

CLC 1023: Sex and Culture
Lecture One: Taboo and Transgression

PLAY [while class is entering]: “Just Dance” composed and performed by Lady Gaga and featuring Colby O’Donis, from the album *The Fame* (2008).

Slide 1: Title –[Still from Lady Gaga’s performance at the MuchMusic Video Awards, Toronto, June, 21, 2009]

Slide 2: Welcome to CLC 1023: Sex and Culture

Welcoming Remarks → here’s a hint of what’s to come in the course

→ we’ll be tracing the phenomenon of EROTIC GLAMOUR through the ages

→ Note the striking continuities in the erotic icons on screen

Focus on Erotic “stars” (e.g. Cleopatra → Seductive Femme Fatale, Brad → the Apollonian Hunk)

→ you’ll be learning how to decode the complex symbolism of erotic imagery such as this...

Slide 3: Borat

–and not just glamorous imagery. A comic image like Borat in his green thong is also interesting from a Sex and Culture viewpoint. What does this image say about the erotic culture that produced it? Why is it funny to us? Why is Borat’s bumptiously straight erotic exuberance ironically signaled to us by his incongruous fashion choice? What do we learn about Borat’s cultural outlook from his hopeless romantic quest for Pamela Anderson? Why does Pamela reflexively resist the sexually aggressive advances of Borat? Why does a sex war break out between them? These are all “Sex and Culture” questions.

Slide 4: Borat and Bruno

→ To use Borat’s term, we’ll be seeking “cultural learnings” about Sex in CLC 1023. Here’s Borat’s creator, the comic Sacha Baron Cohen, in another one of his outrageous erotic personas: the host of Funkyzeit and über-gay fashionista Bruno. Why is he coyly displaying his ass-cheeks? What does his fashion choice say about his gender identity? Why do his femmy hot pants strangely recall the lederhosen worn by Aryan youths in the Austrian Branch of the Hitler Youth? What is the erotic significance of his backward over-the-shoulder glance?

These are all “Sex and Culture” questions, and the answers to them, I shall argue, can be found in the long fascinating history of eroticism.

Let’s kick off the course with some introductions. First I’d like all of you to introduce yourselves to your neighbours.

Slide 5: Professor James Miller

Now let me introduce myself...

Course Director

Professor James Miller

Slide 6: Book Cover → Dante & the Unorthodox

A good way to get to know your profs is by reading their books. Here's the cover of my most recent book – *Dante & the Unorthodox* – a study of Italy's most famous (and in my view most transgressively erotic) poet, Dante Alighieri, whose great poem the *Inferno* we'll be reading together at the end of the first term.

Slide 7: Professor Miller's Office in the Pride Library

My office is located in the Pride Library on the mainfloor of Weldon.

My office hours are Thursdays, 9-11am.

Slide 8: Professor Kelly Olson

Adjunct Co-Ordinator / Principal Guest Lecturer

Professor Kelly Olson

Professor Olson's office is in the Department of Classical Studies,

Talbot College, room 425

Slide 9: Book Cover → Dress and the Roman Woman

And here's Professor Olson's fabulous new book....there's a copy of it in the Pride Library. Check it out!

INVITE Professor Olson to say a few words.

Slide 10: The TA Team → "The Fantastic Five"

Teaching Assistants for 2009-2010

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Slide 11: Breakout Groups

The TA Team will be in charge of the Breakout Groups. So let me explain what's meant by a "Breakout Group".

The class as a whole will meet for lectures on ALL Mondays and Wednesdays and on MOST Fridays during both terms. However, six times each term, always on a Friday afternoon between 3:30 and 4:20, the general assembly of CLC 1023 students will divide into five smaller groups of approximately 40 students per group.

Breakout Group meetings will be held in separate rooms away from our usual location for lectures in Middlesex College 110. Room allocations will be announced in lecture well in advance of the first meeting and will be posted on the course website.

Your group-leader will be one of the teaching assistants in CLC 1023. Your TA will lead discussions during the meetings of your group and will grade all of your assignments for the course. So make a point of getting to know your TA.

Strictly speaking, these Breakout Groups are not "tutorials" because they do not meet each week at diverse times. Like tutorials, however, they will offer students an opportunity to discuss the readings and topics of the course in a less intimidating milieu than the big lecture hall where the class normally meets. The required readings and discussion topics for each session of the Breakout Groups are listed in the CLC 1023 overview and syllabus.

