

COMM 499: Special Topics
Fashion, Media, and Culture
Course Syllabus
Spring, 2007

“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:

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

Course Reader.

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 “fashion trend,” tracing the development of a particular design or product, its growth as a “trendy” fashion, its move to manufactured image, and its ultimate demise as dated (that is, bought by so many people that it no longer exists as a “trend” or elite fashion). The second paper will examine a specific designer, 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.

Grade Breakdown:

Participation-----	10
Fashion Trend Analysis Paper-----	20
Fashion Designer 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 the books and course reader 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 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 (pp. 1-49); Course Reader-Fred Davis, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-18).

Week Three 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 the most important part of his book *The Fashion System*, which we will discuss in class. Be sure to drink plenty of coffee with this. It's the hardest read of the semester. But, 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 week putting it all together for you.

Readings: Course Reader-Roland Barthes "The Rhetorical System" from *The Fashion System* (pp. 225-276).

Weeks Four, Five and Six 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. 49-127), Arnold, "One: Status, Power, and Display" (pp. 1-31).

**Fashion Trend Analysis Paper-Due Week Five.
Midterm Exam-Week Six.**

Weeks Seven and Eight

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 is fascinating reading and a very important piece of the puzzle.

Readings: Course Reader-Daniel Boorstin, "From Ideal to Image: The Search for Self-fulfilling Prophecies," (pp. 181-238), Course Reader-Troy, Introduction (pp. 1-27).

Weeks Nine and Ten

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.

Readings: Barnard, Ch. 6 (pp. 127-156), Arnold, "Two: Violence and Provocation," (pp. 32-62). Course Reader-Troy, Ch. 1 (pp. 28-58).

Weeks Ten and Eleven

Fashion and Attitude: Gender and Sexuality

Fashion has become a means for transmitting messages and attitudes regarding issues of gender and sexuality. We will examine Arnold's discussion of the evolution of these transmitted messages over the last two decades.

Readings: Arnold, "Three: The Eroticised Body," "Four: Gender and Subversion," (pp. 63-127).

Weeks Twelve and Thirteen

Case Studies: Joseph Abboud and Ralph Lauren, Competing Visions of Fashion

It's time to focus on some specific visions of fashion. In his autobiography, Joseph Abboud offers his understanding of fashion and its meaning. A former employee of Ralph Lauren, he explains how his vision evolved to compete with Lauren's vision of what fashion meant. We will take a look at these competing visions, discussing Abboud's autobiography and Michael Gross's explanation of Lauren's evolution from

fashion name to fashion “myth.” We will then apply what we learn to other contemporary visions of fashion.

Readings: Course Reader-Abboud, Chs. 20-25 (pp. 176-220), Gross, “Ascension: From Man to Myth,” (pp. 203-255).

Designer Analysis Paper-Due Week Twelve

Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen Case Studies: Fashion in Popular Culture

As the popular film “The Devil Wears Prada” has shown, fashion directly intersects American popular culture. In fact, fashion and its rules have been an important part of American popular culture for over a century. We will look at a variety of films, television shows, and popular magazines that focus on fashion and popular culture. We will begin by spending a day talking about the impact of Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada* and the subsequent film. You should start reading this novel at the start of the semester and read it as a novel, not a course text. Enjoy it.

Readings: Weisberger (pp. 1-482).

Class Viewing-Selections from “Don’t Change Your Husband,” “It,” “The Women,” “The Devil Wears Prada.”

Week Fifteen Fashion and the Future

Barnard offers us some ways to look at fashion in a post-modern age. We will discuss some of his ideas and wrap up the semester looking at the future for fashion as that most public form of communication.

Readings-Barnard, Ch. 7 (pp. 156-191).

Sources for Course Reader

- Abboud, Joseph. *Threads: My Life Behind the Seams in the High-Stakes World of Fashion*. New York: Harper Collins 2004.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Fashion System*. (trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard) Berkeley: University of California Press 1990.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Language of Fashion*. (trans. by Andy Stafford, ed. by Andy Stafford and Michael Carter) Oxford: Berg 2004.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage Books 1987.
- Davis, Fred. *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1992.
- Gross, Michael. *Genuine Authentic: The Real Life of Ralph Lauren*. New York: Perennial 2003.
- Troy, Nancy J. *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion*. Boston: The MIT Press 2004.