

COMM 206: Communication and Culture

Summer 2014

Instructor: Ioana Literat
iliterat@usc.edu
Office hours: *by appointment*

Location: GFS 105 (Grace Ford Salvatori building)

Schedule: Mon, Wed, Fri: 9--11:50am

Course Description

This course is designed as an introduction to communication as the study of culture. Any study of communication entails an understanding of culture, and vice-versa. As an examination of cultural institutions, ideologies, artifacts, and productions, work in cultural studies and communication is concerned with the integral relationship of cultural practices to relationships of power. Therefore we will focus on the key methodologies and primary themes of cultural study, with an emphasis on how they intersect with central issues in the field of communication. The first half of the course will be devoted to general approaches, key concepts, and over-arching questions, with a particular emphasis on the study of media, popular culture, and communication. The second half will focus more specifically on distinct units of study—gender, race, style, appropriation, technology, art and activism—as individual case studies of cultural analysis. We will pay particular attention to how notions of both culture and cultural study have changed over time, and how those legacies influence contemporary debates around cultural production, cultural identity, and global cultural change.

Course Policies

Students are required to do all the readings, attend class regularly, complete all assignments, and contribute to class discussions. A vital purpose of this course is to facilitate critical thinking. In order for this to happen, you need to come to class prepared (i.e., having read ALL the assigned material), wide-awake, and ready to engage in conversation.

Attendance

Attendance is crucial: there is significant material covered in lecture that does not appear in the readings; in addition, there will be frequent screenings in lecture for which you will be responsible. Please note that this is a very compressed summer class: we are trying to cover a whole semester in a very short period of time. Students who miss **more than one class** will have their grades lowered one mark (B becomes B-) for each additional unexcused absence. Absences will only be excused with proper documentation (medical note, letter from athletic director, etc).

In-class Technology Use

You may bring your laptops to class for note-taking, but please refrain from browsing the Internet and engaging in non-class-related activities. Although you may think you are being discreet, most students engaging in such behavior give themselves away (through inappropriate facial expressions, lack of eye contact, out of sync typing, etc.) – and my eye is trained to notice this kind of misconduct! The use of laptops in the classroom is a privilege. If you abuse this privilege, you will be marked absent for that class period and your participation grade will be reduced.

Classroom Conduct and Respect

All students are encouraged to use the classroom as a safe space in which to voice their opinions. Significantly, we should see ourselves as members of an educational community and should treat each other with due respect. My expectation is that you respect not only the professor, but also your classmates when they participate in discussion.

Academic Integrity

When taking this class, you enter into a contract that states that all the work you are turning in is your own and no one else's, and that you have not turned in any work for which you have received credit in another class. Do not take this policy lightly! Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade in the course, and will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct. If you have any doubts whatsoever about what constitutes plagiarism, please do not hesitate to contact me.

ADA Compliance Statement

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

ESL Students

Please inform me as soon as possible if you require special accommodations based on your understanding of the English language.

Required Texts

All readings will be posted on Blackboard. If you have trouble opening or reading any of the articles, let me know ASAP.

Assignments and Grading

The final course grade will be determined by the following distribution:
(Detailed instructions for each assignment will be provided throughout the course.)

10% Visual remix assignment

This assignment asks you to choose an iconic image or video and creatively remix it to modify its original meaning. Your remixed artifact will be accompanied by a brief written statement where you will reflect on the process of meaning-making, encoding and decoding.

20% Midterm exam

This in-class exam aims to assess your understanding of the concepts and materials (readings, lectures, screenings) covered in the first half of the course. It will consist of short-answer and essay questions.

15% Media pitch

For this assignment, you will work in pairs to develop and present a pitch for a new media artifact (TV show, movie, videogame, app, etc). Your pitch must convey how this product fits within the contemporary cultural landscape, but also how it represents an original and commercially viable idea.

10% Critical essay prospectus and presentation

In preparation for turning in your critical essay, you will have the opportunity to present your ideas – in both written and oral form – and receive feedback from me and from your classmates.

25% Critical essay

This 6-8 page essay asks you to apply key concepts and theories explored in this course in order to make an original argument about a cultural artifact or example of your choice.

20% Participation (including discussion questions)

Participation represents a high percentage of the final grade, because classroom discussion is an integral part of your learning experience in this course. Prior to every class session, students are expected to send me 3 discussion questions about the assigned readings, which we will then address as part of our group discussion.

