

GEOG 587
Place and Popular Culture
Spring 2007

TR 2:10-3:30, 104 James Hall
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Purpose of the course

This course will explore the role geography plays in popular culture — such as literature, motion pictures, television, music, and advertising — and the ways in which popular culture shapes people's attitudes about places. It is intended to help students cultivate an ability to think critically about how places are depicted in popular culture, to analyze how popular culture shapes our ideas about geography, and to write descriptively and evocatively about places. The course will focus on works of the imagination and examples from the United States.

Course structure

The course will be seminar oriented, with class devoted to the discussion and mutual exploration of the connections between place and popular culture. During the first two-thirds of the course, we will as a group read novels, watch movies and television shows, listen to music, examine advertising, and consider existing literature about geography and popular culture. In the final third of the course, student work will be the focus. Students will analyze the role of place in particular examples of popular culture and write short stories in which place figures prominently. Students will share their work with the class.

Critical essays and presentation

Each student will be required to write two essays in which they analyze the role of place in popular culture using examples of their choice. Place should play a central role in the works considered and act as more than just a setting, such that it could be considered another character in the work. Essays can focus on any form of popular culture, including novels, motion pictures, television, music, advertising, even comic books or video games. They should focus on works of the imagination, not documentary or non-fiction accounts, and must be set in the United States. Essays can focus on a single work, the output of a particular individual or group, multiple works that depict a single place or type of place, or the depiction of a particular geographic theme in popular culture. Alternatively, students can analyze the role popular culture has played in shaping the image of a particular place. If you choose to focus one of your essays on a single form of popular culture, your other essay must consider one or more other types of popular culture. Essays cannot be about works considered by the class as a whole.

Student essays should demonstrate an ability to examine popular culture carefully and critically, analyze such works logically and coherently, create sustained and persuasive arguments based on that analysis, and write clearly and effectively. Essays should not be reviews or summaries, but should focus on your analysis of the role place plays in the work under consideration or the potential of that work to shape people's attitudes about the place depicted. Provide only enough summary to enable a reader to understand your arguments. Pick two or three themes upon which to focus. Organize your essay in a clear and appropriate manner. Be sure to include an introduction and conclusion. Essays must be at least 1,000 words in length, typed or typeset using

a computer, double-spaced, and printed on only one side of each sheet, with each page numbered. Electronic submissions will not be accepted. You will be graded on the appropriateness of the creative works you choose to discuss, the insightfulness of your analysis, and the quality of your writing. A list of questions to consider in analyzing the role of place in creative works will be provided. Examples of essays written by students in previous semesters will be made available.

Students will also be required to give a presentation based on one of their critical essays. Presentations should be 12 to 15 minutes in length (no longer); an additional five minutes will be reserved at the end of each presentation for questions and comments. Presentations should not be mere readings of critical essays. They should expand on the ideas presented in the written paper and demonstrate that the student considered the instructor's comments about the essay. They should also recognize the different nature of public speaking and the tools that can be used to enhance a presentation. You may wish to employ audiovisual aids or distribute materials to the class if they help convey your ideas. If you choose to feature excerpts from works under consideration, those excerpts should take up no more than 20 percent of your presentation time. Be creative and speak with as few notes as possible to guide your presentation. You will be graded on your speaking ability, how well you present your analysis to the class, and your responses to questions and comments.

Short story

Most of us are passive recipients of popular culture images about places rather than creators of such works, but we are all experts about our own worlds and the locales we have inhabited, and, thus, are as qualified as the most celebrated authors to write about those places. This assignment is designed to encourage students to think creatively about places, and to write evocatively about them, by creating a fictional work in which a place, real or imagined, plays a significant role.

Short stories should be at least 1,000 to 2,000 words in length, typed or typeset, and double-spaced, with each page numbered. They must be works of fiction, even if they are based in part on actual people or events. They should not be travelogues, reminiscences, or recreations of true life experiences. They should seek to create realistic depictions of a place and the people one might expect to inhabit such a place. They should also possess the other attributes of good fiction — a stimulating plot, engaging characters, a cohesive structure, believable dialogue, and a larger meaning, even if that meaning is not explicitly spelled out in the narrative. Examples of short stories written by students in previous semesters will be made available. We will spend one class period discussing several of those stories so students can gain a better sense of what constitutes a good story in which place figures prominently.

