

English 5960-1 Fall 2007 Theories of Popular Culture: Learning from Las Vegas

1:25-2:45 p.m. MW OSH 104

Prof. Stephen Tatum

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Office Hours: 12:15-1:15 p.m. MW and by appointment

Required Texts:

Fox, In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle

Hickey, Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy

Taylor, Hiding

Venturi, Learning from Las Vegas

Virilio, City of Panic

Franci, Dreaming of Italy: Las Vegas and the Virtual Grant Tour

*selected readings on electronic reserve in Marriott Library—see reading schedule below.

Optional:

Lefebvre, Rhythmanalysis: space, time, and everyday life

About this Course:

Two caveats by way of introduction: 1) English 3900 is a prerequisite for this course, which satisfies the English major requirement of an upper division “theory” course. Some preliminary readings of cultural theories involving ideology, hegemony, and postmodernism will be helpful; 2) though we will be discussing largely contemporary issues, theories, and texts focused on “the popular,” this course will demand as much, if not more, than other courses. Hopefully, we’ll also have some fun and learn something about our everyday drift along the way.

This course is bipolar. On the one hand, our readings and discussions will begin to theorize two concepts:

- a) the “**popular**”; and b) the concept of the **postmodern**. In the course of studying theories of/about these concepts, we’ll also be reading theories regarding the critic’s task and the politics of the popular. We will be reading theories that have to do with culture in the broad sense, including our experience of time and space in both our built and virtual environments. A key issue in all this will be defining and exploring what we’ll call, following Dick Hebdige, “style” as a signifying act and the “spaces” in which such acts take place.
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On the other hand, we will attempt to ground the theorizing through an examination of Las Vegas, arguably one of the important world “capitals” of postmodern consumer capitalism.

Course Requirements and Policies:

20%--discussion, class participation; occasional quizzes or one page writing assignments

40%--Two Take Home Exams/Response Papers . See Due Dates listed in Reading Schedule below.

40%--A final project or paper due at assigned final exam time (or before) involving some additional reading/research. You have options for this final project, which you should discuss with me.

A--the paper option could go in several directions:

1) 15-20 page effort over relevant issue(s) and text(s) in class. (Ex: further reading and research on theories of popular culture in postmodernity; a paper reflecting your further reading in any of our authors' other writings, etc. The paper could focus on literature, television, or films about Las Vegas, interpreting the cultural texts you choose using some of the theoretical insights we read and discuss. Or, in what ways does contemporary Las Vegas correspond with Virilio's notion of urbanism and cities of "panic"?)

B--the project option may travel in one of two directions, though each will involve some accompanying paper of explanation.

1--produce an analytical field trip paper, with accompanying photographs, of a trip to Las Vegas. Focus here could be on a variety of things associated with your experience, but the focus should involve reflections using some of our readings. Ex: compare and contrast the Strip you experience with Venturi's description of the Strip and its architecture. Compare and contrast your experience of the gallery/museum/zoo with Fox's discussion. Elaborate the Postmodern theme of the virtual with regard to the built environment discussed by Taylor and the Dreaming of Italy book.

2—if you are adept with the new video/visual technology, you could produce a video montage or even an i-movie about the themes/issues of the course, if not also ground them through a focus on Las Vegas.

3—If you're interested in music, you could burn a cd of songs/music about Las Vegas and write an accompanying paper drawing out connections or insights in relation the class' major themes, questions, topics.

Attendance is required. Your grade will be affected (i.e. lowered) if you miss more than 10% of our scheduled meetings. In a three hour class such as this one, with approximately 27 class sessions this term, more than 4 unexcused absences will result in lowering your grade one level; more than 8 unexcused absences will result in dropping your grade two levels, more than 12 unexcused absences will result in a three grade level drop, etc.

Tardiness: Don't be late to class. If the door is closed, don't bother to interrupt our conversation.

Written assignments are due as scheduled, unless otherwise indicated as the term progresses. Assignments will be turned in either in class or in my mailbox in LNCO 3500. Unless you have a medical or personal emergency, late papers can be turned in with a one-half grade penalty for each day late. Papers will typically be 5-7 pages typed, not including any endnotes or bibliography. **NOTE: all written assignments, late or not, must be turned in so as to receive a final grade.**

Reading and Discussion Schedule:

Note: * designates e-reserve reading assignment accessed through the Marriott Library webpage.

August 20: Introduction to the Course

August 22: Defining the “Popular”
Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”*

August 27: No class meeting but reading for today is Adorno, “The Culture Industry”*

August 29: Jameson, “Conclusion: the Dialectic of Ideology and Utopia”*
[discussion will cover both Adorno and Jameson readings]

Sept. 3: **LABOR DAY** (No Class)

Sept. 5: Hickey, Air Guitar: “Unbreak My Heart”; “Simple Hearts”

Sept. 5: Hickey, Air Guitar: “Shining Hours/Forgiving Rhyme”; “The Delicacy of Rock-and-Roll

Sept. 10: Defining Postmodernism
Storey, “Postmodernism”*

Sept. 12: Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”*

Sept. 17: PM: A Philosophy and Aesthetic of “Surface”:
Taylor, Hiding,” ch. 1: “Skinsc(r)apes”

Sept. 19: McRobbie, “Postmodernism and Popular Culture”*

Sept. 24: Taylor, Hiding: “De-Signing”

Sept. 26: PM: Globalization and Urbanism
Virilio, City of Panic, ch. 1: Tabula Rasa”

Oct. 1: Virilio, City of Panic: “Kriegstrasse”; “An Accident in Time”

Oct. 3: Virilio, City of Panic: “City of Panic”

Oct 5: no class as this is a Friday, but: **FIRST TAKE HOME EXAM/PAPER DUE**

Oct. 8 and 10: FALL BREAK (No Class)

Oct. 15: PM and Place: the Virtual Environment
Virilio, City of Panic: “The Twilight of Place”

Oct. 17: PM, Theory, the Built Environment and Las Vegas:
Venturi, Learning from Las Vegas: PART 1

Oct. 22: Learning from Las Vegas, PART II: “Ugly and Ordinary Architecture,
Or the Decorated Shed” pp. 87-104

Oct. 24: Learning from Las Vegas, PART II: “Historical and Other Precedents”
pp. 104-27

Oct. 29: Learning from Las Vegas, PART II: “Theories of Ugly and Ordinary”
pp. 128-63

Oct. 31: Taylor, Hiding: “Ground Zero”

Nov. 5: Franci & Zignani: Dreaming of Italy, first 3 chapters

Nov. 7: Franci & Zignani: Dreaming of Italy, chapters 4 & 5

Nov. 12: Fox, In the Desert of Desire, pp. 1-67

Nov. 14: Fox, chapters, 5, 6, 8

Nov. 19: SECOND TAKE HOME EXAM/PAPER DUE

Nov 21: THANKSGIVING BREAK (No Class)

Nov. 26: Hickey, Air Guitar: “Lost Boys”; “This Mortal Magic”

Nov. 28: Hickey, “The Little Church of Perry Mason”

Dec. 3: New Rules of Operation:
Taylor, Hiding: “Interfacing”

Dec. 5: Conclusion(s)

FINAL EXAM WEEK: Dec 10-14

FINAL PAPER/PROJECT DUE: before 5p.m. on DECEMBER 11th in my mailbox in LNCO 3500

Note: The University of Utah is committed to providing reasonable accommodations for those students who have special needs or disabilities or different abilities. Please let me know if we need to work out such accommodations.