

COMM 384: Interpreting Popular Culture

Fall 2016 / MW 9:30-10:50/ASC 204

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Course Description

This class was formulated with the intention to introduce you to a variety of different (critical, historical, and theoretical) approaches to examining popular culture. In this class we will explore a wide variety of case studies and get familiar with significant debates about contemporary popular culture. We will investigate what popular culture is, what functions it seems to serve, how to critically read and interpret popular texts and practices, how it shapes and reflects cultural tastes and values, how we relate to popular culture, and how it shapes the way we think, feel, and define ourselves as individuals and social beings. We will also examine how popular culture relates to social power and control or how power and ideology operate in popular culture by focusing on critical issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. I hope by the end of the semester you will have a theoretically rich analytical toolkit to critically “read” popular culture and to engage in sincere and intellectual conversations about popular culture that seems to matter deeply to us (whether we define ourselves as fans, active participants, or mere consumers).

Class Readings

This class has no required textbooks. All readings are posted on Blackboard. You are expected to complete readings by the start of lecture and be prepared to actively participate in class discussions.

Top Hat

We will be using the Top Hat (www.tophat.com) classroom response system in class. You will be able to submit answers to in-class questions using Apple or Android smartphones and tablets, laptops, or through text message.

You can visit tinyurl.com/TopHatStudentGuide for the Student Quick Start Guide which outlines how you will register for a TOP Hat account, as well as providing a brief overview to get you up and running on the system. An email invitation will also be sent to your school email account (if you don't receive this email, you can register by visiting our course website <https://app.tophat.com/e/821510>).

Top Hat will require a paid subscription, and the standard pricing for the cheapest option is \$24 for 4-months of unlimited access. For a full breakdown of all subscription options available please visit www.tophat.com/pricing.

Course Requirements

Attendance: Required

Attendance is mandatory and will be taken via Top Hat each class. Each time a new attendance session is started, Top Hat generates a random 4-digit attendance code, which is only displayed on the projected screen in our classroom. You may check in for attendance by either texting the attendance code to the Top Hat SMS Response number, or directly entering it into the provided field from your laptop or mobile device. The attendance code will be projected on screen for 30 seconds. Failure to check in for attendance will result in a marked absence. Considering that a significant amount of material covered in lecture is not in the reading and there will be frequent screenings in lecture, it is important that you attend class regularly. You will be given **three (3)** free unexcused absences. **Four or more absences will result in an automatic half grade deduction from your overall grade for each unexcused absence. Missing more than seven classes without discussing the situation with the instructor will result in a failing grade for the course.**

Also, late arrivals and early departures (more than 10 minutes after/before class starts/ends) will not be tolerated as they distract and disrupt class. If you have to miss more than 10 minutes of class, either at the beginning or the end, please consider not coming to class and getting the notes from another student. If you have to leave 10 minutes or less before class ends, let me know before class starts and sit in the front of the classroom so you can leave the classroom quietly. **Be aware that late arrivals/early departures will result in a reduced participation grade.**

Excused absences are granted *only* for the following reasons: serious illness (which must be documented with a doctor's certificate), a death in the family (again, documentation is required), or, in very rare cases, a school-related event that requires your presence and that you have arranged with the professor well in advance (e.g. an out-of-town university competitive event in which you are required to participate, a religious holiday, or a job interview). In order for an absence to be excused, documentation must be provided (a note from a coach, letter scheduling the interview, etc.).

The following types of situations are NOT considered excused absences: social events, meetings of Greek or service organizations, entertaining out-of-town visitors, holiday plans, going to weddings or to visit relatives, or any other circumstance that is extracurricular and at which your attendance is optional and secondary to your schoolwork.

*If you miss an in-class screening, it is your responsibility to track down and watch the materials.

Participation (10%)

In each class, there will be 1 or 2 in-class quizzes that is/are based on readings and lecture. Your participation grade will be based on correctness and participation in a ratio of 1:4. You will be awarded mostly for just responding to the question but will be further rewarded if you identify the correct answer. If it's a polling style question with no correct answer identified, then of course you will be awarded just for having participated in the question. Because I expect you to

come to class on time and be prepared to discuss the assigned readings in each class, I will provide extra points to those who consistently demonstrate preparation by offering insightful opinions on the topics addressed. Because participation is graded in each class, poor attendance will adversely affect your participation grade. **You will be able to check your participation grade on TopHat. Therefore, it is your responsibility to keep track of your participation grade.** If your TopHat answer did not go through because of technical issues, raise your hand immediately so we can correct it. If you experience TopHat issues but wait till another day or later in the semester to bring up the matter, I will not be able to make changes to your participation grade.

