

COMM 396: Fashion, Media, and Culture
Course Syllabus
Spring, 2008

“You can make a statement by how you dress. Clothes are really a part of an expression; they make a statement about you. It’s sort of an introduction; it’s not you.”
---Ralph Lauren

“Fashion is always part of dress . . . Dress is, in the fullest sense, a ‘social model,’ a more or less standardized picture of expected collective behaviour; and it is essentially at this level that it has meaning.”

---Roland Barthes

“*Coach* is like opinions, everybody’s got one.”

---Kenesha Greer

“Damn, I wish I’d known that before I bought my wallet.”

---Durbin

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Course Objectives: Fashion is one of the fundamental ways in which humans communicate to each other about themselves and their desired self-image. This course examines the intersection between fashion, media, personal identity, and image management in today’s society. Drawing on theories of rhetorical and social criticism, we will examine how the fashion industry creates powerful and persuasive messages to sell a given image to consumers. We will also study how those images are reinforced and given authority through media. Finally, we will discuss how consumers co-opt these messages by purchasing fashion’s images, purchasing at once a sense of personal empowerment and an anxiety over conformity. We will study several critical approaches to public communication and apply those approaches to media, marketing, and the fashion industry.

Required Reading:

COMM 396 Course Notebook (at the bookstore)

Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2001.

Barnard, Malcom. *Fashion as Communication*. London: Routledge Press 2004

Barthes, Roland. *The Language of Fashion*. New York: Berg Publishers 2006.

Weisberger, Lauren. *The Devil Wears Prada*. New York: Anchor Books 2006.

Assignments: This course focuses on the communication aspects of fashion and social image. So, students will conduct research in the field of fashion, applying class concepts to fashion as presented by designers and in media. Students will write two critical analyses and take two exams. The first paper will examine a specific designer line, offering an analysis of that designer’s line as “communication,” the position of that line in the fashion world, and the impact of that line on popular culture. The second paper will examine the ways in which fashion magazines create the (written) language of fashion.

Grade Breakdown:

Participation-----	10
Fashion Designer Analysis Paper-----	20
Fashion Magazine Analysis Paper-----	25
Midterm-----	20
Final Exam-----	<u>25</u>
Total Points-----	100

Readings: I know the reading list may seem a bit excessive for an undergraduate course. However, while three of the books are textbooks, your final book is one of the most popular novels of the last few years, a novel that has recently been made into a popular movie. We will be examining that book as an illustration or case study of the interaction between fashion and several other elements of popular culture.

Paper Grades: All written work is to be typed following the guidelines for research paper writing found in either the MLA or APA handbook. Papers will be graded on quality of organization, clarity and depth of analysis, and writing competence. Each error in spelling or grammar will result in a reduction in your paper grade.

Participation and Absence Policy: Attendance in class cannot be counted as participation. Students will receive participation grades based on the quality and quantity of their vocal participation in class throughout the semester. You will be allowed four unexcused absences during the semester. **Each** absence beyond four will result in an automatic 5% deduction from your final class grade. Also, remember that,

when you are absent, you cannot participate in class. So, excessive absences will also impact your participation grade. Being tardy or leaving class early will be counted as half an absence. Also, please turn off cell phones while in class. Leaving class to answer a cell phone will be counted as an absence.

Late Work: All late papers will be docked one letter grade for each class period they are late. Any time after the **start** of the class in which the papers are due will be considered late.

Disability Services: 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 STU 301 and is open 8:30 am - 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776. Students requesting accommodations for taking tests in DSP must have their information to me and DSP in sufficient time to set up accommodations at DSP.

Academic Integrity: The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University's Academic Integrity code as detailed in the Scampus guide. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report **all** violations of the code. Any serious violations or pattern of violations of the Academic Integrity Code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication major or minor.

Final Note: Fashion covers a much greater area of social and cultural communication than many people suspect. It intersects with all parts of popular culture, drawing on the authority of celebrity and, itself, consigning levels of authority to celebrities. Fashion has offered much of the basis for constructing the public image of beauty and form since at least the "Gibson Girl" of the 19th century, has been the focus of social causes both anti (anti-fur) and pro (Kenneth Cole is one of the key names behind the "We all have aids" campaign), has created the narrative material for popular films from at least 1939's "The Women" to this year's "The Devil Wears Prada," has been the subject of numerous novels, including the very popular series of fashion mystery novels by Ellen Byerrum (*Killer Hair*, *Hostile Makeover*, and several others), has been the focus of many television shows ("Extreme Makeover," "America's Next Top Model," and, of course, the many fashion segments on such popular shows as NBC's "Today" and "Regis and Kelly"). In fact, fashion and fashion consciousness are so universal in our culture as to seem almost invisible. Our job this semester is to make those fashions and images visible. We will examine the many ways in which fashion impacts culture through the language it creates. We will also examine how individuals take part in fashion culture by the purchases they make and the images they seek to build for themselves.

Tentative Class Schedule and Due Dates

**Weeks One and Two
January 15-24
Introduction to Fashion and Culture**

During our first two weeks, we will discuss some of the basic theory scholars have applied to fashion. Perhaps the most significant contribution has been the works of Roland Barthes, which we will examine a bit more closely in the third week. However, Barthes carries a limitation in that he sought to use fashion primarily as an illustration of language constructs. The theorists we will discuss during the first two weeks have tried to develop a larger social and historical understanding of fashion.

Readings: Barnard, Introduction, Chs. 1, 2 (1-49).

