

Take-Home Midterm Exam: Understanding American Popular Culture

Part I: What We've Studied

For Part I, answer two of the three following questions. Repeat: Complete only two (2) of the three (3) questions in Part I. (You can choose which ones you want to complete.) Then complete Part II. Make sure you read the whole exam before completing it.

Your answer should be typed and double-spaced, and otherwise conform to the guidelines for formatting your written work outlined on our class website. A minimum length of 500 words per answer is recommended, though 750 words is probably going to allow you more space to explain yourself. The maximum length for one answer is 1000 words. (*Do not write more than 1000 words!*)

1. In the traditional study of culture, "popular culture" was long considered "trash" or "irrelevant" to the university student. A century ago, a student was much likelier to study Greek and Roman literature than modern English literature, for example, and other forms of entertainment (like cinema) only began to get attention from academics later on in the 20th century.

The assumption of our course is that Popular Culture is indeed worthy of study in the university. But *why* should we study popular culture in our effort to understand the culture of Anglophone societies? What role does popular culture play in developing and refining our understanding of Anglophone culture more generally?

2. Our study of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* touched on the fact that Spike Lee seems to want to demonstrate the connection between old-fashioned racism in American media (blackface) and modern racism, such as limiting African-Americans to sports and entertainment (like the sport stars on the wall of Pierre Delacroix's boss's office); requiring all black characters in films and TV to dress like rappers and be "ghetto" people (as demonstrated in the commercials mocking Tommy Hilfiger and malt liquor advertisements); and depicting African-Americans as stupid, inarticulate, and violent (like the Mau-Mau characters).

Our discussion of blackface in Korean media was focused on possible parallels or connections between racism in American media and the Korean media, but I want you to focus on another topic: the connection between old and modern caricatures of some *other* group in Korean media. That is, please explore the historical dimensions of some other form of caricature common in today's Korean media. (*The caricature need not be racial*: in fact, it is more likely you will find examples of caricature of a particular gender, of people from a specific region or social class, and so on.) Explain the connections and similarities--as well as the differences--between the older form of caricature and the modern form. You should use Korean folk stories, pansori narratives, older texts, or other media if you like to demonstrate your argument.

3. In our discussion of Science Fiction (SF), we explored how social anxieties are often important in determining what an SF narrative is about. This is true of other genres of "Speculative Fiction" as well. The skills you develop in our class can be used to analyze examples of pop-cultural speculative fiction--horror, SF, or fantasy--*from own your culture* as well, of course. Choose one of the pop culture texts from the list below and discuss which three major anxieties you feel are being expressed in the narrative:

Films:

- 인류멸망보고서 (Doomsday Book) -- currently playing in theaters!
- The 여고괴담 film series
- 지구를 지켜라 (Save the Green Planet)
- 좋은놈, 나쁜 놈, 이상한놈 (The Good, the Bad, and the Weird)

Comics:

- "26 년" by 강풀
- 순정 만화 by 강풀

TV:

- the SBS melodrama "시크릿 가든" (Secret Garden)
- the SBS melodrama "내여자친구는 구미호" (My Girlfriend is a Gumiho)

"Commercial Fiction":

- the novella 대리전(代理戰) ("Proxy War") by the Korean SF author 듀나 (Djuna), or the expanded novel version if you prefer. The novella is here: <<http://on.fb.me/I7qKXf>>
- the short story 레디메이드 보살 ("Readymade Bodhisattva") by Korean SF author 박성환 (Park Sung-Hwan): <<http://bit.ly/HNrTAT>>

Part II: Show Me What You Can Do!

As I have explained before in this class, part of the process of becoming an effective student of culture is learning to ask intelligent questions and then seek out the answer to those questions. This section of the exam tests your skill development related to this aspect of the course.

Formulate your own question regarding popular culture from the English speaking world. It should be as close in quality and difficulty to the questions above.

You can approach in a new way one of the aspects of Anglophone Popular Culture we have already discussed (race and caricature, the complexities of reading SF and other "genre" narratives).

On the other hand, you can turn to some aspect of Anglophone Popular Culture that we have not yet discussed (gender roles in pop music, the role of politics in entertainment, or the economics of popular culture).

After creating as outstanding a question as you can, research to find the best possible answer to your question. As above, you will answer your own question in a minimum of 500 words, and a maximum of 1000 words. (The minimum and maximum lengths *do not* your question, only the answer.) I expect that you will follow the same standard academic structure in answering your question as is suggested in the questions above: always giving three reasons for your opinion, discussing three aspects of a media topic, and so on.

This exam is due by 5pm on the 4th of May, and you can hand it in to my mailbox at the School of English Office (IH341). Lateness will incur a penalty to your grade. I am giving you some extra time so that you will have time to work on your answers. Please do not put off working on this until the last minute, or the quality of your work will suffer, which will be reflected in your grade.

Good luck!