Slide 12: Questions about Breakout Groups

You probably still have lots of questions about breakout groups: e.g. Who is my TA? Which group am I in? Where will my group meet?

Here's my immediate answer to these questions:

Slide 13: Stay Tuned → All will be revealed in due course.

After the add-drop period in September, you will be assigned to one of these groups. So stay tuned – I'll be dividing you up into your groups later this month.

(Unfortunately, there's no Sorting Hat as in *Harry Potter!*).

Starting in October, the breakout groups will meet (usually) every other Friday: The first meeting will be on Friday October 2 → at the end of week four.

Schedule of Breakout Groups through the Year

First Term

Friday, October 2

Friday, October 9

Friday, October 23

Second Term

Friday, January 22

Friday, February 5

Friday, February 26

Friday, November 6

Friday, March 5

Friday November 20

Friday, March 19

Friday, December 4

Friday, April 2

Now some advice on preparing yourself for the course.

Slide 14: Read the Course Guidebook this weekend.

Your only reading assignment for this weekend will be to read the Course Guidebook. Please check it out ALL THE WAY THROUGH: you'll find the schedule of lectures and readings, , aims of the course, and even tips on how to read for the exams.

Slide 15: Don't Get Burned!

Check out ALL the course policies in the Guidebook:

e.g. submission policy, assignment deadlines, instructions for each assignment, proper formatting of assignments, etc.

Slide 16: Grade Breakdown

Here's an example of the useful information you'll find in the Course Guidebook:

The grade breakdown for this course is easy to remember. Everything gradable is worth ten marks each, and there are ten things that you'll be graded on:

Group Attendance	10
2 nd term Engagement	10
Assignment #1	10
Assignment #2	10
Assignment #3	10
Assignment #4	10
Midterm Test	10
Final Exam: Part #1	10
Final Exam: Part #2	10
Final Exam: Part #3	<u>10</u>
	100

If you lose your guidebook, you can download a copy from WebCT (more about WebCT that next week).

* * *

Now, for the rest of today's class, I'd like to demonstrate for you the typical way a lecture will be organized in CLC 1023.

Slide 17: Theme Song → Image of Lady Gaga

Just before each lecture, as you're coming into hall and taking your seat, I'll play a pop song relevant to the theme of the day's lecture.

ASK CLASS: Anyone recall today's theme song?
Lady Gaga's recent hit "Just Dance"

Slide 18: Repeat of title slide

The first thing I want you to notice in the presentation of my lectures is a powerpoint slide with the number and title of the day's lecture. The title will spell out the main topics under discussion. There'll always be an image appropriate for the theme of the lecture. Here's a suggestive still from Lady Gaga's extraordinary performance at the Much Music Video Awards on June 21, 2009. When you're waiting for lecture to begin, you're invited to meditate on the relation between the image on my title slide and the theme of the day's lecture, in this case "Taboo and Transgression" (more about these keyterms a bit later...)

Slide 19: Closeup of Lady Gaga's exploding breastpiece

ASK CLASS: How can we tell that this is an erotic picture? What clues us into the sexual significance of this performance?

Slide 20: Excerpt of Lyrics from "Just Dance"

I've had a little bit too much

(Much)

All of the people start to rush

(Start to rush by)

A dizzy twister dance-----> momentum like a tornado. Implications?

Can't find my drink or man

Where are my keys? I lost my phone

Slide 21: Lyrics cont'd

What's go-in' on on the floor?-----> a good sex and culture question: search for meaning through close observation of erotic signs and signals, gestures and acts

I love this record baby

But I can't see straight anymore

Keep it cool, what's the name of this club?

I can't remember but it's alright, a-alright

Slide 22: Lyrics cont'd

Wish I could shut my playboy mouth
How'd I turn my shirt inside out?
(Inside out right)

Control your poison babe

Roses have thorns, they say-----> dancefloor morphs into a garden. Women
And we're all gettin' hosed tonight as roses to be "plucked" -> ancient image of
What? Deflowering virgins?

