

POPULAR MUSIC and CULTURAL STUDIES: Practices, Media, Theories

Time: Thu 16-18 // Room: Philosophy building, Ü 13

Please consult this syllabus before registering for the seminar – and then again in preparing for our meetings (including the first meeting).



"Rock 'n' roll is a metaphorical arena, and that is why you can find the abyss in a harmless old pop song" (Greil Marcus). – No matter whether we read this dictum as a threat or as a promise, it claims boundless significance for popular music. Indeed, the practices, sounds, and technologies of popular music culture prompt us to ponder core questions of cultural studies and cultural theory. Accordingly, the seminar is designed both as an *advanced introduction to cultural studies* and as *entry point to popular music studies*. Topics include:

- the EVERYDAY uses of music and the contested category of 'THE POPULAR';
- concert PERFORMANCE and the political power of RITUAL;
- the AUDIENCE and FAN CULTURE/S;
- AFFECT and the BODY;
- ETHNICITY and GENDER;
- and the resonance of the singing VOICE.

Participants should have completed an introduction to cultural studies (either in 'British cultural studies' or in 'American cultural studies'). The seminar primarily aims at students in the BA and teacher-training programmes. However, it may also be of interest to Master's students with a stake in the field (please do not hesitate to contact me if interested).

Preparation for the seminar:

Participants need to prepare for the seminar *before* the beginning of the lecture period. Here is a sequence of steps (all of which should ideally be taken):

- (1) Closely study this SYLLABUS.
- (2) BRUSH UP your knowledge of cultural studies – e.g. by reviewing the introductory lecture.
- (3) (Re-)READ an introduction to cultural studies, or at least the introductory section of such a book. The following texts are especially recommended:
 - ALEIDA ASSMANN, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Issues*, 2nd ed. (Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2019). [Accessible online through UBW¹ // c. € 20,-.]
 - CHRIS BARKER, "An Introduction to Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies: Theory & Practice*, 3rd ed. (Sage, 2008) 3-38. → Prepare especially pp. 7-12 (= section "Key Concepts in Cultural Studies"). [WueCampus.]
 - OLIVER MARCHART, *Cultural Studies* (UTB/UVK, 2008). [Accessible online through UBW.]
 - ZIAUDDIN SARDAR and BORIN VAN LOON, *Introducing Cultural Studies: A Graphic Guide* (2010; Icon Books, 2013). [C. € 10,-.]

Additional reading suggestions can be found not only in this syllabus (see the texts listed below as assigned reading) but also in the 'BASIC BIBLIOGRAPHY' (downloadable from the website of the Chair for English Literature and British Cultural Studies or from the WueCampus 'room' for this seminar.)

Programme:

AR = Assigned reading → Please read *in preparation* for the respective meeting!

AL = Assigned listening → Please listen to and examine these songs and video clips *in preparation* for the respective meeting.

Make sure to always bring your annotated version of the assigned texts to class.

16/04 Introduction:

- Sharing motivations / Establishing perspectives
- Objectives and organization of the seminar

AL:

- Rihanna, "Don't Stop the Music" (music video, dir. by Anthony Mandler, 2007). [\[LINK\]](#)
 - Jamie Cullum, "Don't Stop the Music" (cover version; music video, 2009). [\[LINK\]](#)
- ➔ Please be prepared to introduce yourself by commenting on questions such as:

¹ The university library (UBW) is making many books available online. To access the e-books from home, one often needs to be hooked up to the university's intranet through a VPN tunnel; see website of the Information Technology Centre (Rechenzentrum) on the procedure: [LINK](#).

- What have you learnt about/in cultural studies so far?
- How would you describe your relationship to popular music, and what do you hope to gain from studying it in a scholarly context?
- What is your idea of a university seminar?

23/04 Cultural Studies (& Popular Music Culture)

- Concepts & approaches:
'Culture' / 'Cultural studies' / 'Popular music culture' (& why it matters)

AR: Chris Barker, "An Introduction to Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies: Theory & Practice*, 3rd ed. (Sage, 2008) 3-38. [Only pp. 3-12 are assigned reading; the rest of the chapter is recommended as further reading.] [WueCampus.]

➔ Preparation:

- Please be prepared to offer concise conceptualizations of the terms listed above and to explain the key concepts introduced by Barker (pp. 3-12).
- Which of Barker's key concepts do you consider particularly significant in the study of popular music culture?
- Suggestions for music samples or other material you would like to discuss in relation to the topic of the meeting are always welcome (for this as for all following meetings). The best way for introducing such material is through a post in the WUECAMPUS DISCUSSION FORUM.

30/04 Popular culture & the music industry

- Concepts: 'The popular', 'popular culture', and the 'culture industries'
- Popular music *about* the music industry

AL:

- Spirit Young Performers Company, "Live Disney Medley, by Fantastic Young Singers," *YouTube* (2015). [[LINK.](#)]
- Pink Floyd, "Have a Cigar" (1975). [[LINK.](#)]

AR: Barker, [from the chapter:] "Questions of Culture and Ideology," *Cultural Studies* 39-54 [= subchapters on "Culture with a Capital C" // "Culture Is Ordinary" // "High Culture/Low Culture"]. [WueCampus.]

➔ Preparation:

- Please be prepared to explain the key concepts introduced by Barker.
- Which of these concepts can inform our discussion of the musical samples for this meeting?

07/05 Space & sound

- Space & sound in popular music culture

AL: Madonna, "Drowned World / Substitute for Love" (song & video, 1998). [\[LINK.\]](#)

AR: Brandon Labelle, "Introduction: Your Sound Is My Sound Is Your Sound," *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010) xiii-xxvi. [WueCampus.]

- ➔ Please follow the same preparation process as in previous meetings (close reading of the assigned text, note key concepts, and prepare discussion points).

