

*Gina Dominick – Example English and Composition Course
An introductory composition course I designed as an assignment in “Approaches to Teaching Writing” at Georgetown University.*

Introduction to Cultural Critique

Instructor: Gina Dominick

“Above all, [culture jamming] will change the way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produced in our society.” – Kale Lasn, Culture Jam

“Nothing can be appreciated in a vacuum. That’s what accelerated culture does; it doesn’t speed things up as much as it jams everything into the same wall of sound... In and of itself, nothing really matters. What matters is that nothing is ever ‘in and of itself.’” – Chuck Klosterman, Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs

Course Description:

How is meaning produced in a society? How is culture created? Who decides what gets said and what doesn’t? What are the potential consequences of exposure to mass media? In this course, we will explore and begin to answer these questions and others related to the production and dissemination of “meaning” in society through the lens of the cultural critic. While examining several forms of mass media, including advertisements, music, and television, we will read, watch, and listen to different forms of cultural critique, explore the rhetorical society in which these critics analyze, interpret, and deconstruct media and cultural norms, and, ultimately, identify their societal “calls to action.” Class assignments will consist of regular writing exercises, including two short formal comments, shorter daily responses, and two longer compositions.

Texts:

Grossman, Lt. Col. Dave and Gloria DeGaetano. *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie, and Video Game Violence*. Random House, Inc., 1999.

Hall, Ann C. and Marida J. Bishop, eds. *Pop-Porn: Pornography in American Culture*. Praeger Publishers, 2007.

Klosterman, Chuck. *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*. Scribner, 2004.

Lasn, Kalle. *Culture Jam: How to Reverse American’s Suicidal Consumer Binge – And Why We Must*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Classroom Etiquette:

During this semester, we will be analyzing several forms of mass media and cultural critiques. Success in this course requires that you engage thoughtfully and respectfully with the material, me, and your fellow classmates during classroom discussions and in written responses written responses and compositions. The material, both textual and visual, that I have chosen for us to work with ranges from satiric and comedic to provocative, from traditional academic research to lighthearted cultural observations. Certain commentary may discuss or depict topics that are sometimes the source of controversy in society. As such, we will want to remain cognizant of our responsibilities to academic discourse and our colleagues when discussing these

materials, engaging with them in a manner that is both mature, productive, and becoming of serious students. Class preparation and participation are the most important factors in building our academic conversation, so please complete any reading and writing assignments in a way that we allow you to engage most effectively in the classroom. Out of respect for each other, I ask that we all leave our cell phones off, remaining focused only on material from this course and the insights of our colleagues during our time together. However, please feel free to bring in any materials that you think would contribute positively to our discussions.

Learning Goals:

- Examine, interpret, and reconsider complex cultural objects to better understand how meaning and culture are created in a society
- Determine the role of the cultural critic and analyze how he/she uses writing or other media to present material
- Engage thoughtfully and productively in academic discourse via regular participation in class discussions
- Communicate ideas and information effectively via carefully constructed, revised, and sophisticated prose
- Hone writing skills, paying attention to style, tone, diction, grammar, incorporation of research, and overall organization and readability
- Comfortably navigate library research databases and catalogues
- Develop the confidence to join the conversation!

Evaluation:

Throughout the semester, you will complete several different types of writing assignments. Some will be collected and graded formally while others are designed to assist you in engaging more successfully in class discussions; the latter will be factored into your overall participation grade.

- Comments, Two at 15% each
- Compositions, Two at 20% each
- Participation, 30%

Formal Writing Assignments:

- Two “Comments”: 2-3 pages on a topic from the literature or other materials we have covered most recently in class. For these shorter essays, I’d like to see attention given to developing your own voice and style. These “Comments” will help me to evaluate how well you can engage with the material presented in class while forming and communicating your own thoughts.
- Two “Compositions”: For these two longer writing assignments, you will think critically about the styles and rhetorical techniques of the cultural critics we study in class. In 6-7 pages, I would like you to examine the writers’ language, tone, medium, and overall critical agenda, asking whether his/her arguments are relative, well-communicated, effective, convincing, and productive.
- Revision Exercises: After each Comment or Composition that you write, I will ask that you revise certain prose or ideas in your work. Possible revision exercises might range from examining the topic you have written about from a new perspective to

error correcting sentences for greater grammatical or stylistic clarity. I will determine your individual revision exercises based on what I see in your essays. However, I may also decide that the class together might benefit from the same exercise. These revision exercises will factor into the final grade for each assignment.