Sample Grading: If a student were to answer the question correctly, then a total of 5 points would be awarded. If a student were to answer the question incorrectly, then the awarded points would be 4, just for participating. A student who is absent or did not participate in answering the question would get 0 points.

Group Presentation (10%)/In-group Peer Evaluation (5%)/ Write Up (5%) (20%)

Early on in the semester you will divide into groups to keep track of popular culture trends and phenomena. Starting in week 5, each group will do a short in-class presentation (15 minutes with additional 5 minute for Q/A) discussing the case study in popular culture and the way it exhibits some of the themes we have discussed in class and covered in the readings. Make sure you can provide and discuss at least one specific example in class. Also, to discourage free ridership and encourage everyone to contribute meaningfully to the group work, I will have each group member evaluate the contribution of his/her group members. Lastly, your group will also hand in a write-up (2-3 pages) for the presentation. We will set the groups and schedule for presentations early in the semester. More details about the class presentation will be provided.

2 Papers (15% Each, 30%)

You will write two five page papers that provide a short analysis of a pop culture artifact (movies, advertisements, television shows, games, romance novels, etc.) that was not screened or introduced in lecture. Your argument should be supported with quotes from the readings and specific examples from your object of analysis. I will provide you with guidelines for each paper assignment.

* Late Policy: No extensions will be given unless you have truly extenuating circumstances. Assignment extensions will **only** be granted for documented medical emergencies and ongoing serious illnesses, family emergencies, natural disasters, and religious holidays. If your circumstance fits in any of these categories and need to request a deadline extension, you need to let me know ASAP and **at least 24 hours before assignments are due** so we can make arrangements. Technology excuses are not acceptable. **Assignments turned in late without an approved extension will be marked down a letter grade for every day late. After five days late, the assignment will earn a 0!**

Midterm Exam (20%) / Final Exam (20%)

Both exams will be a mixture of multiple choice, short answer, and short essay questions. The exams will evaluate both your understanding of the readings and topics covered in class throughout the semester and your ability to synthesize ideas across the course.

Course Grading Policy

You will receive details about each assignment/exam separately. **All assignments need to be completed and handed in on time to avoid a grade reduction. 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 me in a timely manner. Do no wait until the end of the semester to sort things out.

In order to pass this class you will need to complete ALL of the assignments. Failure to complete one or more of them will result in an F in the class.

Grades will be assigned as follows:

| | |
|-------------|--|
| A | outstanding, thoughtful and enthusiastic 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 |

Each assignment will be worth 100 points and will be converted to a percentage score depending upon the weight assigned to each. Your percentage scores won the assignments will be totaled and translated to a letter grade per the scale shown below:

| | | | |
|----|----------|----|---------|
| A | = 100-94 | C | = 76-74 |
| A- | = 93-90 | C- | = 73-70 |
| B+ | = 89-87 | D+ | = 69-67 |
| B | = 86-84 | D | = 66-64 |
| B- | = 83-80 | D- | = 63-60 |
| C+ | = 79-77 | F | = 59-0 |

If you have concerns regarding a grade on a given assignment, you must appeal it in writing, stating the reasons why you feel the grade is inaccurate, within one week of receiving the graded assignment. No late appeals will be accepted for review.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

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://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions>. 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>.

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://capsnet.usc.edu/department/departement-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> describes reporting options and other resources.

Annenberg School of Communication Academic Integrity Policy

Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. Students should not give or receive (or attempt to give or receive) unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. You cannot turn in someone else's work and you cannot turn in material you have used in other classes, whether at USC or elsewhere. You should also properly acknowledge and document all sources of information (e.g. quotations, paraphrases, ideas) and use only the sources and resources authorized by the instructor.

The Annenberg School of Communication maintains a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found responsible for plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade for this course, will be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and may be dismissed from the School of Communication.

Support Systems

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 whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. 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.

