A message-centered approach to teaching a college-level course in Popular Culture

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Abstract

Popular Culture, including mediated artifacts from film, television, music, and the internet, are prevalent in most people’s lives but often eschewed in academic settings. This essay provides insights into studying and teaching a graduate level course in popular culture through the lens of the communication studies discipline. It provides a message-centered approach that critically examines both mediated and non-mediated artifacts, focusing on the verbal and nonverbal, discursive and nondiscursive symbols that comprise the rhetoric of popular culture. Beginning with background and definitions, the essay then summarizes the course structure including objectives, required readings, and course assignments and their weightings. The focus then moves to examine in greater detail two specialized theories/models taught in the course – Deanna Sellnow’s Illusion of Life and Andrew Wood’s Omnitopia. Following this, a description is provided of an online dialogue assigned to discuss media effects. In the dialogue, students compare and contrast the perspectives found in Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and Steven Johnson’s *Everything Bad is Good for You*. The paper concludes with feedback from students and the author’s closing thoughts about the value of the course specifically and in studying popular culture in general.

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1. Introduction

The movie *The Avengers*, which regales audiences with the adventures of Marvel super heroes such as Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and the Incredible Hulk, was released in theaters on May 4, 2012. It opened to the biggest box office receipts in movie history, over $200 million USD in one weekend. In less than three weeks, it topped the $1 billion USD mark ($373 million in the United States, and $626 million globally), making it the fastest grossing movie of all time (Bowles, 2012).

I teach a graduate level course in Popular Culture, and a movie such as *The Avengers* is definitely an artifact that could fall under the scope of analysis in the class. That makes some educators cringe. Tell someone you are teaching a graduate level course using traditional and contemporary models of rhetorical analysis for critiquing cultural artifacts, and you will generally receive nods of approval. Tell them that you are analyzing popular culture and you may instead get a quizzical expression or perhaps even a sneer. There is something about the term popular culture—which generally (and correctly) denotes that you are examining artifacts such as television, music and music videos, video games, comic books/graphic novels, and blockbuster movies—that seems somehow “less than” cultural artifacts found in museums, art houses, and opera theaters.

This essay provides insights into studying and teaching popular culture through the lens of the communication studies discipline. That is, it is a message-centered approach that critically examines the verbal and nonverbal, vocal and nonvocal, discursive and nondiscursive symbols that comprise the rhetoric of popular culture. Starting first with some background and definitions, the essay then summarizes the course structure (e.g. objectives, readings, assignments), and then moves on to more specialized aspects of the course, including an overview of two specialty theories employed—the Illusion of Life and Omnitopia, followed by a description of an online dialogue assigned to discuss media effects. The paper concludes with feedback from students and the author’s closing thoughts about the value of the course.

1.1. Definitions

Williams (2005) does an excellent job breaking down the linguistic roots of words/terms such as *culture* and the *masses*, pointing specifically to the degeneration of Latin terms such as *mobile vulgas*. Referring originally, and non-judgmentally, to the shifting and dynamic multitude, we now have such negatively based concepts as *mob* and *vulgar*. It implies that anything pertaining or appealing to the masses must somehow be base, common, or lacking in good taste. Brummett (2011) and Sellnow (2010) identify an elitist culture which lauds theater, opera, classical music and renaissance art; a culture which simultaneously eschews popular genres such as jazz, romantic comedies, and art deco. Fortunately, the gap is being bridged and the distinctions blurred.

Part of that bridge is based on an economic foundation. Cusac and Faulk (2009), looking primarily at formats such as publications, film, television, and sound recordings, determined that, in 2004, the popular culture industry “contributed US $565 billion to the economy, 2.9% of the output in the United States” (p. 459). These numbers precede the launch of products such as the iPad, Nook, and Kindle, which further digitized and revolutionized the aforementioned industries.

