



Teaching Imagined Pasts and Futures via Popular Media

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Abstract

This teaching article outlines how students study popular media texts that create historical and futuristic worlds via our Popular Media and Culture: Imaging the Past/Imagining the Future course. Students learn how filmic and televisual technologies, techniques, and semiotics contribute to narrative's power to critique social and cultural norms and expectations, helping them understand how popular media draws from and triggers imaginary worlds. While the course offers trigger warnings, we are more interested in triggering students' imaginations by taking them into imagined worlds of the past and future. We do this by creating what we call a "community course," in which students have a say in the content and its delivery. In studying imagined worlds, students also learn to differentiate filmic world-building and world-making of the past and future. However, there are challenges associated with curating content as many popular media texts present warnings that it appears in the early 21st century we have failed to heed.

Keywords: Teaching popular media, Community course, World-building, World-making

A common question in mid-twentieth century post-World War 2 was: "What were the Germans thinking? What made them capitulate to a mass murdering dictator?" German-based *Babylon Berlin*, a ratings-smashing Neo-noir detective show that takes place at the tail end of the Weimar Republic, is a great show for positing such questions in a popular media class. These inquiries deepen students' understandings of past social relations and how they contribute to the present's socio-cultural power dynamics. Sadly, now in the present-day Americans are asking themselves the same questions. How did we allow this? What does the future hold?

Our course Popular Media and Culture: Imag-

ing the Past/Imagining the Future offers undergraduate students the opportunity to bring such inquiries to historical and futuristic worlds so that they themselves can imagine and enact a better present and future. Students learn how filmic and televisual technologies, techniques, and semiotics contribute to narrative's power to critique social and cultural norms and expectations, helping them understand how popular media draws from and triggers imaginary worlds. While the course offers trigger warnings for many our shows, we are more interested in triggering students' imaginations by taking them into imagined worlds of the past and future. We do this by creating what we call a "community course" in which students have a

say in the content and its delivery. In studying imagined worlds, students also learn to differentiate filmic world-building and world-making of the past and future. However, there are challenges associated with curating content as many media texts present warnings about political decisions' perilous impacts, warnings that it appears in the early 21st century we have failed to heed.

A community course

Imaginary worlds have always appealed to Grace; hence when she was assigned teaching Popular Media and Culture (CMN 375), she brought that interest to the course. Grace was interested in exploring how filmic forms create worlds that teach us about ourselves in the past, present, and future. Hence, she divided the class into two parts: the first half teaches media texts that conjure histories, and the second half teaches shows that create futures. Grace and teaching assistant Oxala teach 12 shows (feature-length films and television series) in the semester's 16 weeks. The shows move from the medieval past with *House of the Dragon* into the 18th and 19th centuries with *Outlander* and *Alias Grace*, and into modernity with *Babylon Berlin*, *Lovcraft Country*, and *BlacKkKlansman*. The second half begins in the present with *Barbie*, and moves through imagined futures, both utopic and dystopic, such as *The Last of Us*, *Black Mirror's USS Callister*, *San Junipero*, and *Black Panther*, concluding with *Westworld*. Fitting for a large lecture course, we deliver the course content via two weekly lectures, an optional discussion session, weekly quizzes, and two exams. From this course structure, students gain valuable knowledge by focusing on five specific areas: critical viewership, power of narrative, influence of popular media on culture, negotiating the competing ideological forces of the past and future into the present, and becoming better popular media consumers.

Relating course material to students' lives has been a linchpin of our department's pedagogical purpose. The Department of Communication encourages all faculty to create content that reflects students' intersectional realities. In response to this pedagogical goal, we have transformed this lecture course from a top-down structure into a "community course," in which students' suggestions and feedback are considered when revising the syllabus each semester. Mid-semester, we run early informal feedback and adjust the teaching of the course accordingly. Moreover, we rotate two shows per semester based on stu-

dents' suggestions. The constant evolution of popular media makes it difficult to know what students have watched, are watching, and even further, enjoying. By attaining their suggestions, we keep up with their interests and media tastes. All in all, our goal is to guide students as they reflect on their own media habits, their own stories, as well as the histories from which they hail and the futures that they will build.