Disability

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 120 Grace Ford Salvatori Hall and is open 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Other Classroom Policies

Email

Feel free to email me if you have any questions but give me 24 hours to reply. Include the course number in the subject line and sign your full name. I will only answer emails about assignments up to **24 HOURS** before the deadline.

Discriminatory Conduct (such as sexual harassment)

The University as well as this class will not tolerate discriminatory conduct. It poisons the work and learning environment of the University and threatens the careers, educational experience, and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Such behavior will not be allowed in this classroom.

Seating and Discussion

Despite the fact that this is a large class, we love discussions and encourage you to raise your hand during lecture and ask questions, make comments, or ask for clarification of points you may not have understood. Please sit toward the front and center during lecture, so that you can hear the lecture and be heard when you ask questions. When you do ask a question or make a comment, please speak up – even if the professor can hear you, your classmates need to be able to as well.

Noise-Making Devices and Computer Use in Class

All noise-making electronic devices (cellphones, mp3 players, etc.) are disruptive. Those who plan to use your cellphone for Top Hat questions, please remember to set your cellphones into mute or vibrate at the beginning of class. Use of computer in the classroom is a privilege. You may use a computer in the classroom only for note taking and not recreation. If we notice that you are abusing this privilege by using your computer for recreational purposes (e.g. watching videos, checking emails or Facebook, etc.), we will ask you to leave and mark you as absent for that class period.

Schedule of Classes, Topics & Readings

Week One: Defining Popular Culture

Monday, August 22: Introduction

Wednesday, August 24:

- John Storey, Chapter 1. "What is popular culture?" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (pp. 1-16).

Week Two: Critical Approaches to Popular Culture

Monday, August 29:

- David Grazian, Chapter 3. "Monsters, Inc.: A Critical Approach to Popular Culture" in *Mix it Up* (pp. 46-65).

Wednesday, August 31:

- Neil Postman, Chapter 6. "The Age of Show Business" (pp. 83-98) and Chapter 7. "'Now...This'" (pp. 99-113) in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Week Three: High vs. Low/Popular Culture

Monday, September 5:

No Class! – Labor Day

Wednesday, September 7:

- Herbert J. Gans, Chapter 1. "The Critique of Mass Culture" in *Popular Culture & High Culture* (pp. 29-88).

Week Four: Pop Culture and Its Complexity

Monday, September 12:

- Steven Johnson, Part One in *Everything Bad is Good For You* (pp. 62-115).

Wednesday, September 14:

- Jason Mittell (2006). "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television" in *The Velvet Light Trap* 58, pp. 29-40.

Week Five: Parody, Satire, and the Potential to Subvert

Monday, September 19:

- Matthew A. Henry, Chapter 1. "Entertain and Subvert: Fox Television, Satirical Comedy, and *The Simpsons*" in *The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture* (pp. 19-43).

Wednesday, September 21:

- Chuck Tryon, "Fake News and Political Satire," in *Political TV* (pp. 71-106).

Paper #1 Due!

Week Six: Subculture, Counterculture, and Cool Hunting

Monday, September 26:

- Dick Hebdige, “Subculture: The Unnatural Break” (pp. 90-99) & “Style as Intentional Communication” (pp. 100-112) in *Subculture: The Reading of Style*.

Wednesday, September 28:

- Naomi Klein, “Alt.Everything” in *No Logo* (pp. 63-86).
- Joseph Heath & Andrew Potter, “From Status-Seeking to Coolhunting” in *Nation of Rebels* (pp. 188-220).

Week Seven: Fandom

Monday, October 3:

- Henry Jenkins, Chapter 1. ““Get a Life!”: Fans, Poachers, Nomads” In *Textual Poachers* (pp. 62-82).

Wednesday, October 5:

- Suzanne Scott (2013). “Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)Visibility in Comic Book Culture” in *Transformative Works and Culture*.
- Miriam Kent (2015). “Unveiling Marvels: *Ms. Marvel* and the Reception of the New Muslim Superhero” in *Feminist Media Studies* 15(3), pp. 523-527.

Week Eight: Reading Romance

Monday, October 10:

Mid-term Exam!

Wednesday, October 12:

- Janice Radway, Chapter 22, “Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature” in *The Audience Studies Reader* (pp. 219-225).
- Melissa A. Click, “Fifty Shades of Postfeminism” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn* (pp. 15-31).