In addition to such mass-produced and mediated artifacts, the course also included aspects of popular messages that are less industrialized yet still pervasive in contemporary culture, such as the growing popularity of tattoos or America’s fascination with the nostalgic simulacra of mythic locales such as Route 66. All of these artifacts are *texts* worthy of examination. A text, defined by Brummett (2011) is a “set of signs related to each other insofar as their meanings all contribute to the same set of effects or functions;” they are also “the ways in which we experience culture” (p. 29).

Essentially, it is important that we study the messages found within popular culture precisely because it is popular. It is what a majority of the people are reading, watching, listening to, and engaging in on a daily basis. In order to better understanding humans and how they communicate, we need to examine the messages they embrace, consume, pay for, dance to, celebrate with, and use for their definitions and construction of self. We need to look at what’s popular.

1.2. Brief Course Description

As taught, this is a Master’s level course offered as an elective within the Communication M.A. at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado, USA. The section described throughout was offered as an evening
course which met once a week. There were twenty students representing a variety of age groups, socioeconomic status, and ethnicities. Though some focus was given to international popular culture (e.g. the influence of the Beatles), given the locale, the focus was primarily on American popular culture.

2. The Course Structure

To set the tone for the course, the syllabus opens with the following quotation, titled “Pop Culture,” from the Post World War II American Literature and Culture Database, sponsored by the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley:

*Popular culture has been defined as everything from “common culture,” to “folk culture,” to “mass culture.” While it has been all those things at various points in history, in Post-War America, popular culture is undeniably associated with commercial culture and all its trappings: movies, television, radio, cyberspace, advertising, toys, nearly any commodity available for purchase, many forms of art, photography, games, and even group “experiences” like collective comet-watching or rave dancing on ecstasy. While humanities and social science departments before the 1950s would rarely have imagined including anything from the previous list in their curricula, it is now widely acknowledged that popular culture can and must be analyzed as an important part of US material, economic, and political culture.*

The course description reads: “This course is designed to examine contemporary Popular Culture through the lens of communication and rhetorical theory. Diverse embodiments of popular culture will be examined, including but not limited to film, television, the internet, music, and Americana.” A Blackboard shell was created for the course as a depository for course materials and a site for the online dialogue on media effects discussed later. The banner for the course (see Figure 1) included an assortment of visual images hoping to capture the variety of artifacts to be addressed.

![Fig. 1: Blackboard Banner for COMM 561 Popular Culture](image)

Most of the course focused on weekly readings and discussions. Generally, each week a new rhetorical methodology was introduced for critically interpreting cultural artifacts. Among these were popular methods frequently found in rhetorical criticism courses, e.g. Burke’s Dramatism, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm, Bormann’s Symbolic Convergence Theory, Marxist criticism, Feminist criticism, and media-centered models such as Social Learning Theory, Parasocial Relationship Theory, and Cultivation Theory. Theories were introduced through the required texts, supplementary readings posted online, and class lecture.

In addition, a number of documentaries were viewed throughout the course, including *Confessions of a Superhero, Reel Bad Arabs, Killing Us Softly 4*, and *Michael Jackson’s This Is It*. Two of the course’s text authors, Deanna Sellnow and Andrew Wood, Skyped into the class for a virtual guest lecture on their respective theories (discussed later). The class also included one field trip, with an outing to a local theater to see a production of *The Rocky Horror Show*.
2.1. Course Objectives

- Identify and discuss key issues and controversies surrounding the topic of popular culture, such as the debate concerning distinctions between high culture and pop culture, the impact of television and related media on individual and societal intellect, and the nature of communication messages produced by and about popular culture;
- Understand and apply key rhetorical theories and communication concepts to popular culture phenomena, e.g. narrative/dramatistic approaches, critical power approaches, visual and mediated approaches, and specialized theories such as Illusion of Life and Omnitopia;
- Reflect upon one’s own consumption of popular culture and the impact it has on one’s communication styles and effectiveness, and share those insights with others;
- Independently research and write a comprehensive analysis of a popular culture phenomenon of one’s choosing, interpreting the artifact in light of course concepts and theories, and be able to orally present those findings with like-minded colleagues in a manner consistent with professional academic venues;
- Critique and appraise the works of scholars and peers in light of course content.