Slide 23: Lyrics cont'd

additional words adding to the feeling of giddy disorientation in the dance:

rush, lost, can't see straight, can't remember, inside out, poison, hosed

It's in this state of sexual doubt, bewilderment, disorientation that the lost "I" seeks cultural wisdom about the erotic life

[Here is a transcript of the rest of the lyrics for anyone who wants to puzzle over their significance in a sex and culture context:

What's go-in' on on the floor?
I love this record baby
But I can't see straight anymore
Keep it cool, what's the name of this club?
I can't remember but it's alright, a-alright

[CHORUS]

Just dance, Gonna be okay
Da-da-doo-doot-n
Just dance, Spin that record babe
Da-da-doo-doot-n
Just dance, Gonna be okay
D-d-d-dance, dance, dance
J-j-just dance.

**When I come through on the dance floor checkin' out that catalogue (Hey!)
Can't believe my eyes so many women without a flaw (Hey!)**

**And I ain't gonna give it up, steady tryna' pick it up like a call (Hey!)
I'm a hit it up beat it up latch on to it until tomorrow yeah**

Shorty I can see that you got so much energy

The way you twirlin' up them hips round and round

There's no reason at all why you can't leave here with me

In the meantime stand, let me watch you break it down and...

[CHORUS]

Just dance, Gonna be okay

Da-da-doo-doot-n

Just dance, Spin that record babe

Da-da-doo-doot-n

Just dance, Gonna be okay

D-d-d-dance, dance, dance

J-j-just dance

Half psychotic sick hypnotic

Got my blueprint it's symphonic

Half psychotic sick hypnotic

Got my blueprint electronic

[x2]

Go! Use your muscle, carve it out, work it, hustle!

(I got it, just stay close enough to get it)

Don't slow! Drive it, Clean it lysol

Bleed it, Spend the last dough

(I got it)

In your pock-o

(I got it)

Just dance, Gonna be okay

Da-doo-doo-doot-n

Just dance, Spin that record babe

Da-doo-doo-doot-n

Just dance, Baby! (Gonna be okay)

Da-doo-doo-doot-n

Just Dance, Spin that record babe

Baby! Yeah... (Da-doo-doo-doot-n)

Just Dance, Gonna be okay

Spin that record baby! Yeah!

(Dance, dance, dance)

J-j-j-just dance

Slide 24: Sex as a Dance

Lady Gaga's lyrics evoke an ancient representation of sex as an experience springing from and comparable to a dance. We'll be studying the erotic allegory of the dance in its many cultural variations throughout the course.

What sort of erotic dance does Lady Gaga evoke in her lyrics?

Slide 25: Dance of Maenads

The tipsy, disorientated movements of the singer hark back to the wild steps of the bacchic dancers of ancient Greece – the Maenads. The Maenads experienced a manic enthusiasm for their divine leader, the wine-god Dionysus. They were maddened by his intoxicating presence and couldn't control themselves when they were possessed by him. Lady Gaga seems to let her inner Maenad out when she utters her mad chant towards the end of "Just Dance"

Half psychotic sick hypnotic
Got my blueprint it's symphonic

No matter how often she assures herself that she's "gonna be OK" by just dancing, her crazy jabbering towards the end of "Just Dance" suggests that she's headed for trouble.

We'll be encountering their version of the erotic dance when we read Euripides's tragedy *The Bacchae* in a few weeks.

Slide 26: Dance of Amorous Lords and Ladies

Lady Gaga's proverbial utterance "Roses have thorns they say" resonates with the allegory of the erotic dance in the medieval French poem *The Romance of the Rose*, which starts out with a bewildered young lover entering a garden where a lord named Delight leads a fashionable carol-dance of knights and ladies. The naive lover is invited into the dance by Courtesy, but is soon whirled around by the social movement until he falls head over heels in love with an aristocratic maiden symbolized by a rosebud. Stay tuned for what happens in the Garden of the Rose.

Slide 27: Dance of Sexual Damned

Here's another erotic movement that Lady Gaga's lyrics evoke for me. Her "dizzy twisting dance" looks back to the whirlwind of the Sexual Damned in the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, which we'll be reading near the end of first term. This is the English poet William Blake's dynamic illustration of Dante's vision of the erotic dance as a tornado. Hold on to your hats.

Slide 28: Dance of Playboy Centrefolds

When Lady Gaga sings “wish I could shut my playboy mouth,” she is of course directly alluding to a contemporary version of the Dance of Sexual Desire: the disco rush of glamorous sex symbols on the covers of *Playboy* and other so-called “adult” magazines – like Carmen Electra here “baring her Fender.” The pouting open mouths on such figures mimic the invitations to a kiss in the iconic portraits of Marilyn Monroe and other Hollywood Screen Idols. More about that when we come to Hollywood in the second term.

