Surface, surface, surface...

Postmodernism and American Performance Culture

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt
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Room and Time: SR 34 D2 · Friday, 16:30-18:00
Course number: SE 512.312

Description: Since the early 1990s, the concept of ‘performance’ has become a chief concern in American cultural studies. Unlike no other term, ‘performance’ stands for the instability of social, cultural, and individual identity. If previous approaches insisted on the stability of truth and reason as universal ideals, performance theory tends to cultivate a belief in the unreliability and inconsistency of cultural practice. Today, reality seems to be a colorful patchwork whose materiality has to be constituted anew time and time again. In postmodernity, the self seems to be deprived of any ‘essence,’ functioning more and more as a ‘performative’ entity expressing itself through the body but lacking a stable core. Among a wide range of artists, we will look at Madonna and Lady Gaga and their usage of ‘performance’ as a means of their visual art. Attention will also be paid to the Hollywood star cult (Marilyn Monroe and James Dean) and the attempts to create performative texts in film, literature, and television.

Methods: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short info block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout).

Aims: The seminar will deal with the interdependences between individual ‘performances’ and the media in which they are located. Feature films, sitcoms and video clips will be analyzed along with documentaries, photography, and performance art.

Assessment: Regular attendance; active in-class participation; presentation as part of an expert session with 3-page handout and three online questions; at least 9 entries in the discussion forum; research proposal of 2 and final paper of 10-12 pages.

Grading: 1/3 – Attendance, participation, and discussion entries; 1/3 – expert session; 1/3 – research proposal and final paper. Please note that you need a “4” (“Genügend”) in each category in order to pass the course.

Materials: A course reader containing all mandatory texts is available at our office (Attems-gasse 25, 2nd floor, opening hours Mon-Fri 9-12). All texts (plus a number of additional texts) are also available on the Moodle course site.

Uploads: All experts will make sure that their three online questions are available 9 days before the session. PowerPoint presentations and handouts must be made available within 1 week after the session. Please send all documents to our student assistant Sue Lim at marilyn.lim@edu.uni-graz.at.

Syllabus

March 14 Introduction – Performativity and Performance Culture
Basic texts (strongly recommended):

March 21 Music I – “Strike a Pose!” Madonna’s Multiple Personalities
Main example (required):
Additional text (optional):

March 28 Photography – Art and the Performativity of the Image
Main text (required):
Additional texts (optional):
April 4  
**Film I – Performance and Gender**
Main example:  
Main text (strongly recommended):  

April 11  
**Poetry – Jazz, the Beats, and the Culture of Spontaneity**
Main example (required):  
Additional text (optional):  

May 9  
**Film II – Affective Memory and Spontaneous Acting + Extra-screening (date will be announced)**
Main example (required):  
Additional text (optional):  

May 16  
**Feminist Performance Art – Staging Images / Performing Identity**
Main texts (required):  
Additional text (optional):  

May 23  
**Television I – Stand-Up Comedy and the Sitcom**
Main example (required):  
Additional text (optional):  
Christopher Castiglia, “Memory and Queer Culture in *Will and Grace*” (2004), 158-188.

June 6  
**Music II – HipHop and Fake Authenticity + Extra-screening (date will be announced)**
Main example (required):  
Additional texts (optional):  

June 13  
**Television II – The Talk Show as Trash Opera**
Main example (required):  
The *Jerry Springer Show* (NBC, 1991 – today). Watch clips on YouTube!
Additional text (optional):  

June 20  
**Literature – Empty Personalities and Consumerism**
Main text (required):  
Additional text (optional):  

June 27  
**Film III – Enter the Schlemiel: Irony and Performance + Extra-screening (date will be announced)**
Main example (required):  
Additional text (optional):  
David Buchbinder, “Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinity in Recent Film and Television” (2008), 227-245.

July 4  
**Music III – Performance Identity and the End of Authenticity**
Main texts (required):  

— Deadline for the final paper —