2.2. Required Texts/Readings

- Additionally, approximately 20 journal articles were housed in the Blackboard site as required or recommended readings. Sample resources include The Journal of Popular Culture, Southern Communication Journal, the Quarterly Journal of Speech, Critical Studies in Mass Communication, Communication Monographs, Communication Studies, and Popular Music in Society.

2.3. Assignments/Weights

A research paper, in which students wrote a rhetorical/critical analysis on a popular culture topic of their choosing, accounted for a significant portion of the course grade (25%). The papers were 15-20 pages (typed, double-spaced, 1 inch margins, 10-12 pt. serif font, e.g. Times New Roman), not including references or appendices. APA or MLA style was required. A minimum of 15 references were required, with at least five coming from academic Communication journals. As this was a popular culture course, popular press citations were acceptable. No more than half the references could be from online-only resources.

Topics needed to fall under one of the following categories: Film, Radio/Television, Internet, Games, Contemporary History, Art/Visual, Americana. The latter topic included a subdivision focusing on the “American Road” for possible presentation at a conference (discussed later). One of the message-centered methodologies covered in class, e.g. Dramatism, Feminism, Illusion of Life, Omnitopia, needed to be applied as the analytical structure of the paper. 20% of the grade was based on the paper itself (including clarity and organization, depth of analysis, degree of understanding and insight demonstrated re: methodology and interpretation, and writing elements such as grammar and style), while the remaining 5% of the assignment was based on successful completion of a peer review process with fellow students. (Note: after topics were turned in, the categories were reorganized into three cohort groups, which ending up being Television/Film, Audio/Visual Culture, and The Road.)

Students were required to deliver their final paper (10% of grade) in a 10-15 minute presentation emulating a research conference. Like a conference, presenters were seated at a head table. The instructor served as moderator and, following the presentations, a question-and-answer session was held with the audience. Students were expected to deliver their paper extemporaneously; reading from manuscripts was not allowed.

The remainder of the grade was dispersed between attendance (10%), class participation (10%), one-page weekly responses to assigned readings (20%), an online dialogue discussed at the end of this essay (15%), a two-
page reflection paper following participation of an off-campus popular culture event of their choosing (5%), and an in-class report labeled a “Pop-up Presentation” (5%). The latter assignment was loosely based on an old VH1 television program called “Pop-up Video” in which a music video aired while historical trivia, insights and “info nuggets” were displayed throughout in little “pop-up” bubbles. In this case, students needed to select a popular culture artifact that was personally meaningful to them and, in a 5 to 15 minute presentation, tell the story using supplementary material (e.g. artifact, song, video) and share history and insights into the phenomenon. The assignment was refreshingly successful, as students shared everything from Beanie Babies and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to rap music and vintage clothing.

3. Specialty Theories/Models

As noted, students generally learned a new message-centered methodology each week. For those in the Communication or Rhetoric discipline, many of the models mentioned earlier will be familiar, e.g. Burke’s Dramatism, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm, Bormann’s Symbolic Convergence Theory. Space here does not allow explication of the methods. However, two models introduced are significantly worthy and unique to justify additional description here: Deanna Sellnow’s Illusion of Life and Andrew Wood’s Omnitopia. The author would once again like to thank professors Sellnow and Wood for Skyping into class and providing first-person insight on their theories to the class.