**Weeks Three, Four, Five and Six
January 29-February 21
Fashion, Communication, and Culture**

The “language” of fashion, then, creates a form of social communication that has its own meanings, rules, values, and means of censuring those who fail to follow the rules of fashion. We will discuss how this “language” functions and examine examples of designer, “name brand,” and haute couture communication

Readings: Barnard, Chs. 3-5 (pp. 49-126), Arnold, “One: Status, Power, and Display” (pp. 1-31).

Midterm Exam-Week Six---February 21.

**Weeks Seven and Eight
February 26-March 6
Fashion, Language, and Culture**

The language of fashion assumes senders, receivers and a cultural context in which the communication takes place. As we transition into our discussion of fashion as language, we will examine some of the ways in which the communicators manipulate the language to accomplish their goals.

Barnard Chs. 6-8 (pp. 127-191).

Fashion Designer Analysis Paper-Due Week Seven---February 28.

Weeks Nine, Ten, and Eleven
March 11-April 3
Roland Barthes and the Rhetoric of Fashion

There's no getting around it. Barthes is very dense and difficult reading. But, his work is so important we have to get a taste of his fundamental theories. I've given you his easiest, most clear, and, in many respects, most useful book on the subject, *The Language of Fashion*, which we will discuss in class. The idea that fashion creates a code of meaning that you either adhere to by wearing fashion or fail to adhere to (making you a fashion disaster/victim), is key to understanding much of what everyone else wants to discuss concerning the persuasive power of fashion. So, I will spend a couple weeks putting it all together for you.

Readings: Course Reader-Roland Barthes *The Language of Fashion* (pp. 1-158)

Spring Break---March 17-22, No Class

Weeks Twelve and Thirteen
April 8-17
Fashion and Image

Daniel Boorstin wrote the classic text on image and celebrity in America. His chapter on image creation and self-fulfilling prophecies helps us understand why it is so important to both the celebrity and the designer for that celebrity to wear True Religion or Paper, Denim, and Cloth jeans. Boorstin gives us the means to understand how celebrity touches fashion which then touches celebrity back and how each create fame and image for the other. This offers fascinating ideas and a very important piece of the puzzle.

Readings: Weisberger (pp. 1-482).

Designer Analysis Paper-Due Week Twelve---April 10.

Weeks Fourteen and Fifteen
April 22-May 2
Fashion and Society: Tensions and Revolutions

As cultural communication, fashion intersects with a wide variety of social concerns. We will discuss how fashion has been used to promote social agendas, create subcultures, and push toward social change.

Arnold, "Two: Violence and Provocation," "Three: The Eroticised Body," "Four: Gender and Subversion," (pp. 33-127).

Final Exam-May 14, 2-4.

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Writing Assignment #2

Roland Barthes argued that the proper unit of analysis for the student of fashion was the fashion magazine. He claimed that these magazines offered the most straightforward language of fashion. They identified what was “fashionable” and what was now “out of fashion.” Ultimately, they prescribed the language of fashion for culture. As Meryl Streep insisted in *The Devil Wears Prada*, fashion magazines are the arbiters of fashion for all of culture, even those who purposefully dress themselves in “unfashionable” ways. Barthes would say this is because the fashion magazines are the only sources in culture that dictate through words and images the meaning of the fashion units (clothes) we wear.

Your first writing assignment focuses on the fashion magazine as unit of analysis. You are to trace one fashion choice, one designer label’s jeans, accessories (purses, wallets, jewelry), shirts, or other piece of clothing through one season of fashion magazines (*Vogue*, *US Weekly*, etc.). Make sure you focus on one type of clothing (jeans *or* purses *or* hats). Also, make sure you trace only one designer label (PPD *or* True Religion *or* Sevens *or* Citizen).

You are to trace the representation of this designer fashion through *at least* six issues of various fashion magazine (though, frankly, better analyses will doubtless find more than just six--there should be an almost limitless supply out there). You are to trace the representation of this designer fashion in *both* word and image. You should trace the descriptors used by the magazines, terms used to describe the label’s work (“cutting edge,” “overpriced,” “oversold,” “in fashion,” “hot,” “last month’s style,” and so on). You should look for terms that place the fashion choice as either in or out of fashion. You should also look for comparisons (e.g. the comparisons often made between an expensive choice and an equally “acceptable” alternative label).

Explain how these descriptions place the fashion in the current market. Do they give the impression that this is a “must have?” Do they make it elite, only the richest or most dedicated followers of fashion can/will purchase it? Do they make it undesirable (out of fashion, unattractive, etc.)?

Your analysis of the images in fashion magazines should include how the chosen article is placed in shots (is it the central fashion statement? A less important accessory?). Most importantly, what celebrities are shown wearing this article and what (if any) sort of celebrity do they confer onto the article? Think through the image of the celebrity and the qualities this lends to the article of fashion. Jessica Alba will confer a set of qualities quite distinct from those conferred by Drew Carey.

Look for consistent patterns in words and images between these magazines. What actions do these descriptions prescribe for followers of fashion? How are you supposed to perceive and communicate about these articles of fashion? What are you supposed to do when you see your best friend wearing them?

You need to examine all the fashion magazines you can spanning a six month period. I know this goes beyond a single fashion cycle. However, I want to be certain you find it easy to look up current and past issues on your choice, even if you choose something relatively obscure. Just a hint, you might start by going to your favorite fashion label's website and seeing the fashion magazines they list as covering their clothes. You can then go to those magazines and know that they have information you can use.

Papers should run 5-7 pages. Follow either MLA or APA guidelines. You will be graded down for all errors in grammar and citation. So, read your work before handing it in. Papers will be graded for quality of writing and research, depth of insight, and clarity of argument.

Good luck and let me know if you have any questions.