

## COMM 384: Interpreting Popular Culture

Spring 2018 / MW 3:30-4:50PM /ASC 231

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Office Hours: Office Hours: W 11:00 – 11:50 and by appointment

### 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 begin by investigating what popular culture is, what social functions it serves, why it's important to study it, and how we can study it. After exploring various ways popular culture is defined and understood, we will learn how to critically read and interpret popular texts and practices and understand how popular culture 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.

### Course Requirements

#### Attendance: Required

Attendance is mandatory and will be taken each class. Considering that a significant amount of material covered in lecture is not in the reading, it is important that you attend class regularly. You will be given **two (2)** free unexcused absences. **Three 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.**

\* 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). 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%)

I expect you to come to class on time and be prepared to ask questions, discuss the assigned readings, and make insightful and substantive contributions in every class. You should be able to respond to questions about the assigned readings and offer opinions and insights into the topics addressed. Poor attendance will adversely affect your participation grade. If you have a good attendance record but don't actively participate in class discussions, you can't expect to get a good participation grade (in other words, participation grade will not be based solely on attendance). Each class participation will be graded based on the demonstration of your preparation and the level of involvement and contribution to class discussions.

### Discussion Leading (10%)

Early in the semester, you will sign up to be a discussion leader for a topic of your interest. You will prepare 3 thought-provoking questions that we can use for class discussion. The questions must cut across class readings, integrating their contributions to a particular theme. The quality of our class discussions will depend on your discussion points that not only nicely summarize but also reflect and engage critically with the assigned readings (as well as previous class readings, lectures, and discussions). You will prepare a study guide that contains a short summary of the readings (a paragraph for each reading) with your discussion questions and upload it to the discussion forum available on the class blackboard before coming to class on the day of your discussion leading.

### Mid-term (20%)

The mid-term exam will include short and long answer essay questions. The exam will evaluate both your understanding of the readings and topics covered in class and your ability to synthesize ideas across the course.

### 2 Short Paper Assignments (15% each - 30% total)

You will write two short papers (5 full pages), one that explores what popular culture is and what function popular culture seems to have in our society and the other that critically analyzes a specific popular culture text. Further instructions on this paper assignment will be provided later in the semester.

### Final Research Paper (Proposal: 5%/ Presentation: 5%/ Final Paper: 20%/ Total: 30%)

Instead of a final exam, you will and write a 10 page final research paper incorporating topics and theories you learned in class. This paper will be due at the end of the semester. In the first half of the semester, you will submit a 1 page proposal that clearly explains your research topic, research questions, and methods you will use to answer those research questions. Your research topic must be approved by the instructor in advance. In addition to the proposal, you will be required to give a 6-8 minute presentation to the class on the last two weeks of the semester. You will need to prepare a visual aid (e.g. Power Point, Keynote, etc.) for the presentation. Further instructions on these assignments will be provided in a supplemental handout.

\* 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 any of these and you need to request a deadline extension, you need to let me know ASAP and **at least 24 hours before the assignment**

is 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!** Please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss assignments.

### 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/department-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](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

Since this is a discussion-oriented class, I encourage you frequently participate and add value to class discussions. Feel free to raise your hand during lecture and ask questions, make comments, or ask for clarification of points you may not have understood. 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. 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. Any other uses will result in a reduced participation grade.

## Schedule of Classes, Topics & Readings

### **Week One: Introduction**

Wednesday, January 10: Understanding why popular culture matters

### **Week Two: What is Popular Culture?**

Monday, January 15:

No Class – Martin Luther King Day

Wednesday, January 17:

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

### **Week Three: Interrogating Popular Culture**

Monday, January 22:

- 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*

Wednesday, January 24:

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

### **Week Four: The “Popular” Popular Culture Debates**

Monday, January 29:

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

Wednesday, January 31:

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

### **Week Five: Parodies and Satires in Late Night America**

Monday, February 5:

- Chuck Tryon, “Fake News and Political Satire,” in *Political TV* (pp. 71-106).
- Emily Nussbaum, “Hive Mind” in *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/09/a-woman-comes-to-late-night>
- Sarah Larson, ““Vive John Oliver” in *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/vive-john-oliver>
- Caitlin Flanagan, “How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump” in *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/how-late-night-comedy-alienated-conservatives-made-liberals-smug-and-fueled-the-rise-of-trump/521472/>

Wednesday, February 7:

- Jeffrey Jones, “Politics and the Brand: *Saturday Night Live*’s Campaign Season Humor,” in *Saturday Night Live and American TV* (pp. 77-92).

### **Week Six: Shock and Subvert – Television Animations**

Monday, February 12:

- 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, February 14:

- Avi Sanro, “Of Niggas and Citizens: *The Boondocks* Fans and Differentiated Black American Politics” in *Satire TV* (pp. 252-273).