3.1. Sellnow’s Illusion of Life

Co-created with husband Tim Sellnow, the Illusion of Life methodology provides a message-centered model for analyzing both the discursive (symbols with fixed associations, e.g. words, lyrics) and nondiscursive (symbols felt as a quality, e.g. sounds, images) of music. Published in a variety of academic journals, Sellnow concisely summarizes the theory in a chapter from her 2010 Popular Culture textbook. The theory expounds upon earlier work by Suzanne Langer, and argues that music functions rhetorically by creating an illusion of life for its listeners. In other words, music is not actual life; rather, it is a symbolic representation of “life experiences and feelings influenced by the artist’s perspective” (p. 117).

The model provides a framework for analyzing the virtual experience, or symbolic lyrics, found in an artist’s work. Essentially, the rhetor or critic analyzes whether or not the lyrics are comic – which “focus on self-preservation” and “opportunities to beat the odds” – or tragic – which focus on “self-consummation, dealing with great moral sacrifices, and coping with fate” (p. 119). Additionally, either comic or tragic lyrics can be situated within a poetic illusion – which is backward looking into the past and cannot be altered – or within a dramatic illusion – which is “forward-looking into the virtual future” and “offers a sense of uncertain destiny” (p. 119). Thus, a song lyric in which a protagonist looks forward to new and exciting adventures would be described as comic and dramatic, while a song lyric in which the protagonist laments the loss of a romantic relationship would be tragic and poetic.

Most message-centered models provide only a framework for analyzing symbolic units, such as the examples above. What makes the Illusion of Life method unique is the additional criteria for analyzing nondiscursive elements in music such as the sound. Referred to as virtual time, the method offers a substitute for actual time (which is subdivided into successive movements such as minutes, hours, days, etc.), and identifies instead patterns which are communicated via rhythm, harmony, melody, phrasing, and instrumentation. Distinctions are made between intensity patterns and release patterns. An intensity pattern, exemplified by a hard rock song, is characterized by fast tempos, harsh and short-held tones, staccato phrasing, and many amplified instruments. In contrast, a release pattern, exemplified by a ballad, consists of a slow tempo, mellow and long-held tones, smooth and connected phrasing, and fewer and generally acoustic instruments. Sellnow provides greater detail in her distinctions, but the brief description above hopefully gives a feel for the methods and demonstrates that one need only be a traditional music consumer, not a trained musician or music professional, in order to hear the difference.

In additional to identifying the variables above, the goal of a critic is to determine whether the messages found in the music being analyzed are congruent or incongruent. A congruent message, according to Sellnow, occurs when “the emotional messages of the music and the conceptual messages of the lyrics reinforce one another, making the messages communicated poignant (clear) [p. 119].” Conversely, an incongruent message occurs when the emotions conveyed in the music and the conceptual elements of the lyrics contradict. This incongruence tends to alter the meaning of the song compared to simply listening to the music or reading the lyrics separately.
An example of a congruent song would be a comic and dramatic lyrical message paired with an intensity music pattern. Sellnow offers KISS’s classic rock anthem, “Rock and Roll All Nite” as an illustration. On the other side, one would find congruence when combing a tragic and poetic lyric with a release musical pattern. The example offered by Sellnow is Bruce Springsteen’s “Streets of Philadelphia,” the 1994 Academy Award winning song from the movie Philadelphia, focusing on the trauma associated with dying from HIV/AIDS. While congruent music is often effective in creating a particular mood or fostering in-group beliefs, it can sometimes lose rhetorical effectiveness by virtue of being too predictable to adherents and too controversial for outsiders. Sellnow discusses the use of strategic ambiguity and rhetorical ascription as neutralizing methods to temper the polemic nature of a congruent message and make it more palatable to a general audience.

Additionally, the critic can look for incongruity in a musical message, e.g. combining comic lyrics with release patterns or tragic lyrics with intensity patterns. While some might think these combinations chaotic, like the strategies noted above, the dissonance created can actually give the song a twist or a flavor that makes it more acceptable to a broader audience. For example, Sellnow revisits the KISS song “Rock and Roll All Nite;” this time analyzing the ballad-like cover version from Toad the Wet Sprocket. With its slow tempo, harmonic tone, and acoustic instrumentation, this version moves from an abrasive and potentially headache-inducing rock anthem with a call to action to simply a thoughtful and easily consumed musical rumination on the desire to party.

