

Communication 384: Interpreting Popular Culture

Spring 2017
T/Th 8:00 AM - 9:20 AM
ASC 231

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Course Description:

This course critically engages with popular culture in order to understand how an arena often dismissed as “mere entertainment” can act as an indicator of cultural values and a producer of cultural meaning. It explores popular culture as important economic, political, and social texts and works to understand how the production and consumption of popular culture shapes, and is shaped by, our lived experiences. Put another way, this course explores what popular culture says about society and, conversely, what society says about popular culture.

Culling from diverse cultural forms, such as television, film, music, sports, advertising and the Internet, among others, we will struggle with the meaning of popular culture and its place in society, both historically and within contemporary moments. We will take a multiperspectival approach to thinking about popular culture that spans multiple methods and theoretical approaches. Broadly, we will focus these approaches within three areas: production, political economy, and industry practices; representation and textual analysis; and reception and audience studies/uses of popular culture.

Students will be asked to critically engage with popular culture texts, as well as their relation to complex social, political and economic issues, in order to understand how power and ideology are interwoven into this ubiquitous cultural form. We will unpack popular culture in order to understand how seemingly natural views of the world are produced by, and in relation to, popular culture. We will examine the way popular culture communicates and establishes ideas. And we will look at the voices amplified by popular culture and those silenced; at experiences made legible and those made illegible.

Ultimately, this class will present an array of critical/cultural scholarly approaches to popular culture in order to question the role of popular culture in our lives, inform and elevate our conversation regarding popular culture, and provide us with theoretical and methodological frameworks to both engage with popular culture and develop our own ideas about popular culture texts.

Key Questions This Semester:

What is popular culture? How is popular culture produced? What are different methods for studying popular culture? What are different theories of popular culture? What are the economics of popular culture? How do we unpack and “read” popular culture? What do audiences do with popular culture? How/What does popular culture teach us about ourselves? About others? How does popular culture teach us the “correct” way to operate in the world? How might we engage with, or produce, popular culture differently? How might we demand something different from popular culture? How might we question the role of popular culture in our lives?

Required Text:

1. *The Media Studies Reader*. Edited by Laurie Ouellette. Routledge. 2012

All additional readings will be posted to Blackboard.

Course Requirements:

Class participation (15%):

Students are expected to come to class on time and prepared to discuss the assigned readings each week. This includes being able to respond to questions about the assigned readings and to offer opinions and insight into the topics addressed. Your final grade will reflect the degree to which you fulfill these requirements throughout the semester.

Attendance in lecture is important: there is significant material covered in lecture that is not in the reading – which means you cannot pass the course if you do not attend most of the lectures. In addition, there will be frequent screenings in lecture for which you will be responsible.

Students who miss more than **four (4) classes** will have their grades reduced and risk failing the course. There is no distinction between excused and/or unexcused absences (except in cases of severe illness, religious holidays or university sanctioned activities) – so please be judicious in how you manage this requirement. *Keep in mind that you are responsible for the material covered during classes you miss (so make sure to get notes from a classmate and/or come to office hours).*

Your final class participation grade will be based on a combination of your active in-class participation, your attendance record, and homework assignments.

Introduction Paper (5%):

Students will be asked to write a self-reflective paper that situates their understanding of popular culture, their relationship to popular culture, and how popular culture influences their daily life. While a prompt with more information on this assignment will be given to students, this assignment will focus not just on students’ consumption of popular culture but also on their understanding of what constitutes popular culture and why and how popular culture has influenced their identity.

Popular Culture Project (35%)

Students will be asked to write a series of short research papers over the course of the semester. These papers will use a diversity of theoretical approaches dependent on the specific media artifact, but they will all be broken into 3 methodological areas: Political Economy/Production Studies; Textual Analysis; and Audience/Reception Studies. Each student will choose a media artifact to examine – using the same media artifact for each paper. Student’s will also write a short paper where they “make the case” for why their particular media artifact is important and worthy of investigation.

Prompts with more information for each paper will distributed to the class. **These papers are considered mini-research papers. Therefore they ask you to think theoretically and with a particular method of popular culture studies in mind. These are not opinion pieces nor are they evaluations/reviews. The academic articles we read throughout the semester will serve as guides for the format, tone, and approach for each paper.**

All papers should be checked for grammar and spelling, demonstrate a clear writing plan and structure, focus on specific and pertinent arguments, and use a consistent style manual with proper citation practices. Furthermore, they should all engage with specific academic articles assigned for our course.

Papers are due in accordance with their due date and late papers will incur a significant penalty. If you have an emergency that impacts your ability to turn your post in on time, you need to contact your TA or Instructor **before** the post is due.

Midterm (20%):

The midterm exam will take place during class. The midterm will test students on definitions of key concepts and connections between different concepts. The exam will include short definitions and essays.

