



# Comm 384: Interpreting Popular Culture

Popular culture as an indicator of cultural values,  
a producer and reflection of cultural meaning, and a means of communication; theory and case studies.

Fall 2017 Mon & Wed 9:30-10:50am • ASC 231

Safiya U. Noble, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

Email: [safiyano@usc.edu](mailto:safiyano@usc.edu)

Office Hours: Wednesdays 11:30AM-1:00pm and by appointment

Sulafa Zidani, Teaching Assistant:

Email: [zidani@usc.edu](mailto:zidani@usc.edu)

Office Hours: by appointment

*\*This syllabus is subject to change. Changes, if any, will be announced in class or via Blackboard announcements. Students will be held responsible for all changes.*

## DESCRIPTION

This course examines the historical and theoretical study of visual culture—from painting, photography, graphic design, architecture, and film to popular culture, mass media, advertising, communication, the Internet and digital artifacts. Topics covered include the effect of consumer culture on our habits and surroundings and the impact of communication technologies such as radio, television, and digital computing on our understanding of and approach toward the material world. We will explore dominant narratives of identity in the U.S. and counter-narratives of subcultures as it is expressed in visual media. The course will investigate the effect of the politics of collecting, display, and the market with a goal of critically approaching, analyzing and interpreting visual phenomena as we learn to understand the complex economic, social, cultural and political power structures that govern our interpretations of the visual.

## OBJECTIVE

This course is an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of visual studies. Our goal is to cultivate a critical visual studies approach to images. The approach is both theoretical and practical. We look at the various attempts of writers, artists, and philosophers to describe and explain the nature of the image, human imagination, and visual experience. Is seeing shaped by concepts and language or is it independent of them? How do we understand and make use of the things we see? What tools do we have for interpreting and talking about the films, photographs, objects,

and events that we see everyday? And how do the various forms of visuality--our practices of looking and seeing--limit or enhance our experience, agency, and visual pleasure?

This course is centered around the perception, decoding, and interpretation of visual culture from the media landscape. My hope is that you will become adept at the analysis and deconstruction of visual messages in popular culture and the study of tropes and narratives that recur through media in history. To do so, you will be exposed to various lenses by which you can make sense of the visual through cultural, ethical, and technical perspectives.

Everyday life in contemporary society is characterized by a constant flow of images. On billboards, TVs, subways, and buses; in magazines, newspapers, emails, and airport terminals; the fast-paced production of images has revolutionized the way we communicate with and influence one another. At the same time, a well-established tradition of looking at objects and images in museums, galleries, and movie theaters encourages us to slow down the pace of life and to reflect on the meaning and value of images. Occasionally we may even find ourselves gazing at photographs, paintings, buildings, or other people for the simple pleasure of seeing. But rarely do we stand back from our visual experience and ask how this visual culture works and how it affects the way we think and interact with one another. We will learn how to ask better questions of our visual cultures, and cultivate tools for investigating them.

## REQUIREMENTS

### **Participation in class and on the discussion board (20 percent of total grade)**

Students should express their thoughts and reflections on the reading materials and the contents of the class. Students are encouraged to do this both in class and on the discussion board on *Blackboard*. ***We expect you to engage in responsible and reasonable conversation that leans on an intellectual and evidence-based argument, not personal attacks. Hostile communication that does not foster deeper, iterative engagement will be removed and the poster will be contacted.***

**A note on the discussion board:** On the weekly discussion boards you are adding links, videos, articles and all kinds of interesting things! Save anything that you like or think you might want to reflect upon again later, because as I mentioned, once the semester is over, you will not be able to access it. For that matter, you may not even remember the course details or how to find it again! Grab things each week that are of interest to you and keep them in a "course materials" or some other such portfolio that you create. You do not have to share this portfolio with me -- this is just something to consider doing for yourself.

Once you have made your account and your portfolios, you need to SHARE them with me so that I can see that you have completed this assignment. It is critical that we take this time early in the semester to get everyone on the same page, because you need to be developing your portfolios throughout the semester.

### **Short Reflection Papers (3 papers, 20 percent of total grade)**

2-page, single spaced reflection papers are due about every two weeks or so. The first one is due during **Week Four**. Prompts for the responses are detailed in the class schedule below.

**All readings will be found on Blackboard and papers are due on Friday at 11:59pm on Weeks 4, 6, and 10.**

### **Midterm Reflection Paper (10 percent of total grade)**

A slightly longer, 5-page midterm reflection will be due **on the Friday of Week 8 at 11:59pm.**

### **Final Paper (30 percent of total grade)**

Students will prepare a case study of a pop culture incident or controversy and show how the case illustrates or exemplifies an intersectional connection between the theories we have explored in the class. Papers should include a detailed account of the case and a well-supported and well-argued discussion of how it demonstrates the relation between popular culture and power, drawing on the concepts covered in the course (10 pages; 2500 words). Paper must be uploaded to Blackboard **during the time our Final Exam is scheduled.**

### **Group work (15 percent of total grade)**

You will sign up for a group **by no later than week six** and prepare a group presentation for the last two weeks of the semester. The presentation needs to explicitly engage with the main themes of our class and demonstrate a thoughtful, informed perspective that is based on our course readings, discussions, as applied to a topic of interest to you. You will have approximately 10-15 minutes to share your GROUP portfolio/presentation with the class. The goal of the assignment is to collect and curate artifacts that are relevant to the theme of the class and demonstrate your ability to recognize some of the attendant challenges and opportunities of the topic you have chosen.