3.2. Wood’s Omnitopia

Though many of the course definitions of popular culture focus specifically on mediated texts such as television and the internet, as noted earlier, this graduate seminar sought to identify other aspects of American culture that were not mediated but were still popular, e.g. tattoos. As part of this conversation, we addressed non-mediated artifacts such as locales, roadside attractions, architecture, and increasingly popular home features such as “theater rooms” and “man caves.” Andrew Wood’s (2009) theory of Omnitopia provided a message-centered lens through which to view such phenomena.

Roughly translated to “all-place,” the concept of omnitopia “enacts a structural and perceptual enclave whose apparently distinct locales (and locals) convey inhabitants to a singular place (p. 10).” In other words, there exist in culture types of environments that, upon entering, one is cognitively removed from their literal locale and transported to a perceptual, yet strategically incomplete, location that is simultaneously detached from current space yet “everywhere” all at once. Quite simple examples would include a video game arcade at any mall, a McDonalds or Starbucks anyplace on the planet, or a generic conference presentation room found in many hotels. One could be in Denver, Colorado or Prague, Czech Republic – and it is in many ways one and the same space.

Wood discusses these places as enclaves; protective and instructive little worlds which have a distinctive identity apart from their surrounding milieu, characterized by “a paradoxical balance of porous borders and rigid rules” (p. 21). Again, space limits preclude an extensive discussion of the perspective. Briefly, Wood’s text provides in-depth analysis of three common omnitopia locales: airports, hotels, and shopping malls. In deconstructing their essence, he applies the following five criteria for analysis, all of which relate in varying degrees to the artifact being investigated:

- **Dislocation:** “detaches a site from its surrounding locale” (p. 65). Often, when entering a locale, the external surroundings become immediately irrelevant. We become insulated from the outside, and “here” removes the need or recognition of “there.” Casinos, malls, airports, and numerous other structures create such dislocated zones.

- **Conflation:** “merges disparate experiences into a single whole” (p. 68). In this case, multiple message-centered narratives – a “pastiche of functions, referents, and settings (p. 68)” merge into a single location. Examples include everything from a food court at the mall to Disney’s EPCOT Center, where elements of the whole world convene in a unified yet artificial arena.

- **Fragmentation:** “splits a singular environment into multiple perceptions” (p. 70). In contrast to conflation, an omnitopian environment may also fracture the “totality into isolated surface-level images, functions, and interactions” (p. 70). When every occupant in a car is listening to their private music on personal electronic devices, or movie-goers in a multi-plex theater sit in the same building, facing the same direction, but watch different movies on different screens, their locale is fragmented.

- **Mobility:** “orients a place around movement rather than stasis” (p. 73). This is the part of omnitopia in which disparate locales transform into “nodes of the same place” (p. 73). Anyone who has walked from
Airport A onto a plane and exits that plane at Airport B – without really feeling like they have gone anywhere – has experienced the movement, flow, and blurred edges of omnitopian mobility.

- **Mutability**: “enables the perceptual change of a place” (p. 76). Within an environment, changes may be purposefully or inadvertently enacted that alter the experience. From adapting a space by moving chairs around to seat a particular group, to setting up velvet ropes to cordon off movie-goers waiting in line to see *The Avengers*, many spaces are mutable. In some cases, the change may actually negate the feeling of being trapped in a singular environment.

Collectively, these five criteria become the basis for a message-centered critique of a popular culture locale. For those wishing to interpret the artifact in even greater detail, Wood concludes his text with three additional variables which help unpack and critically problematize the five-point structures found in the framework above. He addresses the characteristics of **performance** (“recasting of…props and rewriting of preset scripts,” p. 156) and **convergence** (“intersection of technology and convergence that allows its practitioners to carry a miniature version of the world with them,” p. 175), and concludes with the impact of **reverence** toward the phenomena (“to integrate the value of meaningful places into our sense of selves – not just to pass through them, but also to pass them through us,” p. 194).