Final Exam (25%):

The final exam will require you to demonstrate an understanding of the readings and topics covered throughout the semester (including class discussions), and to synthesize ideas from across the course. Keeping up with the readings (and taking notes on them) throughout the semester will be *very* beneficial to you on this exam. The final exam will be based around short answers and essays.

Students who wish to pursue a career in research or another profession that necessitates focused study and/or a strong and significant writing sample may write a research paper in lieu of the final exam. This undertaking should not be taken lightly and should be discussed with the instructor within the first month of class. Students who wish to pursue this option will have a modified “make the case” paper in which they set out the theoretical and methodological thrust of their research project in more detail.

Class Discussion:

In order to ensure that our discussions are both helpful and enjoyable for all involved there are a few expectations to keep in mind:

1. Please come to class on time and prepared to participate. While it is assumed that you will do all the readings assigned each week, it will be most helpful for you to approach the material as an engaged reader. Even though this is a lecture there will be opportunities for student's to answer questions and offer insights that will contribute to their participation grade. I highly encourage everyone to raise their hands when given the opportunity (whether it be to ask a question or to offer up an answer).
2. Not only does this class ask you to grapple with a lot of nuanced cultural theory, but it also expects you to engage with issues of race, sexuality, gender, ability, and class (to name a few). These can often times be polarizing and uncomfortable subject matters. While you should always feel free to express yourself and your opinions, they should be communicated in an articulate and non-hostile manner. We should interrogate ideas *not* individuals. Please remember to show respect and encouragement towards your fellow classmates, even when you disagree.
3. I expect you to devote your attention to the course material for the full class period. This expectation should be taken very seriously. Violating this policy will result in a decreased participation grade. Furthermore:
 - **Name Plates:** In order to help facilitate the learning of names please bring a name plate to each class.
 - **Cellphone Policy:** All cellphones must be turned to vibrate or silent during class meetings and you should not be checking your phone during class.
 - **Laptop Policy:** Personal computers and wireless Internet are a key part of today's technological culture, but they can also distract you from the class discussion and dampen participation. Recent studies suggest that students who bring laptops to class perform worse (on average) than their non-laptop using peers, and are much less likely to pay attention in class. Laptops can also be a distraction for other [students](#).
 - Therefore, students are **not** encouraged to use laptops to take notes during class. If you feel that your learning will be hampered by not having access to your laptop for note taking or other legitimate purposes, please speak to the instructor. Otherwise, keep your laptop turned off and stowed away during class unless otherwise instructed.

- **If you decide to use a personal computer for note taking you are required to email your notes to the instructor and the TA immediately after class. Failure to do so will result in an absence.** Remember, this class is a chance to further your understanding of the material, develop your critical reasoning skills, and increase your knowledge about theories methodologies of popular culture – therefore I am not interested in your ability to google information.
- If at any time during the semester you are struggling with the material or the course load ***please seek assistance from either your TA or the instructor***. It’s a great idea to be proactive and come to office hours.
- **On a personal note:** I want this to be a positive experience and will do my best to help in any way possible; however, this can only be accomplished if you come and speak with me before things get overwhelming. If you wait too long to seek out help it will be much more difficult, if not impossible, for me to help. I can’t stress this enough – your instructor and TA are here to help you. Seek us out, ask us questions – it’s not only our job, but we actually enjoy talking

Assignments and Grading:

It should go without stating that you are responsible for the material covered in class and in assigned readings. Broadly, you will be evaluated on your engagement level with the class materials, as demonstrated in your written work and class participation, your capacity to explain your ideas and analysis in both articulate and well-written forms, and your ability to creatively explore the theories, methodologies, and ideas presented during the semester. All of your work will be graded on how well it demonstrates an understanding of the theories and methodologies of the class and how well it articulates and structures its argument. Further requirements and expectations will be distributed with each assignment; however, it is up to you to make sure you are not confused about any of these parameters.

The final course grade will be based on the following distribution:

Class participation	15%
Introduction Post	5%
Making the Case Paper	5%
Pop Culture Artifact Papers (10% each)	30%
Midterm	20%
Final	25%

You must complete ALL of these assignments in order to pass the class. **Failure to complete ONE OR MORE will result in an F in the class.**

Course Grading Policy:

Grades will be assigned as follows:

A	outstanding, thoughtful and enthusiastic work
B+/B	above average work, demonstrating good insight
B-/C+/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 on the assignments will be totaled and translated to a letter grade per the scale shown below:

A	= 100-93	C	= 76-73
A-	= 92-90	C-	= 72-70
B+	= 89-87	D+	= 69-67
B	= 86-83	D	= 66-63
B-	= 82-80	D-	= 62-60
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; however, I ask that you wait 24 hours before appealing any grade. No late appeals will be accepted for review.

