COMM 411: COMMUNICATION CRITICISM
Spring, 2020
Class #20627
12:00-1:50 MW
ASC 328

Instructor: Dr. Randall A. Lake
Office: ASC 206C
Office Hours: TBA
Phone: 213-740-3946
Email: rlake@usc.edu (This is the most efficient way to reach me. I check my email regularly when in the office. However, weekdays when I am out of the office, weekends, and evenings are much more sporadic so, if you email me at these times, please do not expect an immediate reply. Because improper email format is unprofessional, inappropriate, and communicates a poor image of its sender, please use proper grammar, letter format, and "netiquette" when communicating with me.)

Course Description
It is a truism that we are bombarded by thousands of persuasive messages every day. Politicians lobby for our votes; companies lobby for our dollars; causes of all kinds lobby for our allegiance. Communication criticism is the process of analyzing these messages for the purpose of figuring out how they persuade us. It differs from two other forms of “criticism” with which you may be familiar. It is not criticism in the popular sense of carping or complaining because, although critical judgments are always somewhat subjective, they are not simply expressions of personal opinion. Communication criticism also is not simply critique because not all messages are merely effects of ideology and power (although some are). The communication critic believes that messages are far richer, more complicated, and more diverse than this, and approaches them as strategic responses to actual, and specific, communicative situations. Thus, communication criticism is a systematic, three-stage process. First, the critic studies the message itself, in order to understand its component parts and how they combine. Second, the critic studies the context within which the message was produced, in order to understand how circumstances might have “called forth” (or stimulated creation of) the message while also constraining (or limiting) the kind of message that would be understood as responding
appropriately to those conditions. Finally, the critic “matches” the message to its context, in order to understand how—or whether—the message responded to the demands of the situation, and to evaluate it as a persuasive effort.

In this class, we will explore a vast range of persuasive messages, from some of the most important speeches ever delivered to some of the cleverest advertisements ever devised; from powerful documentary films to popular TV programs; from political cartoons to internet memes. As communication critics, we will seek to understand, interpret, and evaluate these messages as attempts to shape beliefs and attitudes, and motivate action, in particular audiences under specific circumstances.

Course Goals
- To acquaint students with (a) the purposes and role of criticism in contemporary society, (b) the process of doing criticism, (c) major approaches to conducting criticism, and (d) the finest examples of criticism in the communication discipline; and
- To develop students’ own critical awareness, analytical capacities, and ability to express their ideas in writing

Course Objectives
- As in any course, what you get out of this one will depend upon the effort that you put into it. With sufficient time and effort, at the conclusion of this course you should be able to demonstrate:
  - Knowledge of the fundamental principles of a range of rhetorical, interpretive methods;
  - Ability to apply these methods to an actual message or set of messages;
  - Ability to formulate a compelling rationale for undertaking a study;
  - Competent, effective writing skills with regard to organization, clarity, grammar and punctuation, word choice, and use of evidence to support your claims;
  - Ability to reflect critically on your own and others’ work;
  - Capacity for ethical scholarship, as you select topics, conduct research, incorporate the work of others into your writing, and cite sources; and
  - Capacity to translate a paper into a presentation suitable for a conference

Required Readings
- Campbell, K. K., & Burkholder, T. R. (1996). *Critiques of contemporary rhetoric* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. [This text is out-of-print. Used copies are available on Amazon, and I will provide chapters as PDFs on Blackboard.]
- Other readings as assigned (distributed via Blackboard and/or available via the Communication Source database available from University Libraries)
- You also will need access to the APA style manual (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th ed.), either in print or online, as your papers must conform to its requirements

Readings should be completed *before class* on the day assigned, and you should bring your text and/or article(s) to *every* class session. Lectures may not cover all portions of the assigned readings and will cover additional materials not in the assigned readings; nonetheless, you are responsible for all materials, both in the readings and in lecture, on the exam.

Assignments
- The main assignment in the course is a semester-long project devoted to an artifact, or public message, of your choice (with my approval). It will be completed in three stages, and will involve three papers, reflecting the critical process outlined above: Stage 1, the Descriptive Analysis, will examine the artifact itself; Stage 2, the Historical-Contextual Analysis, will examine the context in which the artifact was produced and received (which might be historical or very contemporary, depending on your artifact); Stage 3,
the Rhetorical Analysis, will employ rhetorical method(s) (see your Methods Journal) in order to interpret and evaluate your artifact (see Stage 1) as a strategic response to a communicative situation (see Stage 2). Of course, we’ll talk about how to complete these stages in much greater detail in class. The length of papers may vary depending upon the nature of the artifact you select to critique. In general, you may assume that each of the first two will require 12-15 pages, and that the third will require 20-25 pages, exclusive of documentation.