### 4. Online Dialogue Regarding Media Effects

The Sellnow and Wood texts discussed above were required readings for class discussion and weekly reading response papers. Two other books, detailed below, were required in class, but there was no time to discuss or integrate them into the weekly regimen. As such, a completely separate online discussion, housed in Blackboard, was assigned. The web dialogue was divided into five two-week blocks. Readings from both books (approximately 80-90 pages) were assigned for each two-week block, and students were required to log into the discussion and contribute at least once to the ongoing conversation. Briefly, zero comments during a two-week block meant an F for that block. The required minimum of one comment earned a D. Two comments, one on each book, were the required minimum for a C for that block. Higher grades were based on a greater quantity of comments and the instructor’s evaluation of the caliber of those comments (e.g. more proactive than reactive, thoughtful responses to questions posed by classmates, integration of course and other outside materials, incorporation of personal experience).

#### 4.1. Postman versus Johnson

The two books read were Neil Postman’s (2005, 20th Anniversary Edition) classic *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* and Steven Johnson’s (2006) bestseller *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture is Making Us Smarter*. The books give sharply contrasting arguments about the value of mediated popular culture such as television, movies, and the internet. Ironically, both books had red and yellow covers with a drawing on the front of one or two people who had televisions instead of heads. The same picture concept was used as both an indictment and an endorsement of media effects.

Postman’s book is a cautionary tale of media consumption. He argues that media, particularly television, is the metaphor that defines and creates our culture. While he claims no bias against the harmless “junk” on television, he expresses concern that media becomes our epistemology – our way of knowing and our standard of truth-telling. He laments that we have lost our typographic mindset which revered reading and, using the Lincoln-Douglas debates as an example, created an audience who would willingly sit through seven hours of oral debate. With the advent and advances of electricity, telegraphs, telephones, photography, and the like, Postman claims that we entered a peek-a-boo world where, like the child’s game, “now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again” (p. 77). Like the game, it is without much coherence or sense, but is also endlessly entertaining.

With the increasing popularity of television, which puts show business on the screen and entices us with ongoing “Now…This” surprises and topic shifts, Postman concludes that we are abandoning logic and reasoning and replacing it with entertainment and theatrics. Unlike some, who equate television viewing with George Orwell’s *1984* and Big Brother concepts, Postman argues that we are more at risk of falling prey to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*; a world in which people willingly love the oppressive technologies that take away their capacity to think. Postman observes that:
Indeed, he (Huxley) prophesized its coming. He believed that it is far more likely that the Western democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion than march into it, single file and manacled. Huxley grasped, as Orwell did not, that it is not necessary to conceal anything from a public insensible to contradiction and narcotized by technological diversions. (p. 111)

Quite simply, Postman is concerned that in everything from our religious beliefs to our political affiliations to our educational systems, we are foregoing reasoned treatment and are instead relying on television and other mediated formats to entertain us. We are therefore, in his eyes, amusing ourselves to death.

In contrast, Johnson argues that, thanks to such mediated conventions as televisions and computers, society has actually grown smarter. He bases much of his argument on a theoretical premise called the Sleeper Curve (based loosely on Woody Allen’s comedy, Sleeper, in which a time traveler awakes to find out that future peoples know things not known to previous generations). Johnson argues that “the landscape of popular culture involves the clash of competing forces: the neurological appetites of the brain, the economics of the culture industry, changing technological platforms” (p. 10). This complex interplay between the brain, economics, and new technologies make the peoples of today more intelligent than their forbearers.

