalty will be applied to your second report grade if you chose that option instead. Scientific studies have proven that digital devices cause attention deficits - that's why texting and driving is illegal. Moral of the story: *please* turn your gadgets off for 45 minutes during lecture. Don't be a digital zombie!



Reports

Under normal circumstances, students will be expected to write **one** report. These should be formatted as short essays or screenplays that include a bibliography and proper citations: I prefer MLA style. I'll announce the details of each topic on Owl, with a new topic roughly **every other week**, each with a distinct deadline. There will be at least **five topics** posted. Late penalty = 5% per day from when I get it, no exceptions.

You absolutely must show you've read **all the course readings and watched the videos** listed in the topic or face losing at least a full grade level. Also use proofreading technology to reduce language errors. Most topics will refer to a book, comic, film or TV show plus a historical/theoretical reading. Some will be screenplays or diaries. For screenplays, don't use Courier font: single-space speeches and scene descriptions, leaving spaces between these. I'll post an example of screenplay format. Also look up my "How to Write a Good Essay" on Owl for some common-sense advice like stating your thesis on page 1.

Second Report Option: You may, but don't have to, write a second report to replace your participation grade. Pick any topic other than the ones you wrote regular reports on. Clearly indicate this on the cover page. You should think about this if: (a) you miss four or more classes, or (b) you're silent in half or more of the classes, or (c) you never show any knowledge of the readings or videos, (d) I don't know your name.

Cells, Laptops and E-Mails

The use of **cell phones** is absolutely banned during lecture. They have zero academic use. **Laptops** may be used to take notes. But please do not use them to play games or surf the web during lecture.

I would like to conduct as much of class business as possible in person to avoid misunderstandings and the ever-worsening problem of e-mail congestion. Please don't email me **complex questions** about course content or your assignments: it's far more efficient for both of us if you speak to me in person about this sort of thing. However, short questions about the course, a recommendation of interesting books, films or TV shows, or a follow-up discussion of issues raised in the lecture are entirely fine. I will delete with Flash-speed questions or complaints concerning **grades**, including pleas for extensions - present these in person.

The same **standards of civility** apply to electronic communication as apply to personal conversations or letters. If I receive a rude or impolite e-mail I will blacklist your e-mail address. Don't rely on e-mail for any communication you think is important: thoughtless e-mails lead to bad feelings, though kind words and reading suggestions are always welcome! Short questions about non-mark issues are fine.

Plagiarism

This is copying text from another source and claiming that you wrote it yourself by not properly referencing where you got it from. Plagiarism is a serious offense: expect to *at least* fail the course if you get caught. I may request that students submit their essays to www.turnitin.com to avoid problems with plagiarism: don't be offended if I do (I know there's lots of web pages and essays on such popular topics as *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, and Campbell's monomyth out there - don't be tempted!). If it's not your idea, and it's not common knowledge, cite it! Common knowledge: "The Earth rotates around the Sun," "Karl Marx is a famous political theorist," "People read less in the digital era." Not common knowledge: "Joseph Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces promotes a monomyth that consists of seventeen stages."

NOTES FROM THE FIMS DEAN'S OFFICE

Winter 2020

Rights and Responsibilities

The conditions governing a student's ability to pursue their undergraduate education at Western are ratified by Senate and can be found on the Academic Policies section of the University Secretariat:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/rights_responsibilities.html

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence. All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software Turnitin under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system.

Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#)

Academic Consideration for Student Absence

Students will have up to two (2) opportunities during the regular academic year to use an on-line portal to self-report an absence during the

semester, provided the following conditions are met: the absence is no more than 48 hours in duration, and the assessment for which consideration is being sought is worth 30% or less of the student's final grade. Students are expected to contact their instructors within 24 hours of the end of the period of the self-reported absence, unless noted on the syllabus. Students are not able to use the self-reporting option in the following circumstances:

- during exam periods,
- absence of a duration greater than 48 hours,
- assessments worth more than 30% of the student's final grade,
- if a student has already used the self-reporting portal twice during the academic year

If the conditions for a Self-Reported Absence are NOT met, students will need to provide a Student Medical Certificate, if the absence is medical, or provide appropriate documentation if there are compassionate grounds for the absence in question. Students are encouraged to contact the FIMS Undergraduate Student Services Office to obtain more information about the relevant documentation.

Students should also note that individual instructors are not permitted to receive documentation directly from a student, whether in support of an application for consideration on medical grounds, or for other reasons. **All documentation required for absences that are not covered by the Self-Reported Absence Policy must be submitted to the Academic Counselling office of a student's home Faculty.**

For Western University policy on Consideration for Student Absence, see [Policy on Academic Consideration For Student Absences - Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs](#) and for the Student Medical Certificate (SMC), see:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the [Western Academic Calendar](#).

Grading at FIMS

- Normally, first year courses required for entry into an MIT or MPI module (MIT 1020E and MIT 1025F/G) are expected to have a course average between 68-72%.
- Normally, second year required courses (MIT 2000, 2100, 2200, 2500) are expected to have a course average between 70 and 75%.
- Normally, third year required courses (MIT 3000, 3100) are expected to have a course average between 72 and 77%.

Elective courses and 4th year seminars have no recommended course averages.