World-building and world-making

The course addresses each show on a weekly basis with the first day of lecture providing an analysis of how the show imagines its world. The course broadly defines filmic world-building and world-making as creating a place and time through cinematic technologies that allow for the imagined to be expressed and experienced. We begin by arguing that stories need worlds, but worlds do not need stories (Wolf, 2013, pp. 29–33). For instance, consider how video games operate: they present imaginary places in which players overcome obstacles, the story, but without a world with obstacles there could be no story. Nevertheless, that imaginary world can exist on its own via infrastructure in a place that we can observe without traveling through it (though that would be a boring videogame), rather like the model kingdom Viserys in *House of the Dragon* builds in his private chambers. He can observe that world without attaching a storyline to it.

To study the past and future we need to witness how the media texts' creators build the worlds for the narratives to take place, most often in genres like fantasy or science fiction. World-building, we argue, consists of a practice of creating an environment separate from reality that is governed by its own rules. To begin analysis of each show's world-building we present how it meets world-building's seven criteria: Infrastructure, Why Now? Multidimensional Cultures and People, Divergent Opinions, Avoiding Logical Histories, Place Matters, Explain the Magic (Ander, 2013). These criteria help us establish how the worlds are materially built and their social and cultural dynamics that ground the narrative, thematic, and cinematic analysis we ask students to do.

From here, we also explain how this application differs from world-making, which represents lived social worlds through signifiers that create meaning via shared symbols, myths, and social practices (Goodman, 1978). Essentially, world-building is about creating a fictional world in which a story might take place,

while world-making represents how we perceive lived social worlds through collective ideas and practices of storytelling in an imagined world. These filmic narratives play an important role in the construction of culture, which is viewed as a domain of struggle where the production and transmission of meaning is always a contested process (Grossberg, 1992). Hence, students witness the imagined pasts and futures as sites of conflict from which new meanings and social and cultural expressions are derived, offering them a better understanding of ideological forces that underpin the past, present, and future.

However, we do not simply report on the material, we critique it and the media landscape that produces it. For instance, the first show we study is *House of the Dragon* which thematically and cinematically presents a misogynistic medieval world. Thematically, *House of the Dragon's* premise is that placing a woman on the Iron Throne will break the realm apart. Cinematically, the show can be excessively graphic, hence we provide trigger warnings and do not assign the first episode (nevertheless students report watching it), which includes a brutally graphic scene in which Viserys allows his cousin-wife to be killed in childbirth so the baby boy can live. In lecture, we critique how the producers claimed they wanted to be thoughtful in how they handled the representation of violence against women (Lopez, 2022), yet this scene was too brutal to assign.

Challenges

The challenges in teaching this content include selecting from a vast repertoire of media texts that imagine the past and future that will be relevant to students' lives. Certainly, including student suggested *Black Mirror* episodes helps them understand the perils of unchecked technologies that they themselves interact with daily and possibly in their futures. Although we find that students are drawn to filmic representations of history rather than reading about it, we struggle with selecting shows about the future since so many of them are dystopic—worse, some of these dystopias are here today. For instance, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a future world in which women are enslaved for their fertility. This dark fantasy has now become a reality in 13 U.S. states (Guttmacher Institute, 7/3/26). While a discussion about these realities might be beneficial to our students, we are concerned that it could be excessively triggering. Hence, we seek a balance of utopic and dystopic vi-

sions of the future, which thankfully, Black Panther and San Junipero provide.

Conclusion

Popular Media and Culture: Imaging the Past/Imagining the Future's focus on historical and futuristic fiction takes students from the present into pasts and futures they may not even have imagined before with the hope that they will bring their own imaginations to the creation of their own worlds. Certainly, we face the challenge of relying on a media landscape that privileges dark fantasies, however, with reflective curating that draws from students' suggestions, we can locate material that is diverse, critical, and imaginatively engaging. Hence, our class offers a reflection of the current zeitgeist.

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Oxala Da Silva is a second-year Ph.D. student in Communication at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), where she also earned her M.A. in Communication. Prior to her graduate studies, she received dual bachelor's degrees in Communication and Psychological Science from California State University, San Marcos. Oxala's research explores the intersections of music consumption and political life, examining how music shapes political ideologies, social norms, and collective practices, particularly within the context of social movements.