Though he extols the Sleeper Curve as the “single most important new force altering the mental development of young people today,” he is quick to point out that his argument is about trends and not absolutes. He does not claim that today’s television shows and video games are necessarily great works of art; simply that they are more cognitively complex than anything that has proceeded them. In other words, because video games are more complicated, television storylines more multi-threaded, and movie plots more intricate and character-laden, today’s consumers are more neurologically engaged.

As evidence, he references the Flynn Effect; a perspective which argues that IQ scores are trending upward. Briefly, philosopher and civil rights activist James Flynn did research to counter allegations (in books such as Arthur Jensen’s The Bell Curve) which suggested an increasing discrepancy in IQ scores between blacks and whites. What he found was that, regardless of color, the average IQ appeared to have risen by 13.8 points over a 46-year period. It seemed to have gone unnoticed because the IQ exam is geared to have a median score of 100. Every few years the test is recalibrated, allegedly by being made more difficult, in order to reset the median score. According to Johnson, “Some environmental factor (or combination of factors) must be responsible for the increase in the specific forms of intelligence that IQ measures: problem solving, abstract reasoning, pattern recognition, spatial logic (p. 142).” This he attributes to the increasing complexity found in popular culture artifacts.

4.2. Student Reactions

First and foremost, students were supportive of the assignment, but not enthusiastically so. Some were simply not comfortable with, or disciplined enough to engage in, a completely online dialogue. Others simply tired of the two arguments, especially since they stretched out over a ten-week period. Despite that, it is a dialogue and an assignment worth keeping in class, though perhaps with a few adjustments.

In the end, a majority of the class sided with Postman. A few voiced preference for Johnson overall, but most simply credited him with having some thought-provoking but not entirely convincing ideas. What follows is a sample student comment extracted from the final two-week block of the dialogue, in which students needed to indicate and justify their preference:

*In regards to the first page of chapter 10, Postman makes it sound as though educational T.V. is not bad. One thing he said stuck out to me: “‘Sesame Street’ relieved them [parents] of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children how to read...” (p. 142). This goes with the theme of “T.V. as the babysitter,” which drives me crazy. I watched “Sesame Street” but not as much as my peers because my dad made it his job to sit down with me every night to read to me. And because I wanted to be just like my dad, I wanted to learn how to read. Eventually, my dad had me reading him the bedtime stories and in the morning I would skip to “Power Rangers” over “Sesame Street” because I already knew how to spell, read, and count.*

*I agree, “... television viewing does not significantly increase learning, is inferior to and less likely than print to cultivate higher-order, inferential thinking” (p. 152). Whenever teachers would put a video on with a follow along worksheet, I would zone out. My generation and the current generations are desensitized to*
the educational effects of T.V. because we do have unlimited access to it. Besides, our culture dictates T.V. time as leisure time – not intellectual stimulation time.

Overall, I admire what Postman says about educating people about how to use T.V. (and all forms of media). If we made more people aware of how T.V. (and media in general) affects them, then they will be more equipped to utilize media for more than leisurely use. I think people have become slaves to media... as Postman states at the end, people don’t need to be worried about the fact they are laughing instead of thinking, but that “they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking” (p. 163).

5. Discussion

All things considered, this was a successful course, and worthy of being taught again. The readings, documentaries, guest speakers, and assignments seem appropriate to the course content. The differential weighting of assignments appropriately reflect the amount of effort expected and value accounted for in the assignment. Though some adjustments could be made to the online dialogue (e.g. condense the number of weeks or number of dialogue blocks, integrate it into a classroom assignment like a debate), the format could be left as is.

Some key elements that seemed most successful were the inclusion of non-mediated artifacts (e.g. tattoos, road) in addition to traditional mediated artifacts, the introduction of new theories/methodologies (i.e. Illusion of Life, Omnitopia) not usually encountered in a communication studies or rhetoric course, the requirement of both a research paper and a concomitant presentation delivered in conference format, and the opportunity to research and share insights into cultural phenomena of personal interest to each student.

