PBPL 24000/SOCI 28035: “Consumerism and Popular Culture,” Summer 2009
Summer Session I, 2009, M-Th; 10:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m., HM 135

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This course examines consumerism and popular culture through a critical sociological lens, focusing on the social and ecological dimensions of modern goods and food production systems, marketing and branding, the news and entertainment media, and the “the new consumerism.” The course also explores the symbolic possibilities consumer culture offers for racial, ethnic and gender identities and, likewise, progressive attempts to address the problems posed by consumerism.

Grading:
30% attendance/participation (includes write-ups for media starvation and breaching exp.)
30% critical analyses (4 @ 7.5% each)
10% advertising assignment
30% final paper

Attendance/Participation: Students are expected to attend and participate in all classes. An absence can only be excused if it is brought to my attention (via email) before class.

Critical Analyses: This class emphasizes short, high-quality writing assignments. At least one critical analysis is due each week (four total) and can be submitted on any day of the week. Substitutions are possible; propose something to me (e.g., a film review). A critical analysis is a short essay that:

1) concisely analyzes, integrates all course reading(s) for that day,
2) is submitted at the beginning of class,
3) includes a word count (under “Tools” menu in Microsoft Word),
4) is 1-2 pages, single-spaced (500-1000 words),
5) and provides some critical commentary and reflection about the reading(s).

Critical analyses (CAs) are graded w/a check plus (7.5/7.5), check (6.5/7.5), or check minus (5.5/7.5). Most analyses will receive checks. CAs can be made up if you miss a week, but will be considered late.

Final Paper: Due on Monday, 7/13 (6-10 pages, double-spaced) on a topic of your choosing (discuss with me). The paper must reference at least five course readings but can include outside research.

Required Books:
• Pollan, Michael. 2006. The Omnivore's Dilemma.
• Johnson, Stephen. 2006. Everything Bad is Good for You.
COURSE SCHEDULE

Section I. Classical Views on Economic and Social Life in Contemporary America

Recommended Reading: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber  
*Capital*, Karl Marx; *Suicide*, Emile Durkheim; *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser  
*Corporation Nation*, Charles Derber; *One World, Ready or Not*, William Greider  
*Selling Women Short: Worker’s Rights at Wal-Mart*, Liza Featherstone  
*The Geography of Nowhere*, James Kunstler; *Fast Food, Fast Talk*, Robin Leidner  
*Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping and Social Inequality*, Christine L. Williams

WEEK 1:

6/22 (M): Introduction: Charting a Course, Defining Our Terms, Entering “Modernism”

In-class reading: Ritzer, “McDonaldization” (10 or so pages)

In-class film excerpt: Charlie Chaplin, “Modern Times” (18 min.)

In-class reading: Marx, “Fetishism of Commodities”

In-class film excerpt: “Maquilapolis” (21 min.)


Chalk: Broughton, “Reynosa Series” (27 pages); see also: www.naftastories.org

Chalk: Marx, “Stranged Labor” (8 pages)

Chalk: Terkel, “Working” (20 pages)

In-class film excerpt: “The Story of Stuff” (http://www.storyofstuff.com/)

In-class film excerpt: “Modern Meat” (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/)


Chalk: Broughton, “Migration as Engendered Practice” (work, immigration, identity at border)

Chalk: Leidner, “Fast Food, Fast Talk” (23 pages) (alienation in the interactive service sector)


6/24 (W): Rationalization of the Food System and Its Social Implications

Pollan, Michael, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Introduction, Chapters 1-7

Chalk: Eshel and Martin, “Diet, Energy and Global Warming” (skim for main ideas)

In-class guest: Pam Martin, Geophysics, University of Chicago (co-author of above reading)

In-class film excerpt: “The Future of Food” (www.hulu.com/watch/67878/the-future-of-food)

Recommended: Film: “King Corn” (http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/kingcorn/)

Film: “Seeing Through the Fence” (http://www.porchlifeproductions.com/)

Film: “Frontline, Poisoned Waters” (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/poisonedwaters/)


*Time*, “It’s not just Genetics”: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1813984,00.html

6/25 (Th): Anomie, Individualism and Life in the American Suburbs

Chalk: Durkheim, “Meaning of Anomy and Anomic Suicide” (6 pages)

Chalk: Twenge, “Generation Me: Confident, Assertive, Entitled, Miserable”

Chalk: Putnam, “Bowling Alone” (11 pages)

In-class film: “The Ice Storm” (113 min.)