- Methods Journal (x5): An informal journal containing five entries, each of which briefly (1-2 pp.) considers how one of the major rhetorical methods covered in class could be used to analyze your chosen artifact/message.
- Participation: Ways to build a high participation grade include regularly and thoughtfully contributing to class discussions and being an engaged listener, and your effort, attitude, and/or performance in any class activities and quizzes. Everyone is expected to contribute to class discussions. Participation points missed due to absence cannot be made up.
- Presentation: During the final exam period, you will deliver a conference-style presentation based on your Rhetorical Analysis, and will answer questions about it. Of course, each of these assignments will be discussed in greater detail in due course.

All assignments must be the original work of the student and cannot have been used previously or concurrently in any other course; this includes the artifact that is the subject of your project. All assignments must be attempted and turned in to pass the course.

I strongly advise that assignments be turned in on time; these things snowball, and you end up further behind. Late work may be penalized for each day late. The final exam (your presentation) cannot be made up.

### Grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Analysis</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>150 pts</td>
<td>934-1000 A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical-Contextual Analysis</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>150 pts</td>
<td>900-933 A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Analysis (draft)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>100 pts</td>
<td>867-899 B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Analysis</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>250 pts</td>
<td>834-866 B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods Journal (x5)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>100 pts</td>
<td>800-833 B-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>100 pts</td>
<td>767-799 C+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>150 pts</td>
<td>734-766 C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1000 pts</td>
<td>700-733 C-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Website**

The course website at [blackboard.usc.edu](http://blackboard.usc.edu) is an official place for posting information relevant to the class, such as announcements, assignments, and grades, for discussing lecture materials, and so on. You are as responsible for knowing any material posted to the website as you would be responsible for material distributed or discussed during class. Because the university does not unequivocally recognize material placed on this website as the intellectual property of its creator, copies of my lecture notes, etc., will not be made available here.

**Participation and Attendance**

Without question, we will encounter differences of opinion. However, disagreement need not—and should not—be disagreeable. An effective participant in this class will be open-minded, a good listener, respectful of the opinions of others, and able to fashion arguments in a way that others will find reasonable. Thus, it is very important that you be present and prepared to participate appropriately in each class. The best policy is to always T.H.I.N.K. before you speak by ensuring that your comment is: Thoughtful, Helpful, Interesting,
Necessary, Kind.

Roll will be taken every day, and more than two absences for any reason (including medical emergencies or other so-called “excused” absences) may affect your course grade adversely, as much as a full letter grade per absence, and even may cause you to fail the course.

Arriving late, leaving early, and other activities not conducive to learning—such as turning off a ringing cell phone or leaving the room to answer it—are extremely disruptive, and may be counted as absences.

Technology: “Topless”

No electronic devices, including laptops, tablets, and phones, are allowed in class at any time unless giving a presentation, or in order to accommodate a registered disability, or otherwise approved by me. There will be times when we will want to use them, so please bring them to class but also turn them off before class. According to the *Wall Street Journal*: “In Silicon Valley itself, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported last year, some companies have installed the ‘toples’ meeting—in which not only laptops but iPhones and other tools are banned—to combat a new problem: ‘continuous partial attention.’ With a device close by, attendees at workplace meetings simply cannot keep their focus on the speaker. It’s too easy to check email, stock quotes and Facebook. While a quick log-on may seem, to the user, a harmless break, others in the room receive it as a silent dismissal. It announces: ‘I’m not interested.’ So the tools must now remain at the door.”

Support Services

Students can face a variety of stressors and difficulties, both school- and life-related. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is Student Counseling Services. To schedule an appointment, call (213) 740-7711 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays, or visit the Engemann Student Health Center. The service is confidential, and there is no charge. If you or a friend have been the victim of sexual coercion or violence, the Sexual Assault Resource Center is located within the Center for Women and Men in the Student Union, Suite 202C, and can be reached at (213) 740-4906. Students who require accommodations or assistance in the course of their studies can receive help from Disability Services and Programs, Grace Ford Salvatori Hall 120, 213-740-0776 (phone), 213-814-4618 (video phone), 213-740-8216 (fax), or ability@usc.edu. These services are confidential, but you must be registered in order to receive accommodation.