### **Portfolio (5 percent of total grade)**

Set up a course portfolio on *Pathbrite.com* (free) and start collecting things of interest. Focus on gaining confidence in using Pathbrite by watching videos on their YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCAvmB31\\_XJ7z8yjmfMNCQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCAvmB31_XJ7z8yjmfMNCQ) The main things you need to do are: create and polish your profile, and began experimenting with building portfolios and collecting items that are of interest to you based on the class content. On the last day of the semester, you will turn in your portfolio, along with a one page statement about what it means to you. Share the portfolio with the following two emails: [safiyano@usc.edu](mailto:safiyano@usc.edu) and [zidani@usc.edu](mailto:zidani@usc.edu)

First, develop a personal portfolio where you keep copies of your work (reflections, etc.). I know that you are submitting them to Blackboard. However, once you graduate, you will no longer have access to any University-owned and managed course system. I want you to cultivate a habit of storing your academic work in a series of portfolios so that you can reflect upon it later. Imagine that you start a portfolio for every course you are taking, and you add your work, articles that you have downloaded and read, or other things that you want to remember to look at in the future. In this scenario, you may look back at your academic work and writing in a couple of years

and notice the difference in your intellectual and academic growth. This process is called meta-cognition, it is the process of reflecting upon your own education and recognizing your growth. It is the process of recognizing, or "knowing," what you know.

Now, imagine that you are going to apply to graduate school, or you are applying for a job. How will you demonstrate what you know? What evidence will you have for yourself, and for others, of your competencies? This is why I strongly encourage your cultivation of e-portfolios. Research shows that portfolios are one of the most effective ways of demonstrating your knowledge, skills and competencies. They are far more powerful for a reader than just a resume.

I want you to practice curating at least two portfolios (I will only ask to see one of them) during our time together this semester so that you understand the various ways you can use them:

- You can use them privately, to keep your academic work and reflect upon it over long periods of time, even after graduation
- You can use a portfolio in the collecting of items/artifacts and to build an archive of artifacts that are meaningful to you -- that deepen your knowledge of a subject (this is your individual portfolio that you will turn in at the end of the semester on any topic of relevance to this class), and
- You can use e-portfolios to showcase the best of your work, as a storytelling device. This is how you will think about your portfolio for a group presentation. What are the most important artifacts that you collectively decide upon to tell a story about a topic that is meaningful to this class? This might be the same process you would use when going on the job market and cultivating a portfolio that showcases the best of your personal, professional, artistic/creative, and intellectual work for an employer.

## Course Grading

Letter Grade	Percentage
A	95%-100%
A-	90%-94%
B+	85%-89%
B	80%-84%
B-	75%-79%
C	70%-74%
D	60%-69%
F	0%-59%

In accordance with best practices regarding student privacy, we cannot discuss grades over email. Please meet with your instructor during office hours if you have questions about grades.

## Definition of Grades (from the Registrar's Office)

The following grades are used: A — excellent; B — good; C — fair in undergraduate courses and minimum passing in courses for graduate credit; D — minimum passing in undergraduate courses; F — failed. In addition, plus and minus grades may be used, with the exceptions of A plus, F plus and F minus. The grade of F indicates that the student failed at the end of the semester or was doing failing work and stopped attending the course after the twelfth week of the semester. Minimum passing grades are D- for undergraduate credit and C for graduate credit. Additional grades include: CR — credit (passing grade for non-letter-graded courses equivalent

to C- quality or better for undergraduate courses and B (3.0) quality or better for graduate courses); NC — no credit (less than the equivalent of a C- for an undergraduate and a B for a graduate, non-letter-graded course); P – pass (passing grade equivalent to C- quality or better for undergraduate letter-graded courses and B (3.0) quality or better for graduate courses taken on a Pass/No Pass basis); NP – no pass (less than the equivalent of a C- for an undergraduate and a B (3.0) for a graduate, letter graded course taken on a Pass/No Pass basis).

**\* IMPORTANT: All work for the course is due on the last day of the semester at 11:59pm. Final papers are due during the time we are scheduled to meet for the course Final exam (see University schedule). No coursework will be accepted after this time.**

***I will not give any incomplete (I) grades, so please plan accordingly. Upload your portfolio statement and share the portfolio with us through Pathbrite before the last day of the class.***

### **Extra credit**

There may be opportunities to earn extra credit by attending a designated campus event and writing a half-page response paper. You may earn a maximum of three extra credit points. Events will be announced as opportunities are available. Response papers should be clearly marked as such and included in your Portfolio.

## **ACADEMIC CONDUCT**

### **Plagiarism**

Presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words - is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards (<https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct (<http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>).

### **USC Annenberg Policy on Academic Integrity**

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism and Communication's policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

"Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism and Communication has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an 'F' on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism and Communication. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators."

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

## **SUPPORT SYSTEM**

### **Equity and Diversity**

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity (<http://equity.usc.edu>) or to the Department of Public Safety (<http://dps.usc.edu/contact/report>). This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community - such as a friend, classmate, adviser, or faculty member - can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp>) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage (<https://sarc.usc.edu>) describes reporting options and other resources.

### **Support with Scholarly Writing**

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students can visit The Writing Center at USC for assistance with academic papers (<http://dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter>). Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute (<http://ali.usc.edu>), which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

### **Disability Services**

The Office of Disability Services and Programs (<http://dsp.usc.edu/>) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. Students requesting test-related accommodations will need to share and discuss their DSP recommended accommodation letter(s) with their faculty and/or appropriate departmental contact person at least three weeks before the date the accommodations will be needed. Additional time may be needed for final exams. Reasonable exceptions will be considered during the first three weeks of the semester as well as for temporary injuries and for students recently diagnosed. Please note that a reasonable period of time is still required for DSP to review documentation and to make a determination whether a requested accommodation will be appropriate.

### **Stress Management**

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is the USC Student Counseling Services office at (213) 740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

### **Emergency Information**

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information (<http://emergency.usc.edu/>) will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

All readings will be posted to the course learning management system (Blackboard).