Week Nine: Selling Nostalgia

Monday, October 17:

- Simon Reynolds, “Don’t Look Back: Nostalgia and Retro” in *Retromania* (pp. xxv-xxxvi).

Wednesday, October 19:

- Daniel Marcus, “The Wonder Years: Televised Nostalgia” in *How to Watch Television* (pp. 223-231).
- Katharina Niemeyer & Daniela Wentz, “Nostalgia is Not What it Used to Be” in *Media and Nostalgia* (pp. 129-138).

Week Ten: Social Media Memes as Pop Culture

Monday, October 24:

- Limor Shifman (2011). "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme" in *New Media & Society* (pp. 187-203).
- Jason Tanz (2016). "Finally, An Exhaustive Structural Analysis of 'Damn Daniel'" in *Wired*.

Wednesday, October 26:

- Caitlin Dewey, "Hey Girl, A New Study Says Looking at Ryan Gosling Memes Increase Men's Feminist Feelings" in *Washington Post* (January 28, 2015).
- Carrie A. Rentschler & Samantha C. Thrift (2015). "Doing Feminism in the Network: Networked Laughter and the 'Binder Full of Women' Meme" in *Feminist Theory* 16(3), pp. 329-359.

Week Eleven: Popular Feminism/Misogyny and Beyoncé Feminism

Monday, October 31:

- Callie Beusman, "What Does It Mean for Feminism If Feminism Becomes Trendy?" in *Jezebel* (23 February, 2014).
- Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015). "Popular Misogyny: A Zeitgeist" in *Culture Digitally* (<http://culturedigitally.org/2015/01/popular-misogyny-a-zeitgeist/>).

Wednesday, November 2:

- Nathalie Weidhase (2015). "'Beyoncé Feminism' and the Contestation of the Black Feminist Body" in *Celebrity Studies* 6(1), pp. 128-131.
- Janell Hobson (2015). "Beyoncé's Fierce Feminism" in *Ms. Magazine* (7 March).
- Lasha (2016). "bell hooks vs. Beyoncé" in *Salon* (17 May).

Week Twelve: Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality I

Monday, November 7:

- Carol Stabile (2009). "'Sweetheart, This Ain't Gender Studies': Sexism and Superheroes" in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6(1), pp. 86-92.
- Adilifu Nama, "For Reel?" in *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (pp. 126-154).
- Andrew Wheeler (2014). "Avengers Now: A Black Captain America, A Female Thor, A Superior Iron Man, and What It Means for Marvel and Diversity" in *Comics Alliance* (July 17).

Wednesday, November 9:

- Kristen J. Warner, Chapter 2. "ABC's *Scandal* and Black Women's Fandom" in *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn* (pp. 32-50).

Week Thirteen: Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality II

Monday, November 14:

- Alice Leppert, "Keeping Up With the Kardashians: Fame-Work and the Production of Entrepreneurial Sisterhood" in *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn* (pp. 215-231).

Wednesday, November 16:

- Ron Becker, “Gay Material and Prime-Time Network in the 1990s” in *Gay TV and Straight America* (pp. 136-188).
- Sonali Kohli (2014). “Pop Culture’s Transgender Moment: Why Online TV is Leading the Way” in *Slate* (September 26).

Screening: *Further Off the Straight and Narrow*

Paper #2 Due!

Week Fourteen: Intersection of Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality III

Monday, November 21:

- Continue lecture and discussion from previous class

Wednesday, November 23:

Happy Thanksgiving! – No Class (November 23-27)

Week Fifteen: Global Popular Culture

Monday, November 28:

- Koichi Iwabuchi, Chapter 4. “How “Japanese” is Pokemon?” in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure* (pp. 53-79).
- Jason Bainbridge (2014). “‘It is a Pokemon World’: *The Pokemon Franchise and the Environment*” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(4), pp. 399-414.

Wednesday, November 30:

- Kent A. Ono & Jungmin Kwon, Chapter 12. “Re-worlding Culture? YouTube as a K-Pop Interlocutor” in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global* (pp. 199-214).
- John Seabrook (2012). “Factory Girls” in *The New Yorker* (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/factory-girls-2>).

Final Exam Review

Final Exam

Monday, December 12 (11:00AM-1:00 PM)