What all these variations of the erotic dance provide us with are ways of understanding the complexity of sexual experience – they are ritual signs of the erotic life that Culture repeatedly invents and reinvents to help us decode the mysteries of sex, to define its ever elusive meanings.

Can there be Sex (in any meaningful sense) without Culture?

Slide 29: Sex without Culture/ Sexual Culture → THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

As a thought experiment, I’d like you to try to imagine sex without culture and then to contrast what you imagine sex without culture might be with your present (extensive?) knowledge of sexual culture.

Slide 30: Development of the contrast

I’d venture to suggest that Sex without Culture (if it ever existed) is now for us virtually UNKNOWABLE.

Sex without Culture is still imaginable perhaps – like the State of Nature – but our collective fantasies of it would probably generate a set of adjectives such as these:

Sex without Culture

Sexual Culture

Hard to know
Mysterious
Unruly
Frightening
Overwhelming

Now let’s fill in the other column. It’s much easier to do!

Slide 31: Development of the contrast cont'd

Sex without Culture

Hard to know
Mysterious
Unruly
Frightening
Overwhelming

Sexual Culture

Intelligibly coded
Manifest (exposed)
Regulated
Encouraging, even consoling
Controlled

Slide 32: What sexual culture provides us with...

CULTURE constantly provides us with “vehicles” to carry our thoughts about SEX from the unknown to the known. By “vehicles” I don’t literally mean CARS – though cars and other mechanical things can certainly function as signs in erotic allegories. By erotic “vehicle” I mean a figurative image that carries with it – or conveys our thoughts to – a certain decodable understanding of the erotic life. Lady Gaga’s pectoral fireworks, for instance, certainly function as signs of a certain cultural perception of erotic desire as a fiery explosion..

Slide 33: Overarching Theme for CLC 1023 – Sex and the Cities

The overarching theme for the course is accordingly very urban – “Sex and the Cities” a theme reflected in the organization of the course as an imaginary tour of the great erotic capitals of the world starting with the ancient city of Babylon.

Slide 34: Advertisement for the Television Series “Sex and the City”

The idea for the course was suggested to me by the popular television series “Sex and the City,” which locates the erotic capital of the world in Manhattan.

What does this advertisement for the television series suggest about the relation between sex and the city?

By organizing the course around this theme of Sex and the Cities, I don’t mean to imply (of course) that cities are the *only* place where sex occurs these days, or where sexual acts occurred in the past.

Consider, for instance, this remarkable object.

Slide 35: Mystery Object

Can anyone suggest what it might be?

Slide 36: Close-up of the Stone “Tool” (Hohle Fels Object)

Date: approximately 28,000 years old

Discovered in the Hohle Fels Cave near Ulm in the Swabian Jura (Southern Germany)

This stone object (20cm long, 3cm wide) has provoked a great deal of discussion among archeologists and anthropologists. It's pretty obvious that it's a sculptural representation of a prehistoric penis, but what was its use? If it was not a sacred object in some kind of phallic cult -- a fertility charm perhaps? -- it might have functioned as a “tool” in a practical sense. Scratches on its surface suggest that it may have been used to chip away at flintstones. Was it a male “tool” to make men's tools?

Or was it a sex toy from the Ice Age? Is so, then it may well be the oldest DILDO on record. Who would have used it? Cave-women? Or (Gay) Cave-men?

We can be pretty sure that whoever used it was doing a great deal more than sleeping in the Hohle Fels Cave!

By organizing the course as an imaginary tour of erotic cities, I don't mean to imply that sex as a human action was invented by city-people. However, I *do* mean to imply that our understanding of the history of sex as a culturally regulated activity is very dependent on something that was invented by city-people a very long time ago → an invention like WRITING → THE CREATION OF TEXTS.

Slide 37: Ancient Texts from Babylon

Here are two examples of ancient writing: cuneiform tablets of excerpts from the great erotic epic *Gilgamesh* from ancient city of Babylon.

Now think back to that advertisement for “Sex and the City”: What was Carrie Bradshaw holding in her lap as if it was an extension of her genital area?

