

COMM 384: INTERPRETING POPULAR CULTURE

SPRING 2006

Professor: Alison Trope, Ph.D.
Office hours: T 3:30-4:30, TH 12:30-1:30, and by appointment
ASC G36, atrope@earthlink.net

ASC 204
T/TH 2:00-3:20 pm

Teaching Assistants: Cara Wallis <cwallis@usc.edu>
Richard Lawrence <rlawrenc@usc.edu>

Course Description:

This course examines the role of popular culture as an indicator of cultural values, tastes and attitudes, as both a producer and reflector of cultural meaning, and as a means of communication. It will be the goal of this class to elucidate varying definitions of the "popular" as they play themselves out in everyday life. We will therefore examine the articulation of popular culture across an array of cultural institutions, artifacts, and visual practices—from film and television to music and fashion, from museums and theme parks to cityscapes and malls. We will consider who invokes and determines the essence of popular culture, and assess the resulting struggles over cultural authority. Using recent cultural theory, we will examine how popular culture has a rich, complex tradition, and is constantly appropriated, redefined and reinvented.

Course Readings:

All course readings (except for occasional handouts) can be found in a mandatory reader with photocopied articles available at Magic Machine in University Village. The reader includes a table of contents with full bibliographical information. Do not be alarmed by the size of the reader: My lectures as well as your discussion sections will distill the main ideas and help you make concise study notes.

Course Requirements and Attendance:

Students are required to do all of the reading, attend all classes and discussion sections, complete all assignments, and participate fully in discussion both in class and in your assigned section. Attendance is mandatory and will be taken each class meeting and discussion section. Attendance grade may be affected by your promptness and level of attention during class lecture. You are allowed three absences without explanation (this includes attendance for TA sections as well), after which there is a deduction of half a grade off the final grade for each unexcused absence.

Use of computer in the classroom is a privilege. You may use a computer in the classroom ONLY for taking notes. If you abuse this privilege by checking email or going on the Internet, computers may be banned from the classroom altogether.

Assignments and Grading:

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

Class participation/section work	10%
Paper #1	25%
Paper #2	25%
In Class Midterm	20%
Take Home Final	20%

You will receive details about each assignment/exam separately. **All assignments must 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 not wait until the end of the semester to sort things out. Remember: this is YOUR responsibility.**

You must complete ALL of these assignments in order to pass the class. **Failure to complete one or more of them will result in an F in the class.**

You are responsible for the material covered in class and in the reading. You will be evaluated on the following:

- 1) the level of your engagement with the class materials (as evidenced in your written work and class participation)
- 2) your capacity to explain your ideas and analysis in articulate and well-written forms
- 3) your ability to creatively explore those theories and methodologies

All of your work will be graded on two primary evaluative scales:

- 1) how well it demonstrates an understanding of the theories and methodologies of the class
- 2) how well it articulates and structures its argument

Course Grading Policy:

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 on 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.

Academic Integrity:

When taking this class, you enter into a contract that states that all the work you are turning in is your own and no one else's, and that you have not turned in any work for which you have received credit in another class. Do not take this policy lightly!

The School of Communication is committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical support. It endorses and acts on the SCampus policies and procedures detailed in the section titled "University Sanction Guidelines." These policies, procedures and guidelines will be assiduously upheld. They protect your rights, as well as those of the faculty. It is particularly important that you be aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one professor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade in the course, and be reported to the Office of Student Conduct. If you have any doubts about any of these practices, you must confer with the professor.

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 STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213)740-0776.

ESL Students

Please inform me as soon as possible if you require special accommodations based on your understanding of the English language.

Please complete the form attached to the back of this syllabus, attesting to the fact that you have read and understood all of these course policies.