This essay provided the author a unique opportunity to reflect upon the course structure, which was certainly of personal benefit. That is not the sole purpose, however, of the paper. The purpose is to share with members of the academic community both a rationale and a framework for those hoping to teach a course, undergraduate or graduate, on Popular Culture. The suggestions and ideas throughout are provided freely in the spirit of academic collegiality. Before embarking on such a project, however, it may be of value to hear what the students themselves thought of the course.

5.1. Student Feedback

Students are given a standard course evaluation form to complete, which consists of two clearinghouse questions on a 5-point scale (5 being high) with space for anecdotal comments. On the question, “All things considered, how would you rate the course?” the score was 4.85. On the question, “All things considered, how would you rate the instructor?” the score was also 4.85. Sample open-ended comments include the following:

- This was my first class experience at UNC and it blew my expectations away. The teacher, the material, and the guest lectures all worked together to provide an informative and rewarding experience.
- Very thought provoking. Wish this intense analysis was offered at the undergraduate level.
- Really opened my eyes to the power of pop culture and helped me better put into words thoughts I’ve had for a long time.
- A new way of considering the world I live in. Dr. Endres always made the time for constructive critique. Breadth and depth of coursework allowed for individual growth and understanding. Books flowed well. Most important, the use of authors via video was excellent addition for understanding.
- The course was one of the most interesting I have ever attended. There was enough material to make it challenging as should be expected in a master’s program. It was not too overwhelming and kept me wanting to read more. The instructor was firm and provided a perfect environment for wonderful discussion. I love the idea of bringing Sellnow and Wood into the class.

5.2. Concluding Thoughts

On a professional note, this class was very rewarding, as a number of the students submitted their research papers for consideration at various professional conferences or publications. The five students from “The Road” cohort in class had their papers accepted as a collective panel (chaired by the instructor) at the March, 2012 conference of the
Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery, held in Colorado Springs, CO. The panel, titled “Rhetorical Perspectives on the Literal and Symbolic Road in Popular Culture” perfectly fit the conference theme of “The Image of the Road in Literature, Media, and Society,” and their finished papers were published in the conference proceedings.

The class was rewarding on a personal level as well. Speaking in first person, now, I will admit to being a big fan of popular culture. I’ve always been a bit hesitant to admit that in an academic setting, however, fearing that my affinity for motorcycle rallies, tattoos, comic books, music and movies does not measure up to the my colleague’s interests in ancient or current political speeches. On a similar note, I’m sometimes a bit uncomfortable with popular culture because it sometimes does feel shallow when compared to high culture artifacts such as classical music or Renaissance paintings. It is intimidating to be writing this paper for a conference in Prague, which boasts an astronomical clock built in 1410, when I am living in a country whose ruling government wasn’t founded until 1776, in a state (Colorado) that didn’t exist until 100 years later in 1876. I’m surrounded by more movie theaters than museums, by more tattoo artists than aristocrats, and more comic books than commissioned works. Sometimes, I must admit, I embarrass myself.

But then I return to an observation made in this paper’s opening comments. Popular Culture – as manifest in blockbuster movies such as The Avengers – is exactly what I should be studying and teaching, because it is what’s influencing a majority of consumers worldwide. It is what people are reading about, watching, listening, and dancing to. It is what they are buying and what drives much of the global economy. It is what influences them and their relationships with others. It is the messages they care about.

My next academic paper, which I’ll start writing as soon as I finish proof-reading this, is about a super hero action figure named Captain Action. The figure was first released in 1966, then again in 1998, and once again this summer of 2012. The earlier productions never had more than a three-year lifespan. I will be comparing and contrasting the marketing strategies and use of media in each of the releases (including comic books and, in this new case, social media), as a predictor of the potential success of this latest attempt. Whether you label it “popular” or not, it is communication, and it is culture, and it is worth investigating.

References