Slide 38: Sexuality / Textuality

Answer: A “Laptop” → a technological symbol of her participation in the conjoining systems of sexuality and textuality

Important Point:

SEXUALITY (as a system of erotic signs, controls, meanings) is deeply connected with TEXTUALITY (as a system of symbolic inscriptions and archival records)

Slide 39: Tom of Finland clones reading

Here’s a gay version of the symbolic connection between sexuality and textuality.

[note visual pun: the “bum” of the book, where the pages meet in the centre]

Slide 40: Conceptual Foundations

In the three lectures next week we’ll be starting the course by laying down some conceptual foundations related to the basic connection between sexuality and textuality.

Slide 41: Taboo and Transgression

The foundational concepts I’d like to start us off with today are drawn from social anthropology, and I’ll be using them frequently all year through the course. So before I begin to apply them to the interpretation of erotic texts and contexts, I think we should start by defining them.

Slide 42: Taboo

DEFINITION

A socially prevailing prohibition (against acts, conducts, or attitudes) which is designed to distance and protect whatever a culture considers sacred from whatever it condemns as unholy, impure, uncivilized.

Etymological Note

The word itself was introduced into English by Captain Cook in the eighteenth century: he borrowed it from the inhabitants of the island of Tonga in the South Seas. The Tongans would say that a sacred object was “taboo” – meaning that it was not to be touched or consumed or made use of in any way because it was reserved for the gods.

Taboos are obviously related to laws, and are reflected in legal codes, but here’s the difference.

Laws are always written down, encoded in texts, passed on through legal institutions, and hence are usually much more narrowly focused than taboos.

Taboos largely function as the unwritten rules of social/religious order and are therefore more general in reference than laws.

Taboos, we might say, become expressed or “enshrined” *within* Religious Commandments and Legal Codes

Slide 43: The two taboos

I would argue that there are TWO all-pervasive taboos in ancient as well as contemporary culture:

(1) The Taboo on Violence (it’s behind the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”)

(2) The Taboo on Sex (which comes out most clearly in rules forbidding “promiscuous sex”: it’s behind the commandment “Thou shalt not commit adultery..” which may reflect a deep-seated aversion to or fear of sexual violence resulting in social breakdown.)

Slide 44: No Means No Posters

The deep connection between the two taboos is clearly asserted in modern “No Means No” poster campaigns, such as these two examples

Slide 45: What old taboo is still operating in this modern image (Sex and the City Ad)?

Though Carrie Bradshaw is represented as naked and sexually vulnerable (or sexually on the make) in the Big City, her primary “erogenous zones” – breasts and vagina – are discreetly covered up. The taboo against Nudity is a variation of the taboo against Sex in so far as the naked (woman’s) body functions here as a sign of erotic temptation and hence also as a sign of the Erotic Lure of the City.

Slide 46: Transgression

DEFINITION

A transgression is a ritualized rebellion against taboo

For example:

wars, sacrifices → rebellions against the taboo on violence

orgies, same-sex couplings, public nakedness → rebellions against the taboo on sex

Slide 47: Janet Jackson's Infamous "Wardrobe Malfunction"

Janet Jackson's public display of nakedness (Super Bowl, February 1, 2004) provoked a media storm of outrage and condemnation: a "taboo" reaction to her infamous "wardrobe malfunction"

Yet notice how ritualized the transgression was: it was part of an intricately choreographed public spectacle, the halftime show at the Superbowl (itself a ritual transgression against the Taboo on Violence). As the images suggest, the wardrobe malfunction clearly suggested another ritual spectacle – the strip-tease – which is normally concealed from "public view" and reserved for the privately sequestered pleasure of the male gaze. Janet tried to cover it up (literally) but it was too late. The transgressive image was broadcast to "family audiences" around the world. It was a memorable media moment in the history of transgression!

Slide 48: Dynamic Interplay of Taboo and Transgression

To sum up:

There is a dynamic interplay between taboo and transgression in all cultures.

Taboos were established in the distant past to regulate and sustain the economic/social activity of the tribe (the "world of work").

Transgressions were also established in the distant past, and their simple function is to make us all the more mindful or conscious of the taboos they break.

Slide 49: Masaccio, Frescoes of Adam and Eve (Florence, Brancusi Chapel, 1426-7)

We can find the same dynamic interplay of transgression and taboo operating in highly charged erotic images from the past: for instance, here, in the Renaissance artist Masaccio's frescos of the fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Notice the semi-erect state of Adam's penis after he has eaten the forbidden fruit and been expelled from the Garden by the fiery Angel of God's Wrath