

Demystifying the Hipster
Fall 2014
Professor O'Dell

Time: Tues. 6-8:30pm
Location: Eaton 204
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Office Hours: Tues. 5pm, and by appointment

Course Description

The hipster is a divisive cultural figure that elicits both envy and outrage, and some argue that it has run its course -- but what exactly is (or was) the hipster? Are hipsters part of a counter-culture, or are they just another marketing niche in the mainstream? How can we tell the difference? In this course, students will interrogate contemporary writing--both academic and popular--that claims to define the hipster, examining these arguments beside exemplary texts that have warranted the hipster label. We will focus on film, fiction, fashion, and music (among other genres and media) produced in the last twenty years, connecting these more contemporary examples to a longer history of the hipster that dates back to Norman Mailer's controversial 1957 essay, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." As Mailer's title indicates, race is just one of many politically-charged issues that have underpinned the hipster and the identity crisis it inspires. As we consider how this cultural type has developed in response to issues of race, gender, class, and mass media, students will come to understand the larger social, political, and stylistic concerns that underlie arguments about who counts as a hipster. Over the course of the semester, students will develop their own canon of hipster art, exploring the generic and stylistic traits that have made certain works and artists part of hipster culture, while also considering how the hipster audience is defined in relation to the "mainstream." Students will become critics of today's hipster culture as they explore how hipster identity reflects larger cultural anxieties.

Required Texts

Printed copies of readings posted on Trunk
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Dave Eggers
Occupy!: Scenes from Occupied America (ed. n+1)

Course Components:

The course blog is an important tool for developing written communication skills and a space in which students can keep the class discussion active. You will be assigned a blogging week (or two, depending upon class size), in which you will write a brief post about a hipster trend, text, or artwork that relates to that week's reading. Other students will respond to these ideas through the blog's comment feature. Writing a thoughtful post on the assigned blogging week and responding consistently to others' posts will be considered part of course participation.

On the weeks when you blog, you will also **lead class discussion**. Depending upon class size, you may have a partner or partners working with you. You should arrive with a set of questions about that week's readings, and you may use responses from the blog to engage students in the conversation. Leading discussion gives you an opportunity to spend one day acting as the authority on the subject under discussion.

In addition to blog posts and commentary, you will write a formal **analysis essay** of 4-5 pages in which you analyze a specific text (film, song, art work, or fashion item, for example). Your essay should argue why or why not the chosen object deserves a place in the class' "hipster canon." You will cite from at least one of our critical readings to develop your argument. The paper can be an expansion of a blog post, and your essay will form the basis for the later group project. The short essay is a place in which you will develop your own definition of the hipster through a particular cultural object or text. It is also an opportunity to apply the critical texts we've read to an object or text that we have not discussed together.

Based on the object or text students analyzed in the short paper, they will form groups with peers for a **research project** that investigates the larger trend to which this object belongs. Students will draw from their individual arguments when they research the history of the particular genre or trend their group is exploring. Research projects should rely on at least three concrete examples (or primary texts) and five research sources (or secondary texts). Students will write an annotated bibliography to accompany their research presentation, and the quality and clarity of the research presentation is factored into their grade.

To end the course, students will work with a partner to create a **take-home exam** for one another, along with a rubric explaining how they will grade the exam. You can ask anything of your classmate that is related to course readings, research presentations, and/or blog content, and your rubrics and exam prompts should indicate the rationale behind the assignment and its connection to the course. On the last day of class, students will grade one another's completed exams. The final exam is worth 30% of the final grade. Half of this 30% is based on the creation of an exam and rubric, while the other half is based on the completion of a peer's exam.

Student Evaluation

Discussion Leading: 10%

Course-long blogging and participation: 15%

5-page Analysis Paper: 15%

Group Research Project and Presentation: 30%

Final Exam: 30%

Calendar*

9/2: Are you a Hipster?

In Class: Course introduction.

9/9: Hipster History

Due: Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster”; James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy”; Patrice Evans, “Hip-Hop & Hipsterism”; and Mark Grief, “What Was the Hipster?”

Suggested Supplements: Rob Horning, “The Death of the Hipster”; Anatole Broyard, “A Portrait of the Hipster”; Donnell Alexander, “Cool Like Me (Are Black People Cooler than White People?)”

In Class: Class discussion and Blogging/Discussion Leading sign-up

9/16: The Meaning of Hipster Style

Due: Pierre Bourdieu, Introduction to *Distinction*; Nikil Saval, “Wall of Sound”; Phil Ford, “Hip Sensibility in an Age of Mass Counterculture”; *Shut up and Play the Hits* (Dir. Dylan Southern and Will Lovelace)

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading

9/23: Can there be a Hipster Avant-Garde?

Due: Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*; “A Regressive Avant-Garde”; “An Interview with Dave Eggers” (*Harvard Advocate*)

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading

9/30: Selling Out

Due: 5-page Analysis Paper

Exit Through the Giftshop (Dir. Banksy); Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Branding Creativity: Creative Cities, Street Art, and ‘Making Your Name Sing’”; Michael Z. Newman, “Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative”

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading, determine project groups

10/7: Hipster Activism/Hipster Slacktivism

Due: *Occupy!: Scenes from Occupied America* (ed. n+1); Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted”; Stacey Patton, “Why African Americans aren’t embracing Occupy Wall Street”; Edyer Peralta, “Out Of Wall Street Protest, An Unlikely Celebrity: ‘Hipster Cop’”; Janice Radway, “Zines, Half-Lives, and Afterlives: On the Temporalities of Social and Political Change”

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading

10/14: Hipster Irony and New Sincerity

Due: *Synecdoche, NY* (Dir. Charlie Kaufman); “Altered Ego” (NYPress); R. Jay Magill, Jr., “Hip Affected Earnestness”; Jesse Thorn, “A Manifesto for the New Sincerity”; Tom Scocca, “On Smarm” (*Gawker*)

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading

10/21: DIY, Gender, and the Hipster Art Community

Due: *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (Dir. Miranda July) “Hands-on: The Crafting and Indie Design Movement”; Dayna Totorici’s “You Know it When You See It”; Onion, “Miranda July Called Before Congress to Explain Exactly What Her Whole Thing Is”

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading

10/28: Hipster Coupling

Due: *Medicine for Melancholy* (Dir. Barry Jenkins), *Weekend* (Dir. Andrew Haigh)

Suggested Reading: Ehrlich & Bartz, “Mating”

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading, project group meeting

11/4: Group Presentations: A Report from the Front Lines

Due: Research Presentation

In Class: Research presentations and discussion, additions to “canon” page

11/11: NO CLASS

11/18 Hipsters Gone Viral

Due: “Look at this F***ing Hipster” (tumblr); excerpt from Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*; Laura Portwood-Stacer, “Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention”

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading, assign final exam

11/25: Get off my Lawn!: The Hipster Grows Up

Due: Take Home Exam and Rubric

Joe Winkler blog post, *Portlandia* (Season 1: episodes 1&2; Season 3: episodes 3&9); Magill, “Irony, Sincerity, Normcore: Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, David Foster Wallace and the End of Rebellion”

In Class: Class discussion and discussion leading , exam/rubric swap

12/2: So, Are you a Hipster?

Due: Completed take-home exam

In Class: Exam grading and course wrap-up

* Reading assignments are subject to change. You will receive a revised syllabus once students determine when they will blog and lead discussion. Additional homework assignments may be given during class.