Grading Standards

Grades will be assigned as follows:

- A/A- = outstanding, thoughtful and engaging work
- B+/B = above average work, demonstrating good insight into assignment
- B-/C+ = needs improvement on ideas, argument and follow-through
- C and below = fulfilling the bare minimum and showing little understanding of the material

Turning in Assignments

You must complete ALL of these assignments in order to pass the class. Failure to complete one or more of them will result in an F in the class. If an assignment is not turned in on time, it will be penalized by one mark (e.g. an A- becomes a B+) for each day of lateness. If you are unable to turn in an assignment due to illness or a personal emergency, you must provide written documentation that will allow you to be excused, or discuss your situation with the professor in a timely manner, before the paper is due.

Course Schedule and Readings

*NOTE: Please make sure to complete all readings BEFORE class.
This schedule is open to revision as needed.*

Week 1

Wednesday, May 21: Defining culture

Readings:

- Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary"
- Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism"
- *Optional:* Raymond Williams, "Culture" (from *Keywords*)

Overview of course and syllabus

Friday, May 23: Studying culture

Readings:

- James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication"
- Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture"

Screening: *Supermen of Malegaon* (2012)

Week 2

Monday, May 26 – NO CLASS (Memorial Day)

Wednesday, May 28 – NO CLASS (Ioana at conference)

Friday, May 30: Ideology and hegemony

Readings:

- Marx and Engels, from "The German Ideology"
- Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"
- Antonio Gramsci, from "The Prison Notebooks"

Screenings: *The Twilight Zone: "Eye of the Beholder"* (1960)

Modern Family: "Game Changer" (2010)

Week 3

Monday, June 2: Interpretation and agency

Readings:

- Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Viewers Make Meaning"
- John Fiske, from *Understanding Popular Culture: "Chapter 2: Commodities and Culture"*

Screening: *All in the Family: "Sammy's Visit"* (1972)

Excerpts from *Reefer Madness* (1936) and *Bronies* (2012)

Wednesday, June 4: Mass culture

Readings:

- Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception"
- Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

Screenings: *Idiocracy* (2006)

Ways of Seeing - Part 1 (1972)

VISUAL REMIX ASSIGNMENT DUE

Friday, June 6: Taste and cultural distinctions

Readings:

- Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aesthetic Sense as the Sense of Distinction"
- Gael Sweeney, "The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess"

Screenings: *60 Minutes*: "Yes... But is it Art?" (1993) and "Kinkade" (2001)

Selected "ratchet" music videos

Exam Review: Midterm Jeopardy!

Week 4

Monday, June 9: MIDTERM EXAM

Wednesday, June 11: Gender

Readings:

- Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power"
- Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility"

Screenings: *Bridalplasty* (2010)

Excerpts from *America in Primetime* (2011)

Selected music videos

Friday, June 13: Race

Readings:

- Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"
- Stuart Hall, from *Representation*: "The Spectacle of the 'Other'"
- *Optional*: Edward Said, "Orientalism"

Screening: Excerpts from *Good Hair* (2009), *America's Next Top Model* (2009), *Chappelle's Show* (2004)

Week 5

Monday, June 16: MEDIA PITCH ASSIGNMENT DUE. In-class media pitches.

Wednesday, June 18: Subcultures and Style Politics

Readings:

- Dick Hebdige, "Subculture: The Unnatural Break"
- bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?"

Screening: Excerpts from *Paris is Burning* (1990) and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009)

Friday, June 20: Appropriation and cultural authenticity

Readings:

- Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding Creativity: Creative Cities, Street Art and 'Making Your Name Sing' "
- Robin D.G. Kelley, "OGs in Postindustrial Los Angeles: Evolution of a Style"
- *Optional:* Sam Anderson, "The James Franco Project"

Screenings: Excerpts from *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010), *The Comedy Central Roast of James Franco* (2013), *The White Rapper Show* (2007)

PROSPECTUS DUE.

Week 6

Monday, June 23: Culture in the digital age

Readings:

- Henry Jenkins, from *Spreadable Media*: Introduction and Chapter 4
- Ioana Literat, "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity"

Screening: *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005)

Wednesday, June 25: Global culture and the possibility of change

Readings:

- Christopher Kelty, "From Participation to Power"
- Malcolm Gladwell, "Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted"
- Excerpts from *Beautiful Trouble*

Friday, June 27: FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Wednesday, July 2: FINAL PAPER DUE