Key Due Dates:

1. Introduction Post – Due 1/24
2. Making the Case Paper – Due 1/31
3. Political Economy/Production Studies Paper – Due 3/2
4. Midterm – 3/9
5. Textual Analysis Paper – Due 3/28
6. Audience and Reception Studies Paper – Due 4/18
7. Final Exam – Due 5/9

Course Schedule

Please note that this course schedule is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor

Week 1

Tuesday, 1/10: Introduction to the Course

Thursday, 1/12: How to Interpret Popular Culture?

- Kellner, Douglas. “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture.” – **GRC**

Week 2:

Tuesday, 1/17: Defining Popular Culture (What are the stakes?)

- Jenkins, Henry, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc. “Defining Popular Culture.” In *Hop On Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. - **BB**

Thursday, 1/19: The History of Popular Culture

- Lipsitz, George. “Popular Culture: This Ain’t No Slideshow.”
- Defining Critical Thinking –
 - <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766>
 - <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-the-art-of-close-reading-part-three/511>

Week 3:

Tuesday, 1/24:

- Readings TBD
- ❖ **Introduction Paper Due - Popular Culture and My Identity**

Thursday, 1/26: Methods of Popular Culture – Production Studies

- Schiller, Herbert. “The Corporation and the Production of Culture.”

Week 4:

Tuesday, 1/31: Methods of Popular Culture – Textual Analysis

- Hall, Stuart. “The Work of Representation.”
- ❖ **Making the Case Paper Due**

Thursday, 2/2: Methods of Popular Culture – Audience/Reception Studies

- Ang, Ien. “On the Politics of Empirical Audience Research.”

Week 5: Interpreting History Through Television

Tuesday, 2/7:

- Spigel, Lynn. “The Domestic Economy of Television Viewing in Postwar America.”

Thursday, 2/9:

- Miller, Quinn. “The Dick Van Dyke Show: Queer Meanings.”

Week 6: Interpreting Citizenship Through Television

Tuesday, 2/14:

- Ouellette and Hay. “Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen.”

Thursday, 2/16:

- Amaya, Hector. “Citizenship, Diversity, Law, and *Ugly Betty*.”
- ❖ **Paper #1 Due - Political Economy and Production Studies Analysis**

Week 7:

Tuesday, 2/21: Interpreting Class Through Television

- Smith-Shomade, Baretta. “Eyes Wide Shut: Capitalism, Class and the Promise of Black Media.”

Thursday, 2/23:

- Grindstaff, Laura. “Trash, Class, and Cultural Hierarchy.”

Week 8:

Tuesday, 2/28: Interpreting Identity Through Television

- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. “What’s Your Flava: Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture.”

Thursday, 3/2:

- Moore, Candace. “Resisting, Reiterating, and Dancing Through: The Swinging Closet Doors of Ellen DeGeneres’s Televised Personalities.” – **GRC**
- **Paper #1 Due - Political Economy and Production Studies Analysis**

Week 9:

Tuesday, 3/7: Midterm Exam Review – Come to Class Prepared with Questions

Thursday, 3/9: **Midterm Exam**

SPRING BREAK (3/13-3/17)

Week 10:

Tuesday, 3/21: Interpreting Music

- Gitelman, Lisa. "Reading Music, Reading Records, Reading Race: Musical Copyright and the U.S. Copyright Act of 1909."
- Grossberg, Lawrence. "Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom."

Thursday, 3/23:

- Azikwe, Marlo David. "More Than Baby Mamas: Black Mothers and Hip-Hop Feminism."

Week 11:

Tuesday, 3/28: Interpreting Sports

- Readings TBD
- **Paper #2 Due - Textual Analysis**

Thursday, 3/30:

- Hutchins & Rowe. "Online Crowds and Fandom." From Sport Beyond Television. - **BB**

Week 12: Interpreting Film

Tuesday, 4/4:

- Mulvey, Laura. "The Pleasures of Looking." - **BB**
- hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze."

Thursday, 4/6:

- Halberstam, J. "Oh Behave! Austin Powers and the Drag Kings"
- Smith, Greg. "It's Just a Movie." – **BB**

Week 13:

Tuesday, 4/11: Interpreting Reality TV

- Readings TBD

Thursday, 4/13:

- Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy."
- Andrejevic, Mark. "The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure."

Week 14:

Tuesday, 4/18: Interpreting New Media

- Christian, Aymar Jean. “Real vlogs: The rules and meanings of online personal videos.” – **BB**
- Manovich, Lev. “The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production
- ❖ **Paper #3 Due – Audience and Reception Studies Analysis**

Thursday, 4/20:

- Jhally, Sut. “Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture.”
- McLintock, Anne. “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising.”

Week 15:

Tuesday, 4/25: Interpreting Advertising

- Sender, Katherine. Selection from *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* – **BB**
- Katz, Jackson. “Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From BMWs to Bud Light.”

Thursday, 4/27: Class Recap and Final Review

- ❖ **Take Home Final Assigned – Due Tuesday, 5/9 by MIDNIGHT**