Support Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

SUPPORT SERVICES – LINKS

Office of the Registrar:

www.registrar.uwo.ca

Student Development Centre:

www.sdc.uwo.ca

Psychological Services:

www.sdc.uwo.ca/psych

Services for Students with

Disabilities:

www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd

Accessibility

Information:

www.accessibility.uwo.ca

/ Writing Support

Centre:

www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing

Learning Skills Services:

www.sdc.uwo.ca/learning

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Indigenous Services:

[http://indigenous.uwo.c](http://indigenous.uwo.ca/)

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International and Exchange Student

Centre:

www.sdc.uwo.ca/int Career

Centre at Western:

www.success.uwo.ca/careers/

Appendix A: Suggested Grade Ranges in MIT, MPI and MTP

Guidelines to the MIT Grade Range

These guidelines are benchmarks, and are not to be followed as rigid regulations. They will be adjusted as appropriate to take into account the level of the course and any specific instructions given by a professor. As well, competency in English language usage (including spelling and grammar) may be taken into account in the assignment of grades by individual instructors. Note that the 70-79 grade range is broken into two divisions, as this is the grade range into which a large number of students fall.

90-100 (Outstanding, A+)

The report shows sparkling originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic. Sophisticated synthesis and analysis of the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of the topic are demonstrated. Mastery of complex material and ideas is immediately evident. The topic is treated with sensitivity and subtlety of thought. The quality of the writing and background research is exemplary.

80-89 (Excellent, A)

The report shows originality and exhibits a high degree of critical analysis of the topic; it gets to the heart of the matter with comments and/or questions. It is clearly focused and logically organized. The quality of writing makes the report immediately understandable. Mastery of complex material and ideas is demonstrated. The report is of appropriate length, while preserving the priorities and emphasis of the material, so that the result is meaningful, not simplistic.

75-79 (Very Good, B+)

The report shows above average analysis, critical thinking and independent thought. Claims are supported by ample evidence and the components of the topic are well-researched and presented. The topic is addressed in reasonable depth and/or breadth and covers material appropriate to the course. The analysis is organized around focal points and the argument is easily followed. The report demonstrates an above average ability to write in an intelligible style and to condense material meaningfully and with a concern for priorities of that material.

70-74 (Good, B)

The report shows an attempt at analysis and critical thinking. Claims are supported by reasonable evidence. The topic is addressed in some depth and/or breadth, with references to the appropriate literature and course material. The analysis is organized around focal points. The report is generally well written and well argued.

60-69 (Competent, C)

The report demonstrates adequate comprehension of the topic. The report is on topic and is a reasonable summary of material covered in the course, but goes no further. Facts are stated accurately; the quality of writing is sufficiently intelligible with enough elaboration and enough connections made between ideas to permit a reader to understand the point of the report.

50-59 (Marginal, D)

The report shows less than adequate comprehension of the topic and of the material covered by the course. The report is a less than adequate summary of sources and/or is considerably off-topic. Facts are stated inaccurately or ambiguously; the writing style is difficult to follow; there is insufficient elaboration to permit reader's comprehension of relations among ideas; little judgment is shown in selecting detail for inclusion in the report.

Below 50 (Unacceptable, F)

The report demonstrates a failure to comprehend the topic. The material is disorganized and unintelligible. The report clearly does not meet the minimal requirements of the assignment.

Appendix B: Guidelines of Academic Appeals for FIMS Students

Grounds for Appeal:

The Faculty of Information and Media Studies does not view the appeals process as an opportunity for students to solicit a second opinion on a grade assigned to a particular piece of work. Appeals must pertain to the final grade in a course, and will only be entertained if sufficient grounds for appeal can be met, including: medical or compassionate circumstances, a defect in the evaluation process, bias, inaccuracy or unfairness.

Stages in the Appeals Process:

The first stage of the process is a discussion of the disputed grade with the appropriate Teaching Assistant (if applicable), and subsequently, the course Instructor. For grades assigned to individual assignments, essays, lab reports, projects and tests completed throughout the term, the student first must appeal to the Teaching Assistant or Instructor of the course, within three weeks of the date on which the Instructor or Teaching Assistant returned the assignments to the class. The Appeals Committee will not hear any further appeals about the final grade in any course unless this first step has been taken.

If completion of the first stage has not resolved the matter, the student may appeal the final grade in the course to the FIMS Appeals Committee. Appeals of final grades must be **within the time frame indicated in the Undergraduate Calendar.** It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the appeal is submitted within the deadline. The student shall submit a formal letter to the FIMS Appeals Committee outlining the grounds for the appeal, the remedy sought and relevant materials including the information about when and with whom (Teaching Assistant and/or Instructor) the student met, as described in Stage 1. If the appeal involves a request for work to be regraded, the original marked work and a clean copy (if possible) must be included. If the appeal is commenced once the deadline has passed, it will not be considered either by the Appeals Committee or by the Associate Dean.

The FIMS Appeals Committee has the discretion to determine whether the grounds for appeal have been met.

If the Committee deems that the reasons for the appeal are not legitimate, the Associate Dean will be informed. The appeal will be terminated and the student will be informed.

If the Committee decides that the grounds for appeal have been met, the following steps will be taken:

1. the course Instructor will be shown the appeal letter and offered an opportunity to make a written response;
2. if work is to be regraded, a reader will be appointed who is competent in the area in question and was not involved in the assignment of the original mark. The reader will consider the work in question and will arrive at an independent evaluation. If there is a large discrepancy between the original mark and the regraded mark, a second reader may be appointed by the Committee. **If the appointed reader(s) arrive at a grade within five marks of the original, the original grade will stand.**

The FIMS Appeals Committee will review the evidence and will make a recommendation on the case to the Associate Dean Undergraduate.

The Associate Dean Undergraduate will consider the recommendation from the Appeals Committee, and will make a decision. The student and the instructor will be notified promptly and in writing by the Associate Dean of the decision and of the change in grade, if any. Within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, the Associate Dean's decision on the matter is final.

Further appeals are possible under certain circumstances to the Senate Review Board Academic (for Undergraduate students) or to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (for Graduate students) but the student should carefully consult the guidelines regarding such Appeals.