TENTATIVE WEEKLY SCHEDULE (open to revision)

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Week 1: **Defining Popular Culture**

January 10 Introduction

January 12 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Practices of Looking: Image, Power and Politics"

Week 2: **Popular Culture: Past and Present**

January 17 George Lipsitz, "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow"

January 19 Lawrence Levine, excerpts from *Highbrow/Lowbrow*

Week 3: **The Problem of Mass Culture**

January 24 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

January 26 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception"

PAPER #1 ASSIGNMENT DISTRIBUTED

January 27 **Last day to drop without receiving a "W"**

Week 4: **A Taste for Pop: Pop Art and Mass Culture**

January 31 Roland Barthes, "Soap-Powders and Detergents," "Toys," "Operation Margarine," "Striptease"

February 2 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp"
Robert Venturi, excerpts from *Learning From Las Vegas*

Week 5: **Popular Culture on Display**

February 7 Cecile Whiting, "Shopping for Pop"

February 9 Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man"
Lucy Lippard, "Curiouser and Curiouser: The Popular 'Museum'"

Week 6: **Whose Culture? Defining Taste**

February 14 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, excerpts from *Practices of Looking*
Pierre Bourdieu, "Aesthetic Sense As the Sense of Distinction"

February 16 Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window"

Week 7: **Cultural Authority and the Canon**

February 21 Janice Radway, "The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book of the Month Club,
Class Fracture and Cultural Authority"

PAPER #1 DUE

February 23 Cecilia Konchar Farr, excerpts from *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed
the Way America Reads*

Week 8: **Postmodernism**

February 28 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Postmodernism and Popular Culture"

March 2 **MIDTERM**

Week 9: **Producing Popular Culture: Appropriation, Dialogue and Reworking
Popular Narratives**

March 7 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, excerpts from *Practices of Looking*

PAPER #2 ASSIGNMENT DISTRIBUTED

March 9 George Lipsitz, "Against the Wind: Dialogic Aspects of Rock and Roll"
Carol Clover, "Dancin' in the Rain"

*******SPRING BREAK: MARCH 13-17*******

Week 10:

Nostalgia and Simulated Cities

March 21

Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland"

March 23

M. Christine Boyer, "Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport"

Week 11:

Youth Culture and the Power of Subcultures

March 28

Dick Hebdige, excerpts from *Subculture, The Meaning of Style*, pp. 5-19, 46-70

March 30

Tricia Rose, "Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality and Black Cultural Practice"

Week 12:

Fan Culture

April 4

Henry Jenkins, "'Get a Life!': Fans, Poachers and Nomads" AND "Scribbling in the Margins: Fan Readers/Fan Writers"

April 6

C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, "Soap Fans' Subculture"

Week 13:

Fashion and Style Warfare

April 11

Angela McRobbie, "Second-hand Dresses and the Ragmarket"

April 13

Stuart Cosgrove, "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare"
Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics"

Week 14:

The Concept of Cool

April 18

Thomas Frank, "Hip as Official Capitalist Style"

April 20

Naomi Klein, "New Branded World"
Malcolm Gladwell, "The Cool Hunt"

Week 15:

Off Beat: Finding Meaning in Trash Culture

April 25

Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style"

Paper #2 Due

April 27

Gael Sweeney, "The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess"

TAKE-HOME FINAL DISTRIBUTED

April 29-May 2

Study Days

May 4

TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAMINATION DUE by or before 2pm

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Please complete this section and return it by the end of the second day of class for my records. Thank you.

Please print the information in capital letters so it can be read clearly, except in the case of your e-mail address which should be reproduced exactly as it appears:

Your name:

E-mail address:

On-Campus address:

Daytime phone:

Evening Phone:

Do you prefer to be contacted by phone or e-mail?

How often do you check e-mail (Circle one):

Daily

Once in two days

Weekly

Infrequently

What is your major?

What is your class standing? (i.e. freshman? sophomore?)

Why are you taking this course?

Have you taken other classes that focus on popular culture and/or popular entertainment (film, television, music, etc.)? COMM 300, 395, 455, etc.? If so, please list them.

Do you have a learning disability that has been reported to the Learning Center on campus?

Do you have an athletic, debate, or other schedule that may add to your absences? Please specify.

Is there any other information/concerns that you would like to share?

I certify that I have read and agreed to the terms specified in the attached syllabus:

Signature

Date