### Paper Assignment 1 Duel

### Week Seven: The “Real” Issues in Reality TV I

Monday, February 19:

### President’s Day – No Class

Wednesday, February 21:

- Kelefa Sanneh, “The Reality Principle: The Rise and Rise of a Television Genre” in *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/09/the-reality-principle>.
- Mark Andrejevic, “Reality TV and Voyeurism” in *Reality TV* (pp. 173-194).

### Week Eight: The “Real” Issues in Reality TV II

Monday, February 26:

- Michael J. Lee & Leigh Moscovitz, “The “Rich Bitch”: Class and Gender on the *Real Housewives of New York City*” in *Feminist Media Studies* 13(1), pp. 64-82.

Wednesday, February 28:

- Maria Pramaggiore & Diane Negra, “Keeping Up with the Aspirations: Commercial Family Values and the Kardashian Brand” in *Reality Gendervision* (pp. 76-96).

### Week Nine: Pop Nostalgia

Monday, March 5:

### Mid-term Exam

Wednesday, March 7:

- Ryan Lizardi, “Introduction to the Perpetual Individual Nostalgic’s Playlist Past” in *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Media* (pp. 1- 36).

### Week Ten:

### Spring Break! (No Classes on March 12 & 14)

### Week Eleven: Feminism in Popular Culture

Monday, March 19:

- Andi Zeisler, “Women Under the Influence: Pop Culture Now and Beyond” in *Feminism and Pop Culture* (pp. 121-148).

Wednesday, March 21:

- Kath Kenny, “The Personal is Now Commercial – Popular Feminism Online” in *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-personal-is-now-commercial-popular-feminism-online-79930>
- Alice Vincent, “How Feminism Conquered Pop Culture” in *Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11310119/feminism-pop-culture-2014.html>
- Nathalie Weidhase (2015). “‘Beyoncé Feminism’ and the Contestation of the Black Feminist Body” in *Celebrity Studies* 6(1), pp. 128-131.

**Final Paper Proposal Due!**

### **Week Twelve: Queer Popular Culture**

Monday, March 26:

- Joshua Gamson, “‘It’s Been a While Since I’ve Seen, Like, Straight People’: Queer Visibility in the Age of Postnetwork Reality Television” in *A Companion to Reality Television* (pp. 227-246).
- Katerina Symes, “*Orange is the New Black*: The Popularization of Lesbian Sexuality and Heterosexual Modes of Viewing” in *Feminist Media Studies* 17(1), pp. 29-41.

Wednesday, March 28:

- Michael Lovelock, “‘I Am...’: Caitlyn Jenner, Jazz Jennings and the Cultural Politics of Transgender Celebrity” in *Feminist Media Studies* 17(5), pp. 737-754.
- Sonali Kohli, “Pop Culture’s Transgender Moment: Why Online TV is Leading the Way” in *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/09/why-online-streaming-wins-with-transgender-portrayals/380822/>

### **Week Thirteen: Digital Popular Culture**

Monday, April 2:

- Jeff Blagdon, “How Emoji Conquered the World” in *The Verge*. <https://www.theverge.com/2013/3/4/3966140/how-emoji-conquered-the-world>
- Luke Stark & Kate Crawford, “The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect, and Communication” in *Social Media + Society* 1(2), pp. 1-11.

Wednesday, April 4:

- Caitlin Gibson, “A Whisper, Then Tingles, Then 87 Million YouTube Views: Meet the Star of ASMR” in *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-whisper-then-tingles-then-87-million-youtube-views-meet-the-star-of-asmr/2014/12/12/0c85d54a-7b33-11e4-b821-503cc7efed9e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.98e7b7a09f3a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-whisper-then-tingles-then-87-million-youtube-views-meet-the-star-of-asmr/2014/12/12/0c85d54a-7b33-11e4-b821-503cc7efed9e_story.html?utm_term=.98e7b7a09f3a)
- Emma Leigh Waldron, “‘This Feels So Real!’: Sense and Sexuality in ASMR Videos” in *First Monday* 22(1). <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7282/5804>

### **Week Fourteen: Pop Culture From Outside the US**

Monday, April 9:

- Koichi Iwabuchi, Chapter 4. “How “Japanese” is Pokemon?” in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure* (pp. 53-79).

Wednesday, April 11:

- Eun Young Jung, “New Wave Formations: K-Pop Idols, Social Media, and the Remaking of the Korean Wave” in *Hallyu 2.0* (pp. 73-89).

**Week Fifteen: Presentation Week I (April 16 & 18)**

**Week Sixteen: Presentation Week II (April 23 & 25)**

**Friday, May 4 (5pm) - Final Paper Due!**