



## COMM 384: INTERPRETING POPULAR CULTURE

Fall 2018

Tuesday & Thursday 11:00-12:20am • ASC 204

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:00PM-3:00pm and by appointment

Teaching Assistants:

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TA 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 popular culture and communication. 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 every day? And how do the various forms of visibility--our practices of looking and seeing--limit or enhance our experience, agency, and culture?

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.

### **TECHNOLOGY POLICY**

No digital technology should be used while you are in class, including laptops, phones, watches, Google Glass, and so forth. Give yourself the gift of 80 minutes of uninterrupted distraction from participation. TAs will take note of those not mindful of the policy and it will be reflected in your participation grade. You may use analog technologies like a pen, pencil and paper.

### **REQUIREMENTS/ASSIGNMENTS**

#### **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.***

***You can demonstrate participation by the following:***

- 1) Coming to class prepared each week to participate in the class discussion***
- 2) Posting news articles, research, videos, or links to content in the weekly Forum on Blackboard, and offering a short comment on its relevance to the discussion/course***

### **Short Reflection Papers (5 short 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 the weeks assigned. There will be a link in each of these weeks on Blackboard where you can upload your paper.**

### **Midterm Reflection Paper (20 percent of total grade)**

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

### **Final Project or Paper (20 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. Projects or 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 for papers. 5-page project description to accompany a project. Both must include a bibliography of works cited from the course). Paper or project must be uploaded to Blackboard **during the time our Final Exam is scheduled. More information about presenting projects will be communicated during the semester.**

### **Group work (10 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 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.

### **Handwritten/Visual journal (10 percent of total grade)**

Each week, you will reflect upon what you are learning, and hand-write (not use a computer) and collect images in your journal. You can contribute to it while you are in class. I will also assign you periodic out of class activities where you will complete these assignments in your journal, rather than write a paper.

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).

### 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%

**\* 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.***

### Extra credit

There may be opportunities to earn extra credit by attending a designated campus event and writing a one-page response paper. You may earn a maximum of three extra credit points. Events will be announced as opportunities are available, and you can also suggest events to me for consideration.

## 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 S-Campus 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 USC Campus 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 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 SYSTEMS**

### **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).