Informal Writing Assignments:

- Regular Writing, Close Reading, and Voice Exercises: Throughout the semester, we will complete regular in-class writing, close reading, and voice exercises to improve both reading and composition skills. The exercises are designed to increase your awareness of specific rhetorical, stylistic, and grammatical concerns and will not be graded.
- Discussion Questions: For most classes, I will ask that you prepare two-three discussion questions. These discussion questions should highlight specific passages in the text (moments in a film or aspects of another visual aid) that you find interesting or pertinent and consider how we might best discuss these passages in the classroom. You should bring a copy of your discussion questions to class as well as post them on our class site by Sunday at 12:00p.m. for our class on Monday.
- Prep Sheets: Prep sheets are designed as a way for you to manage your thoughts and questions in preparation for class discussion. You'll want to choose between two and three passages, moments, themes, or issues that you find interesting or pertinent in the text, take notes, and then write briefly on the subjects that you have chosen. I expect prep sheets to be 1-1.5 pages in length. Though I will collect these sheets as a part of your overall class participation, they will not be graded formally.

Preparation and Participation: You will be successful in this course by coming to every class prepared and willing to contribute. A prepared student will have completed reading assignments in their entirety, written insightful discussion questions, and reconciled his/her thoughts, questions, and opinions about course materials in his/her prep sheet. To that extent, those students who work diligently in preparation for each class tend to also be those who participate regularly in class discussions. I do not have a formal class attendance policy and do not require any excuses, but remember that participation counts for 25 percent of your final grade. I cannot evaluate and comment on your preparation and participation if you do not attend class regularly.

MLA Style:

Proper citation and organization of your work are essential components of each piece of writing that you hand in for a grade. Please consult the Purdue Online Writing Lab (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>) for instruction and examples of correct MLA documentation. If I receive a Comment or Composition that is cited or formatted incorrectly, it will be returned without a grade until it is revised. This may seem a bit picky, but paying attention to your citations will show that you have dedicated time to truly polishing your responses. You will never be penalized for incorrect documentation unless you fail to revise.

Introduction to Cultural Critique (4-day Lesson Plans)

Within the following four-day sequence, I have tried to include as many different writing “instances,” as Wayne C. Booth terms, as possible, including through close reading and discussion. In this course, students are writing every day, whether through designing discussion questions, creating prep sheets, performing quick in-class “writing, close reading, and voice exercises,” or working on larger composition projects. I hope to show students quickly that writing is a skill. To improve, they must practice regularly. Most of my writing exercises involve some type of close reading and consideration of how students will present their thoughts in classroom discussion. In doing so, I hope to blur the lines between reading and writing, to end the “war,” as Peter Elbow calls it, and get students to understand the symbiotic relationship created from working to improve both skills at the same time. To this extent, students are also reading for every class period.

While the amount of writing may seem a bit ambitious for college freshmen, I make it clear in my syllabus which types of writing will be graded formally and which will simply be factored in to class participation to relieve pressure. As Elbow notes, “Writing is usually handled in such a way as to make it an unpleasant ordeal, even a punishment – for students *and* teachers” (“War” 19). However, by organizing the writing in terms of “high to low stakes,” we can keep students actively writing while alleviating the anxiety that grading produces.

Each homework assignment includes creating two or three discussion questions for the next class. In requiring students to design, to a certain extent, the flow of discussion, I hope to foster a collaborative environment that is at least partially student-driven. During the first class of the semester, I find it necessary to address the “classroom etiquette” portion of my syllabus in detail so that students have a clear understanding of what I mean by remaining “cognizant of our

responsibilities to academic discourse and our colleagues when discussing these materials, engaging with them in a manner that is both mature, productive, and becoming of serious students." I want the classroom to be a space where students can argue their ideas and positions in an unthreatening manner as they learn the importance of considering and choosing carefully how to present their ideas and values, thereby encouraging students "to improve [their] capacity *to shape reality with words*" (Booth 64).

Works Cited and Consulted

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. The Guilford Press, 1985. 134-165.

Booth, Wayne C. "'LITCOMP': Some Rhetoric Addressed to Cryptorhetoricians about a Rhetorical Solution to a Rhetorical Problem." *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*. Ed. Winifred Bryan Horner. University of Chicago Press, 1983. 57-80.

Elbow, Peter. "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." *College English* 45.4 (1983): 327-339.

Elbow, Peter. "The War between Reading and Writing: An How to End It." *Rhetoric Review* 12.1 (1993): 5-24.