Tentative Daily Schedule

Undoubtedly, some adjustments to this ideal schedule will be required as the semester progresses, so approach it with flexibility in mind. Adjustments will be discussed thoroughly in class in advance, and announced on Blackboard. Further details regarding readings in subsequent weeks will be provided in due course. Assigned readings/films/etc. should be completed before class. “(BB)” means that the material is available on Blackboard.

| M Aug 21  | Introduction to the Course |
| W Aug 23  | Introduction to Rhetoric and Criticism |
|           | READ *Campbell & Burkholder, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-15)*; Hart & Daughton, Chs. 1-2 |
| M Aug 28  | The Process of Criticism |
|           | READ *Foss, Ch. 2*; *Campbell & Burkholder, Ch. 1 (pp. 15-16)* |
|           | Discuss artifacts |

Rationalistic Criticism

| W Aug 30  | Neo-Aristotelian criticism |
|           | READ *Foss, Ch. 3* |
M Sep 4  Labor Day NO CLASS
W Sep 6  Neo-Aristotelian criticism, cont.
          VIEW “An Inconvenient Truth”
M Sep 11 Narrative criticism
          READ Foss, Ch. 10 (pp. 319-338; 357-360); Fisher, “Narration as a Human
          Communication Paradigm”(BB)
W Sep 13 Narrative criticism, cont.
          VIEW “Inconvenient Truth . . . or Convenient Fiction?”
          DUE (by midnight): Journal #1
M Sep 18 Doing descriptive analysis
          READ Campbell & Burkholder, Ch. 2
W Sep 20 Doing descriptive analysis, cont.
          Discuss Descriptive Analysis

Psychosocial Criticism

M Sep 25  Cultural criticism
          READ Hart & Daughton, Ch. 11
W Sep 27  Cultural criticism, cont.
          READ Douglass, “What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?”; Obama, “A More
          Perfect Union”; Stephens, “Frederick Douglass’ Multicultural Abolitionism”;
          Frank, “The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other”
          DUE (by midnight): Journal #2

M Oct 2  Ideological criticism
          READ Foss, Ch. 8 (pp. 237-248); Cloud, “Hegemony or Concordance? The
          Rhetoric of Tokenism in Oprah Winfrey’s Rags-to-Riches Biography”
W Oct 4  Ideological criticism: Post-Colonial
          READ Hart & Daughton, Ch. 14 (pp. 329-333); Hasian & Wood, “Critical
          Museology and Post-Colonial Communication”
M Oct 9  Doing historical-contextual analysis
          READ Campbell & Burkholder, Ch. 3
          DUE: Descriptive Analysis
W Oct 11 Doing historical-contextual analysis, cont.
          Discuss Historical-Contextual Analysis

M Oct 16 Ideological criticism: Neo-Marxist
          READ Hart & Daughton, Ch. 14 (pp. 320-329); Freund, “Trading in Lives”
W Oct 18 Ideological criticism: Feminist
          READ Hart & Daughton, Ch. 13; Foss, Ch. 6 (pp. 141-154); Boser, “I Forgot How
          It Was to be Normal”
          DUE (by midnight): Journal #3

Dramatistic Criticism

M Oct 23  Dramatism
          READ Hart & Daughton, Ch. 12 (pp. 259-270)
W Oct 25  Dramatic criticism: Cluster analysis
          READ Foss, Ch. 4 (pp. 61-98)
M Oct 30  Dramatic criticism: Pentadic analysis
READ Foss, Ch. 11 (pp. 367-380); Tonn, Endress, & Diamond, “Hunting and Heritage on Trial”

W Nov 1
Dramatistic criticism: Guilt Cycle analysis
READ Rise, “Guilt, Purification, and Redemption” (http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol1/iss3/burke/samra.html); Schultz, “Every Implanted Child a Star (and Some Other Failures)”

M Nov 6
Dramatistic criticism: Guilt Cycle analysis, cont.
READ Lake, “Order and Disorder in Anti-Abortion Rhetoric”; stories by Brenda, Dierdre, and Jill at http://hopeafterabortion.com/?page_id=18

W Nov 8
Dramatistic criticism: Comic and Tragic Frames
READ: Christiansen & Hanson, “Comedy as Cure for Tragedy”
DUE: Historical-Contextual Analysis

M Nov 13
Choosing a method/critical evaluation
READ: Campbell & Burkholder, Chs. 4-5
Discuss Rhetorical Analysis
DUE (by midnight): Journal #4

W Nov 15
Genre in criticism
READ: Hart & Daughton, Ch. 6; Foss, Ch. 7 (pp. 183-190); Campbell & Jamieson, Presidents Creating the Presidency, Ch. 2

M Nov 20
Genre in criticism, cont.
READ: Ware & Linkugel, “They Spoke in Defense of Themselves”
DUE (by midnight): Journal #5

W Nov 22
Thanksgiving NO CLASS

M Nov 27
Writing workshop
DUE: Rhetorical Analysis (draft)

W Nov 29
Writing workshop, cont.

F Dec 8
11:00-1:00 Final “Exam” (Presentations)
DUE: Rhetorical Analysis (final)