

Course Outline: Understanding Culture: Text, Image, Music

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES

Note for students: This short course outline is provided for planning purposes only. Course information is tentative and subject to change; the final course syllabus will be available by the first day of classes.

Course Code

AP/HUMA 2001

Course Description

This course introduces students to the interdisciplinary study of culture, with a focus on how meaning is produced through media, material systems, and everyday practices. Drawing from cultural studies, media theory, and sound studies, the course examines how cultural forms—across text, image, film, music, and digital media—are shaped by social, political, and technological conditions.

While the course engages a broad range of media, it uses **sound, music and music technology** as a primary analytical lens to explore how cultural meaning emerges through interaction, mediation, and material processes. Students will investigate how systems of representation, infrastructure, and interface shape perception, identity, and experience.

The course is structured around a combination of theoretical inquiry and experiential learning, including a dedicated Culture Lab, where students engage directly with media technologies, electronic musical instruments and production environments. Through this work, students develop both critical and practical approaches to cultural analysis and gain practical experience in sound design, synthesis and recording techniques. Guest speakers from the music and arts industries will also be integrated into the course.

Organized into thematic modules—including representation, mediation, materiality, interface, and systems—the course emphasizes how culture is not only interpreted but also actively produced and negotiated. The course engages the core streams of the Humanities program, including Power, Diaspora, and Race; Arts and Popular Cultures; Digital and Technological Worlds; and Texts and Interpretations.

Course Delivery

Delivery Mode: LECT

HUMA 2001 will be taught as a full-year, in-person course consisting of a weekly 2-hour lecture and a weekly 1-hour tutorial. Lectures will combine short presentations, guided discussions, media analysis, listening exercises, demonstrations, and guest presentations from artists, musicians, producers, and other cultural practitioners. Tutorials will emphasize smaller-group discussion, collaborative activities, and applied engagement with course concepts through close analysis of media, sound, and cultural systems.

A central component of the course is the “Culture Lab,” which provides students with hands-on experiential learning opportunities involving sound technologies, musical instruments, recording systems, and media production environments. Students will participate in guided experimentation and exploratory exercises that emphasize process, interaction, and critical reflection rather than technical mastery. Additional optional workshops and drop-in sessions may be offered through the York University Media Creation Lab to support project development and technical skill-building. The Culture Lab will be scheduled as a “drop in” environment that students will have to visit, likely for several sessions, for a few hours a time, during a designated 10-day period for each term. **This is outside of scheduled class and tutorial times, although introductory sessions for the Culture Lab will also take place during scheduled lecture and tutorial times.** Students unable to commit to these drop in sessions are advised to select a different course.

Participation is an important component of the course and includes attendance, tutorial engagement, contribution to discussions and activities, and active involvement in Culture Lab sessions. Students are expected to complete assigned readings and media materials in advance and contribute constructively to class discussions and collaborative learning environments.

Although the course is delivered in person, eClass will be used to distribute readings, assignment information, announcements, and supplementary materials. The course includes in-person assessments, including two in-class tests, as well as experiential and project-based assignments integrating both critical analysis and creative practice.

Course Materials

REQUIRED READINGS (SELECTED)

- Yan Jun, “Perhaps I’m (Not) A Sound Artist”

- David Novak & Matt Sakakeeny (eds.), selections from *Keywords in Sound*
- Carla J. Maier, “Sound Practices”
- Jeremy Wade Morris, “Music Platforms and the Optimization of Culture”
- Stefano Barone, “The Digital Infrastructures of Music Scenes: Perspectives from the Global South”
- Glenn Hudak, “The ‘Sound’ Identity: Music-Making & Schooling”
- Judith Klassen, “What is Canadian? Popular Music and National Identity”
- Nicola Dibben & Anneli Haake, “Music and the Construction of Space in Office-Based Work Settings”
- Kyle Barnett, “Listening to the Anthropocene: Interview with Stuart Hyatt”
- Matthew Rodger et al., “What Makes a Good Musical Instrument? A Matter of Processes, Ecologies and Specificities”
- Clive Bell, “Bell Labs: Requiem for Musical Instruments”
- Sarah Freeman, Marcus Gibbs & Bjorn Nansen, “‘Don’t Mess with My Algorithm’: Exploring the Relationship Between Listeners and Automated Curation and Recommendation on Music Streaming Services”
- Jonathan De Souza, “What Can You Do with the Ukulele? Instruments and Musical Affordances”
- Vanessa Chang, “Records that Play: The Present Past in Sampling Practice”
- Róisín Loughran & Michael O’Neill, “Generative Music Evaluation: Why Do We Limit to ‘Human’”
- Alexander Galloway, “The Unworkable Interface”
- Brian Funk, “Musical Creativity: Born Out of Limitations + Restrictions”
- Tania Zittoun, “The Sound of Music”
- Paul Ward, “Sound System Culture: Place, Space and Identity in the United Kingdom, 1960–1989”
- Pauline Oliveros, *Listening as Activism*
- Christos Carras, “Soundwalks: An Experiential Path to New Sonic Art”
- Raphaël Nowak & Andy Bennett, “Analysing Everyday Sound Environments: The Space, Time and Corporality of Musical Listening”
- Thor Magnusson, “Of Epistemic Tools: Musical Instruments as Cognitive Extensions”
- Ryan Meehan, “Metabolic Rates”
- David Hesmondhalgh, “The Global Spread of Music Streaming: Capitalism and Colonialism, Technology and Culture”
- Paul Rekret, “Against the Stream”

Additional readings include artist writings, online archives, listening materials, technical guides, and multimedia resources related to sound art, music technology, media systems, and digital culture.

Tentative Grade Breakdown and Deadlines

[Provide a breakdown of course components into individual assessments, including the weight of each assessment and anticipated date held or due date. Include whether assessments are

held in-person or online or if they might be held outside of class time (e.g. evenings or weekends)]

Assessment	Weight	Mode	Tentative Deadline
Attendance and Participation	10%	In-person	Ongoing
Culture Lab Phase 1	15%	In-person (drop in outside of class time). Includes take-home assignments	Oct 22-Nov 2 (tentative)
Test 1	10%	In-person	Dec. 3
Midterm Assignment: Material Encounter Project	20%	Take-home	Nov. 26
Culture Lab Phase 2	15%	In-person (drop in outside of class time). Includes take-home assignments	Jan 28-Feb. 7 (tentative)
Test 2	10%	In-person	April 1
Final Project: Cultural Systems Project	20%	Take-home	April 5
	100%		