You will be graded on how well you portray the place in which the story is set and incorporate it into the plot, the effectiveness of the story, and the quality of your writing. Students are expected to share their stories with the class and be prepared to discuss them. In addition to turning in a paper copy of the story, you are required to e-mail to the instructor as an attachment a single-spaced version of the story in Adobe Acrobat format, so that your story can be made available to the rest of the class. Adobe Acrobat is available in the computer clusters on campus.

Students are also permitted to create a different type of creative work, such as a short film, song, comic book, or video game, as an alternative to a written short story. The instructor must approve what you propose to do before you do it. The work must be produced in a format that is accessible to the instructor and class.

Discussion

Because this course is discussion oriented, it is imperative that students read any assigned works before the class meeting at which it will be discussed and come prepared to discuss that material and any examples we consider in the classroom. You are expected to contribute to classroom discussion and will be graded on the degree to which you participate and the quality of your contributions. Students may also be asked periodically to compose questions designed to stimulate discussion about works we will consider and turn them in for possible class use.

Discussion is intended to be an open dialogue from which we all can learn. It's okay to disagree with the instructor or your fellow students, so long as you do so respectfully. In fact, it is encouraged. You will not be graded on your opinion or the degree to which your views coincide with those of the instructor. We will all learn more if we are open, honest, and candid. A good classroom discussion need not be different than a conversation you might have with friends. The best discussions are those that make us think about a subject in a different way than we would on our own. The quality of this class will depend greatly on how actively students become involved in discussions.

In addition to the various popular culture works we will examine as a class, students are expected to read several article-length essays on topics relevant to the study of place and popular culture. There will be at least one such essay that is to be read in conjunction with each of the example popular culture works we will consider. Some will analyze the role of place in that form of popular culture. Some will address the place or region depicted in that work. Most are not explicitly about the specific works under consideration. These readings should be seen as background to help you better think about the role of place in popular culture and the specific places we will discuss. The articles may not be explicitly discussed in class, but students are expected to read them and may be asked to reflect upon them.

Grading

Student grades will be based entirely on written assignments, the presentation, and their contributions to class discussion. There will be no quizzes or exams. The two critical essays will each be worth 20 percent of your course grade, 40 percent total. The presentation will be worth 20 percent. The short story will be worth 20 percent. Discussion will be worth 20 percent. No extra credit is available, nor are students permitted to redo work as a way to improve their grades.

Grades will be assigned based on the traditional scale in which an A represents work of exceptional quality, a B is considered good, a C is average, a D is poor, and an F is unsatisfactory. Grading in a course such as this is inherently subjective. Students should keep in mind that grading is an assessment of quality, not a measure of effort. I strive to be as fair as possible to all students. I provide detailed comments on written assignments that I hope will help you understand your grade and improve your future written work. If you have questions, please come see me. Although this is not an English class, I pay significant attention to the quality of student writing because I believe the ability to write clearly and effectively is the most important skill students should possess by the time they graduate.

Students are also required to complete a personal information card and turn it in no later than January 23. Students who fail to turn in cards by the due date will have their grades lowered one-tenth of a point (on a 4.0 scale).

Attendance and tardiness

Since classroom activity will be devoted to considering popular culture works and discussion, attendance is essential. Although attendance will not be taken, your discussion grade may suffer if you are absent because you will not be there to contribute to discussion and may miss popular culture works we will consider as a class. Students should obtain notes from classmates for any classes missed and are responsible for any information provided during class periods from which they are absent.

Any written assignment turned in after the due date will be docked one letter grade for each school day it is late. Lateness will be excused only when circumstances beyond a student's control prevent them from submitting an assignment on time. If you think you have a legitimate excuse, you must notify me by e-mail or telephone *before the class period in which the assignment is due*, or, when that is logistically impossible, very soon afterwards on the same day. You must also be able to prove your excuse in writing (doctor's note, towing receipt with time listed, etc.). Conflicts with jobs, other classes, and your personal life are not satisfactory excuses.

Content warning

Some of the creative works we will consider may be offensive to some people because of their language, attitudes, use of violence, or depiction of adult situations. If you think there is a possibility that you may be offended, you may want to reconsider your enrollment in this course. You will not generally be warned when potentially offensive material may be encountered. My intent is not to shock, but to present meaningful examples for illustrating course themes.

