

BIS 341 Topics in the Study of Culture: Approaches to Cultural Research

Professor Benjamin Gardner

“At best, daily life, like art, is revolutionary. At worst it is a prison-house.” (Paul Willis, 1977)

Class description:

This course is designed to introduce students to cultural research. Students will read and observe a number of different approaches to understanding cultural practices and influences in society, as well as practice different methodologies of cultural research. Throughout the course students will move between critically evaluating cultural research and carrying out mini-research assignments. Students should come away from the course with an appreciation of the types of methodologies and evidence necessary to support particular cultural research questions and claims. Ultimately, students should leave this course with a new awareness of the role that cultural forces play in shaping their own lives, in structuring existing inequalities and relations, and in offering possibilities for social, political and economic transformation.

Student learning goals:

- To become more observant and reflective about the world and our place in it;
- To understand how much of what we encounter in our daily lives is culturally constituted;
- To critically evaluate our own assumptions;
- To learn to listen and observe carefully and recognize the significance of other people’s memories, stories, and experiences;
- To become better critical thinkers and writers.

Recommended preparation:

I recommend (but do not require) that students take BIS 300 before enrolling in this course. This course involves analyzing images, film and academic writing, as well as carrying out your own research throughout the quarter.

General method of instruction:

The format of the course will be discussion-based, with extensive collaborative group work involved. Individual and group research outside of class is an integral part of the course.

Class assignments and grading:

Readings may include Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?;” Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism;” Stuart Hall, “Questions of Cultural Identity;” Paul Gilroy, “Could you be loved? Bob Marley, anti-politics and universal sufferation;” Steven Gregory, “Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community;” Penelope Eckert, “Jocks and Burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school;” John Berger, “Uses of photography;” and Liisa Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization.”

In addition to contributing to the course through discussion and other forms of engagement, you will be asked to submit several short essays. These papers are not intended to be research papers, but rather to give you an opportunity to interrogate the readings, challenge their assumptions, and practice critical thinking skills. Students will carry out small research assignments, including interviewing a relative or friend, observing and describing social relationships at a public

location, and representing different issues through digital photography and other forms of media.

The information above is intended to be helpful in choosing courses. Because the instructor may further develop his plans for this course, its characteristics are subject to change without notice. In most cases, the official course syllabus will be distributed on the first day of class.