14/05 [Public holiday / no meeting]

[I suggest doing some of the more ample reading and preparation for next week (21/05) during this 'break'.]

21/05 Technology, mediality, and performance

- Culture and technology: guitar technologies & the cultural work of the electric guitar
- Media, mediation, and immediacy
- Performance

AL:

- Jimi Hendrix, "The Star-Spangled Banner" (clip of live performance, Woodstock, 1969). [\[LINK.\]](#)
- Ed Sheeran, "Shape of You" (video of live performance in Berlin, 2017). [\[LINK.\]](#)

AR:

- Paul Théberge, "'Plugged In': Technology and Popular Music," *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith et al. (Cambridge University Press) 3-25. [Accessible online through UBW: [LINK.](#)]

- ➔ In addition to preparing Théberge's text, please familiarize yourself with the two key concepts 'medium/media' and 'performance', drawing on relevant scholarly sources and study aids.

28/05 Subjectivity, collectivity, and the power of music / Fans

- Disco music & the concept of subjectivity
- Subjectivity, collectivity, and the concert event
- Fans as 'creative consumers' (?)

AL:

- Sister Sledge, "Lost in Music" (1979). [\[LINK.\]](#)

- Thirty Seconds to Mars, "Do or Die" (music video, dir. by Jared Leto, 2013). [\[LINK.\]](#)

AR:

- Roy Shuker, "'My Generation': Identity, Consumption and Fandom," *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 2016) 177-195. [WueCampus / Readable online through UBW.]
- Henry Jenkins, introduction & conclusion, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992) 1-8 & 283-293. [Accessible online through UBW.]

04/06 [Public holiday / no meeting]

[I suggest doing some of the more ample reading and preparation for next week (11/06) during this 'break'.]

11/06 **'Ethnicity' / 'Black music'**

- Ethnic difference & diasporic subjectivity
- African American music & the history of popular music
- Interrogating the concept of ethnicity

AL:

- Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Bass Culture" (1980). [\[LINK.\]](#)
- Childish Gambino, "This Is America" (music video, dir. by Hiro Murai, 2018). [\[LINK.\]](#)

AR: Barker, [from the chapter:] "Ethnicity, Race and Nation," *Cultural Studies* 247-251 and 255-257 [= subchapters on "Race and Ethnicity" // "The Idea of Diaspora" // "The Black Atlantic"]. [WueCampus.]

18/06 [No meeting]

[I suggest doing some of the more ample reading and preparation for next week (25/06) during this 'break'.]

25/06 **Genre / gender / voice**

- Sex/ism and rock music / Women in (country) music
- The significance of the voice
- Feminized ways of listening

AL:

- Tammy Wynette, "Stand by Your Man" (1969). [\[LINK.\]](#)
- Billie Eilish, "Bad Guy" (2019) [\[LINK.\]](#)

AR:

- Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality" (1978), rpt. in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (Routledge, 1990) 317-332. [Accessible online through UBW: [LINK.](#)]
- Mimi Haddon and Bethany Klein, "Introduction: Gender and Popular Music Knowledge," *Popular Music and Society* 47.2 (2024): 87-99. doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2024.2320552. [Accessible online through UBW.]

02/07 **Body / performance / stardom – The case of Beyoncé**

- The body as a site of culture
- The concept of performance
- Performing ethnicity, gender and class

AL (and AR):

- Beyoncé, material from the artist's website. [LINK.](#)
- Beyoncé, various music videos mentioned by Durham and Weidhase.

AR:

- Nathalie Weidhase, "'Beyoncé Feminism' and the Contestation of the Black Feminist Body," *Celebrity Studies* 6.1 (2015): 128–31. doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1005389. [Accessible online through UBW.]
- Aisha Durham, "Class Formation: Beyoncé in Music Video Production," *Black Camera* 9.1 (2017): 197-204. [Accessible through UBW/Project Muse: [LINK.](#)]

09/07 **Conclusion**

17/07, 10-12: **Final test** (room TBA)

! Please note that the final test takes place in a different time slot and room than the regular seminar meetings. (The 17th of July is the *Friday* of the first 'examination week'.)

[See last page of the syllabus for questions of organization and successful preparation!]

ORGANIZATION OF THE SEMINAR / SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION:

In addition to *continuous active participation and preparation*, the following contributions are required to earn credit points:

- All participants need to write at least two READING RESPONSES (see information below) & are expected to contribute to the DISCUSSION FORUM.
- Students of the teacher training and BA programmes will sit a FINAL TEST (which will combine quick assessment tasks and essay questions). Master's students (if any should participate in the seminar) will conclude with a longer ACADEMIC ESSAY (wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit).

READING RESPONSES are short academic essays (c. 1.5–2,5 pp.) that engage with the material assigned for a specific meeting. They should address both the primary text(s) to be discussed in the meeting and the relevant secondary readings. The following points should be considered when writing a reading response:

- How can the topic and material for the meeting be contextualized?
- How do the topic and material tie in with the seminar discussion so far?
- What questions should be posed in relation to the topic/material?
- What can (probably) be shown or established by posing these questions?

Reading responses should try to concretely tackle selected passages from the primary and/or secondary texts assigned. They are due two days before the respective meeting. Please upload your reading response to WueCampus. I'll provide specific feedback on your writing.

PLEASE NOTE: Reflecting is *the* core competence the humanities build on and aim to develop. Your success at and beyond university will depend on determinedly training this competence. So-called 'Artificial Intelligences' (Large Language Models) may seem to respond to your queries, but they certainly do not reflect. Allowing these tools to produce your texts and to do your thinking for you will dramatically weaken your academic and personal development. It is much better to use opportunities for thinking productively and autonomously, and for getting feedback on your actual writing skills.