Lasn, Kalle. *Culture Jam: How to Reverse American's Suicidal Consumer Binge – And Why We Must*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999.

UNIT 1: Who's interested?: "Non-commercial heart and soul"

CLASS 1

Class introductions (15-20 min.)

Review of course description, syllabus, and reading list

Questions? I anticipate spending between 20 and 30 minutes outlining the course and fielding any questions.

Assignment for Class 2:

Part I: In preparation for next Monday, read "Autumn" and "Winter" in *Culture Jam* and write 2-3 discussion questions on either *Logorama* or *Culture Jam* (one that you would really like to discuss in class, two more in case that first one gets "scooped" by another student). Post these discussion questions on our class site by 12:00p.m. on Sunday.

Part II: Write a one-page "prep sheet" to use during our class discussion on Monday. Think of it as notes (written in complete sentences) that can also include your initial

reactions to the material, something specific that you noticed and wanted to examine further, the overall point that you believe the filmmaker or writer is trying to make, etc. Regarding *Culture Jam*, you might want to pull specific quotes or a portion of the text and write briefly on why you think the passage is significant to the work or our class so far. This can also be a space for you to work through questions about the material or write about something particularly provocative. It is fine to ask questions in your prep sheet, but just be sure to provide at least a preliminary answer that we can examine as a group. However, please do not feel obligated to address *every* topic or theme. Choose those which you feel could lead to an interesting discussion.

Be sure to bring a copy of both your discussion questions and prep sheet to class. This work will not be graded formally, but I will collect both portions of the assignment as a contribution to your participation grades. If you have any questions about this assignment between now and Sunday, please do not hesitate to email me for clarification.

Remember that discussion questions are different from content specific questions.

Not a Discussion Question: What animal logos are at the zoo in *Logorama*?

Discussion Question: What seems ironic about the police officers' discussion of animals in the zoo versus those in the wild, given that the animals are all logos?

Not a Discussion Question: Kale Lasn is the founder of what magazine?

Discussion Question: Why does Kale Lasn refer to adspeak as "anti-language," and what danger does he think it poses to society?

Short film: *Logorama*, directed by H5/ François Alaix, Hervé de Crécy and Ludovic Houplain, an animated short French film that received the Prix Kodak at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film at the 82nd Academy Awards. All scenery, characters, and props in the film are familiar logos and trademarked images.

CLASS 2

Class will begin with a quick (10 min.) writing, close reading, and voice exercise.

Writing, Close Reading, and Voice Exercise 1:

"Fact: Half of all exotic dancers were once beauty-pageant contestants. That's a surprising statistic when you first hear it. It's hard to bridge the distance between the wholesome naïve small-town Cavalcade Queen who plays 'The Volga Boatman' on the accordion and wants to be a vet, to the hardened stripper with seen-it-all eyes grinding in red light on the stage of Number Five Orange. However, the more you think about it, the more sense it makes. From the instant the twelve-year-old pageant contestant (and some pageant queens are groomed much younger than this, as JonBenet Ramsey proved) steps in front of a crowd, a kind of tractor beam takes hold of her. She feels the electricity of what anthropologists call the 'male gaze.' She understands the sum of her worth, at that moment, to these people, lies in the image she represents" (Lasn 75-76).

- 1.) How would you describe the tone of this passage?**
- 2.) What is the image of the female stripper and how does Lasn develop it in the mind of the reader?**
- 3.) Why does Lasn reference JonBenet Ramsey specifically? What effect does it have?**

After giving the students 10 minutes to write, I will ask for volunteers to share some of their answers. My goal for this exercise is to have students focus on the writer's specific rhetorical choices and the effect that those choices have on the reader.

Lecture: Alienation

In *Culture Jam*, Kale Lasn often discusses the problem of alienation in a society and how culture (especially ads) can augment that alienation. In this lecture, this short lecture (10-15 min.), I will thicken this treatment of alienation by providing the students with examples of the historical use of the word and engaging with them about their own understanding of the term.

Group work: close reading print advertisements (10 min.)

Small Group Work: Adspeak

Take a few moments to examine your group's advertisement before working together to answer the following:

What is your advertisement trying to sell?

What “scene” is portrayed? Who are the actors and what are they doing?

Is there accompanying text? Is so, how does it relate to the “scene”?

What message is the scene trying to convey about the product?

What type of consumer is this advertisement trying to reach?

Can you identify any type of consumer it might “alienate”?

Is this an effective ad? In other words, do you think it will help sell the product to the consumers it is trying to reach? Why or why not?