Academic honesty

Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated in this course and will be severely punished when discovered. The instructor will review the university's academic honesty policy in class and will provide examples of behavior that would be considered violations of that policy. If you have questions about what constitutes academic misconduct, ask the instructor or see the university's *Students Rights, Rules and Responsibilities* handbook, available at <http://www.unh.edu/student/rights/>

Blackboard

The university's Blackboard computer system (<http://blackboard.unh.edu/>) will serve as an archive for course materials, will provide students access to their grades, and may be used as a method for distributing information between class meetings. I will assume that the e-mail address linked to your account is your primary e-mail address and that you check it periodically.

Required books and readings

Ernest Hebert. *The Dogs of March*. 1979. Reprint, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995.

Danny Santiago. *Famous All Over Town*. 1983. Reprint, New York: Plume, 1984.

All other readings are available on Blackboard in Adobe Acrobat format.

Tentative course schedule

January 16: Introduction to course

January 18: Defining popular culture

M. Thomas Inge. "Introduction." In *The Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture*, vol. 1, pp. xv-xxv. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002.

Jacquelin Burgess and John R. Gold. "Place, the Media and Popular Culture." In *Geography, the Media & Popular Culture*, edited by Jacquelin Burgess and John R. Gold, pp. 1-32. London: Croom Helm, 1985.

January 23: Defining place

Personal information card due

Tim Cresswell. "Introduction: Defining Place." In *Place: A Short Introduction*, pp. 1-12. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004.

E. Relph. "Place in Geography." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, vol. 17, pp. 11448-11451. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001.

January 25-February 1: Place and cinema 1

Good Willing Hunting. Directed by Gus Van Sant. Written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Miramax Pictures, 1997. 126 minutes.

Karan Sheldon, "New England in Feature Films." Northeast Historic Film, 2001, http://www.oldfilm.org/nhfWeb/ed/Archive/Sheldon_FeatureFilms.htm

Ty Burr. "Reel Boston." *Boston Globe Magazine*, February 27, 2005, pp. 18-24.

February 6-8: Place and literature 1

Ernest Hebert. *The Dogs of March*. 1979. Reprint, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995.

James R. Shortridge. "The Concept of the Place-Defining Novel in American Popular Culture." *Professional Geographer* 43:3 (1991), pp. 280-291.

February 13: Place and television 1

"High Octane." *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Written by William Keys and William Kelley. Directed by Don McDougall. CBS Television. Originally aired February 23, 1979.

Marsha G. McGee. "Prime Time Dixie: Television's View of the 'Simple' South." *Journal of American Culture* 6:3 (1983), pp. 100-109.

February 15: Place and music 1

Essay 1 due

Music by the Flatlanders, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, and Terry Allen.

Blake Gumprecht. "Lubbock on Everything: The Evocation of Place in the Music of West Texas." In *The Sounds of People and Places: A Geography of American Folk and Popular Music*, 4th edition, pp. 255-276. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

February 20: Place and advertising

Place in the L.L Bean catalog.

Douglas K. Fleming and Richard Roth. "Place in Advertising." *The Geographical Review* 81:3 (July 1991), pp. 281-291.

February 22: Place and literature 2

Student short stories from previous semesters.

Erica Beke. "Just Passing Through." 2004.

Tom Kressler. "Draw Me a Picture." 2004.

Danielle Mann. "Past and Present Future." 2004.

Anna Mallory. "Boots." 2005.

February 27-March 6: Place and cinema 2

Fargo. Directed by Joel Coen. Written by Joel and Ethan Coen. Grammercy Pictures, 1996. 97 minutes.

Andrew R. L. Cayton. "The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest." In *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, edited by Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, pp. 123-139, 230-233. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

March 8: Place and television 2

"Pilot." *The O.C.* Written by Josh Schwartz. Directed by Doug Liman. Fox Television. Originally aired August 5, 2003.

Lisa M. Benton. "Will the Real/Reel Los Angeles Please Stand Up?" *Urban Geography*, 16:2 (1995), pp. 144-164.

March 12-16: Spring break; no classes.

March 20-22: Place and literature 3

March 20: Essay 2 due

Danny Santiago. *Famous All Over Town*. 1983. Reprint, New York: Plume, 1984.

David Fine: "Starting Points: The Place and the Writers." In *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction*, pp. 1-25. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000.

March 27-29: Place and music 2

Music by Fountains of Wayne, plus student-chosen examples of place-conscious music.

Murray Forman. "'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music." In *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, pp. 201-232. New York: Routledge, 2004.

April 3-17: Student presentations (4 per day)

April 5: Short story due

April 19-May 3: Student short stories (4 per day)