Recommended: Chalk: *New York Times*, “The Six Figure Rootless Life” (9 pages)


Film: “Frontline, The Lost Children” (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/georgia/)

6/25 (Th) or 6/26 (F): Optional trip to view “Food, Inc.” at Landmark Century or Evanston CineArts!
Section II. The Consumer Society: Choice, Identity and Culture

Recommended Readings: The Theory of the Leisure Class, Thorstein Veblen
Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture became Consumer Culture, Heath & Potter
One Nation under Goods: Malls and the Seductions of American Shopping, Farrell
Branded: The Buying and Selling of American Teenagers, Alissa Quart
Variations on a Theme Park, M. Sorkin (editor)
Confessions of a Shopaholic, Sophie Kinsella
The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf

WEEK 2:

6/29 (M): Social and Psychological Dimensions of Consumerism
Lindstrom, Buyology: Truth and Lies about Why We Buy, Introduction, Chapters 1-9
In-class film: “The Persuaders” (60m) (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/)
In-class film excerpt (if time allows): “Super Size Me” (15 min.)
Recommended: Chalk: Schor, “The Overspent American” (14 pages)
Chalk: Chalk, “Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child” (marketing to kids)
Chalk: Chalk, “BrandSense” (17 breezy pages) (using all senses to sell products)
Chalk: New Yorker, “The Cost Conundrum” (health care consumerism and public policy)
(www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/06/01/090601fa_fact_gawande?currentPage=all)

6/30 (Tu): Consumerism, Advertising and Identity
Chalk: Kilbourne, “Forget the Rules! Enjoy the Wine” (25 pages)
Chalk: Kilbourne, “We are the Product” (17 pages)
Lindstrom, Buyology: Truth and Lies about Why We Buy, Chapters 10-11
DUE: Advertising Assignment (and short presentations)
In-class film: “Killing Us Softly 3” (34 min.)
In-class reading: “Two Cheers for Consumerism”
Recommended: Chalk: Pinker, “The Blank Slate: Gender” (20 pages)

7/1 (W): Brands and The Question of Choice
Schwartz, The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less, Prologue, Chapters 1, 3, 5, 10, 11 (others optional)
Chalk: The Economist, “The Case for Brands” (9 pages)
In-class film: “TED Talk: Barry Schwartz, The Paradox of Choice” (about 20 min.)
In-class film: “TED Talk: Malcolm Gladwell” (about 20 min.)
Recommended: Chalk: Klein, “No Logo” (13 pages)
Film: “An Inconvenient Truth”

7/2 (Th): Consumerism and the Production of Culture
DUE: Breaching Experiment
Gladwell, The Tipping Point, pp. 3-14 (Intro), 89-132 (Stickiness), 169-192 (Context)
In-class film: “Merchants of Cool” (60 min.)
Recommended: Chalk: Gladwell, New Yorker, “Cool Hunting” (10 pages)
Explore: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants (media consolidation)
Explore: http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart/main (media consolidation)
Section III. Popular Culture in Consumer Society

Recommended Readings: *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, Robert McChesney
*Class Act: Service and Inequality inside Luxury Hotels*, Rachel Sherman
*Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*, Joshua Gamson
*The Plug-In Drug: Televisions, Computers, Family Life*, Marie Winn
*Blue Chicago*, David Grazian; *No Brow*, John Seabrook

WEEK 3:

7/6 (M): Selling (Commercial) Experiences in the City
BEGIN: 48-hour media starvation exercise after class (no email, texting, Internet, TV, radio)
**In-class video visit:** David Grazian, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania
Recommended: Grazian, *On the Make: The Hustle of Urban Nightlife*, Chps 7, 8

7/7 (Tu): Hip Hop, Gangs, and Representations of Race
**Chalk:** Collins, “Controlling Images Black Women” (24 pages)
**Chalk:** Glassner, “Culture of Fear” (pp. xi-xxviii, 109-127)
**Watch:** “Hip Hop: Beyond Beats” (www.pbs.org/independentlens/hiphop/index.htm)
**In-class film excerpt:** “Ethnic Notions” (20 min.)
**In class film excerpts:** “Peter Pan,” “Pocahontas”
**In-class guest:** John Walker, Former South Side gang leader
**In-class film excerpt (if time):** “Bowling for Columbine” (30 min.)

7/8 (W): Social Class, Taste, and Celebrity in Popular Culture
**In-class discussion: media starvation exercise**
**Chalk:** Grindstaff, “The Money Shot” (read pp. 17-33 of Chp. 1 and all of Chp. 8)
**Chalk:** Scientific American, *Mind*, McAndrew, “Can Gossip Be Good?”
**In-class film excerpt:** “Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class”
**In-class film excerpt:** “People Like Us: Soc. Class in U.S.” (10 min.)
**In-class guest:** Frank McAndrew, Department of Psychology, Knox College

7/9 (Th): Evaluations of Popular Culture
Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, Introduction, Part II
**Chalk:** Lasn, “Culture Jamming”
**In-class reading:** “Exposure to Sex on TV May Increase Chance of Teen Pregnancy” (2 pages)
**Listen:** NPR, TV & Teen Pregnancy (www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96574085)
**In-class film excerpt:** “South Korea: The Most Wired Place on Earth”
(http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/south_korea802/)
**In-class film:** “TED Talk: Dan Gilbert, Stumbling on Happiness” (about 20 min.)
**In-class listening (if time, interest):** consumerist and anti-consumerist music
**Recommended:** Chalk: “Voluntary Simplicity” (15 pages)

7/10 (Fri): Blues and Authenticity (and Tourist Spectacle) in Chicago (optional for those 21 and older)
Evening meeting time (TBA); discussion with blues club owner (tentative)
**Chalk:** Grazian, “Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs”

WEEK 4:

7/13 (M): **Final paper due by 2 p.m. in GB218A or via email** (I can’t extend deadline; grades due 7/14)