I will ask each group to present their ad to the rest of the class along with what they discussed in relation to the discussion questions provided. I anticipate us discussing the ads for another 10 minutes.

A short “pre-discussion lecture” with some background about Kalle Lasn and his work with the Adbuster Media Foundation and *Adbusters* magazine and, more broadly, as a cultural critic.

Class discussion about *Culture Jam* and *Logorama*. Here, students should use their prep sheets and discussion questions. While it is most important for our discussion to stem from the students’ questions and prep work, given that this will be the first day of class, I will make it a point to highlight or steer discussion accordingly.

Pertinent Passages/Moments and Themes:

- *Logorama*
 - o Why is Ronald McDonald the villain and why is it so potentially disturbing?
 - o Certain brand images being characterized as the following: Mr. Clean as homosexual, Big Boy as a rambunctious and ornery elementary student, etc.
 - o An earthquake (natural disaster) is eventually what causes the “logo city” to come tumbling down. What is the possible commentary here?
 - o The significance/irony in the choice of music: Dean Martin’s “Good Morning Life” and The Ink Spots’ “I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire”
- *Culture Jam*
 - o Dedication: “for my mortal enemy, Phillip Morris Inc., which I vow to take down.” What type of mood does this set for the text?
 - o How Lasn is situating the “culture jammers” in the broader history of social movements and cultural revolutions
 - o Significance of quotes: “Above all, [culture jamming] will change the way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produced in our society” (xi) and “We are being manipulated in the most insidious way. Our emotions personalities and core values are under siege from media and cultural forces too complex to decode” (xiii)
 - o What is Lasn’s “call to action” as he presents it in the Introduction?
 - o Lasn’s linking of psychological effects of media on society with the “anti-language” of what he terms adspeak (21)
 - o Disinformation vs. Infodiversity (25-26)
 - o Advertisers’ influence on media outlets, reframing news
 - o Authentic experience and the authentic self vs. alienation
 - o Lasn’s presentation of the commercialization of culture as a “cult”: “Free thinking will break the trance and introduce competing perspectives. Which leads to doubt. Which leads to contemplation of the nearest exit [from the cult]” (54). Is this representation warranted? How specifically does Lasn attempt to defend this comparison?
 - o Why does Lasn refer to the United States as America™? In what ways does *Logorama* depict this same commentary?
 - o What does Lasn think it will take (and thus what is he advocating that we do as readers and word citizens) to stop the “Doomsday Machine”? Why do you think he ends this season (“Winter”) with this commentary on ecological economics?

Homework: Read the next season (“Spring”) in *Culture Jam* and write a one-page prep sheet and two discussion questions for the next class. Students should continue to work on the

development of discussion questions.

CLASS 3

Writing, Close Reading, and Voice Exercise 2 (10 min.):

“Let’s rethink our vital components – our information delivery systems, our basic ideas about nutrition, transportation and economics. Let’s commit, totally, passionately, to reducing our ecological footprint, to learning how to measure progress accurately, to countering the information viruses spreading in our midst. Instead of resisting this kind of fundamental change, let’s embrace it. Let’s cheer on our cultural rebels even as we fear them. Let’s revel in (or at least not shy away from) the life and death of paradigms.” (Lasn 113)

1.) How would you describe the tone and mood of this passage? What in particular about Lasn’s rhetoric (how he is constructing the meaning of this passage with the words and style he uses) contributes to this tone and mood?

2.) What themes and issues presented previously does Lasn condense in this paragraph?

This exercise has students focus on both the writer’s specific rhetorical choices and their effects on the reader. Students will also practice recalling, extracting, and synthesizing themes present elsewhere in the text. I hope to spend at least ten minutes on this exercise before continuing a class discussion of *Culture Jam*.

Culture Jam, “Spring”: Pertinent Passages and Themes

- In what ways does Lasn consider the Situationists to be the ultimate culture jammers?
→ alienation comes up again
- In “The New Activism (Fire in the Belly),” Lasn outlines what a culture jammer is and is not. Who is he including as potential jammers? Who does he exclude? “The critical issues of our time are neither Left more Rights, neither male nor female, neither black nor white. The challenge for new millennium activists is to find the courage to let go of all their old orthodoxies, ‘isms’ and sacred cows, and to commit to ‘a ruthless criticism of all that exists’” (121).
- According to Lasn, why are culture jammers not academics? What does this indicate about his book?
- The “Culture Jammer’s Manifesto” (128)

Homework: Read “Summer,” the concluding section, in *Culture Jam*, write and post 2-3 discussion questions and create a one-page prep sheet.

I will also hand out a set of articles about McDonald’s for students to read for next Wednesday’s class (a week from this class). We will not be discussing these articles on Monday but will begin watching *Food Inc.*, a documentary about a variety of health, economic, and environmental concerns related to the food industry in the US. Because these are longer and more dense articles

than the type of reading students may have encountered before, I want to be sure to give them a week to finish reading.

Adams, Catherine. "Reframing the Obesity Debate: McDonald's Role May Surprise You." *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 35.1 (2007): 154-157.

Bailey, Courtney. "Supersizing America: Fatness and Post-9/11 Cultural Anxieties." *Journal of Popular Culture* 43.3 (2010): 441-462.

Kowitt, Beth. "Why McDonald's Wins in Any Economy." *Fortune* 164.4 (2011): 70-78.

Before leaving class, students should hand in a copy of both their discussion questions and prep sheets.

CLASS 4

Final discussion (20 min.) of the last section of *Culture Jam*, "Summer."

Culture Jam, "Summer": Pertinent Passages and Themes

- The "adbust" images throughout the text
- Lasn's commentary on corporations as people: "When a corporation hurts people or damages the environment, it will feel no sorrow or remorse because it is *intrinsically unable to do so*. (It may sometimes apologize, but that's not remorse – that's public relations)." (157)
- Why does Lasn think "demarketing" sounds un-American?
- Lasn's use of the word "détourn"
- What is Lasn's ultimate "call to action"? → "We will save the most precious of all our natural resources: the peace and clarity of our own minds." (199)

Following our discussion, I will hand out the writing prompts for "Comment 1" and field any questions regarding the nature or requirements of the assignment (15 min.).

Unit 1 – Who's interested?: "Non-commercial heart and soul"

Comment 1

Due 12:00p.m., Friday, September 23

Write for 2-3 pages in consideration of one of the following prompts.

1.) "If you're living a full life, why would you want to 'get away' from it?" (Lasn 104). Lasn discusses and points to the concept of "alienation" and its relation to modern culture several times throughout *Culture Jam*. Explain this connection as Lasn sees it. Then, analyze instances of this type of alienation in culture as you see it.

2.) "Next time you're in a particularly soul-searching mood, ask yourself this simple question: What would it take for me to make a spontaneous, radical gesture in support of something I believe in? Do I believe in *anything* strongly enough? What would it take for me to say, This may not be nice, it may not be considerate, it may not even be rational – but damn it, I'm going to do it anyway because it feels right?... Direct action is a proclamation of personal independence. It happens, for the first time, at the intersection of your self-consciousness and your tolerance for being screwed over" (Lasn 129). Quite

simply, culture jam. Write about something about which you feel strongly enough to “make a spontaneous, radical gesture.” Then, engage with the “guide” that Lasn has created through his book to explain how you might “jam” the system in support of your cause, defending why it warrants this type of “jamming.”

3.) Throughout the text, Lasn rails considerably against the “I” in corporation, a debate which has now gone “mainstream.” How does *Logorama* also interpret and re-imagine this concept? How does Catherine Adams (Corporate Vice-President of the McDonald’s Corporation) reinforce and defend “corporations as people” in her article “Reframing the Obesity Debate: McDonald’s Role May Surprise You”? Where do you see yourself in this debate? Are corporations people? Why or why not? Address the arguments presented in these three works specifically in a well-reasoned and sustainable essay. Be sure to include any outside sources you use to defend your argument (either for or against the concept) when you turn in your final essay.

4.) Design your own prompt. If you see something specific on which you would like to comment for this first essay, present your topic and questions to me by the next class period (Wednesday).

Please do not hesitate to email me any questions you have regarding this first essay, stop by my office hours, or set an appointment to meet with me. I would also be willing to look at any thesis statements or drafts (in whatever stage) during the next two weeks, and we will be dedicating more class time to writing and editing exercises during this time as well, including peer reviews. Additionally, please remember that you can always visit the Writing Center for extra help.

***Remember to use proper MLA format. Consult Purdue’s Online Writing Lab. (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>).**

After going over the prompts for “Comment 1,” I will provide a brief introduction to the documentary *Food Inc.* I hope to get through a little less than half of the movie (35-40 min.) by the end of class.

Homework: Finish reading the articles about McDonald’s, write and post 2-3 discussion questions, and prepare a prep sheet for class discussion. Students should also begin to focus on which prompt they will choose for “Comment 1.” We will continue *Food Inc.* during the following class period.