

COMMRC 1122: Media Criticism
2:30-3:45
406 Information Sciences Building
Fall 2012

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Office Hours:
Tu & 10:00-12:00
Th 12:00-2:00
And By Appointment

This course offers a survey of media theory and criticism, exploring both foundational and contemporary media theories and applying these theories to contemporary media texts. In general, we will sample a variety of theories and theoretical perspectives—Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, feminism, postmodernism, the Frankfurt school—explore several different methods of media study—textual analysis, audience orientation, audience ethnography—and explore a variety of media—from print to music to television. Pairing theoretical readings with a series of case studies, we will think deeply about the ways in which the contemporary media impacts our everyday lives.

Texts & Materials:

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Jeffrey Paul Melnick. *9/11 Culture: America under Construction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Laurie Ouellette, and James Hay. *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

John Storey. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. 4th ed. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009.

Other readings available on our Blackboard course website (available by going to courseweb.pitt.edu).

Midterm and Final Exams:

The Midterm and Final Exams will be composed of multiple choice, short answer and essay type questions and will ask you to engage our readings and other material in critical, insightful manners. Questions, terms, and concepts will be developed directly from our readings and discussions. In preparation, you should review your notes and read each essay carefully and be familiar with its principle terms and concepts.

Critical Essay:

You will write one critical essay of 10-12 double-spaced, typed pages, demonstrating your engagement with some specific topic in media criticism. You will receive specific details on the assignment during the course of the semester.

Although there are many different acceptable forms of writing, this course emphasizes analytic, thesis driven essays. This style of essay forces the writer to carefully formulate an argument about the objects they analyze and offers a good exercise in the critical thinking skills that are central to this class. For both of your essays, you will develop a well crafted central argument or THESIS STATEMENT that guides your essay overall. You will place this thesis at the opening of your paper and the remainder of your essay will work to support this main argument. Each of your subsequent paragraphs and examples should be clearly related to your thesis. *If it isn't clear how any of your points connect to your central argument, then they should be revised or eliminated in favor of more relevant points.* The more clearly you connect these various examples and supporting arguments, the more clearly you will have supported your thesis and the stronger your essay should be overall.

Your thesis should be original and distinct to your essay and to your analysis. *If your thesis could just as easily apply to another topic and/or another essay, it is probably not specific or focused enough.* The theses “*Lost* uses a number of different aesthetic techniques” and “*Lost* is a beautifully shot program” are too broad to sustain a focused, well-developed argument. A stronger thesis might argue: “The use of extreme close-ups and non-diegetic sound on *Lost*, creates the feeling that the audience members are inside the heads of each of the main characters. This adds psychological depth to the experience of watching the show.” Likewise, “*Sex & the City* offers conflicting portrayals of women,” is not as strong as: “On *Sex & the City*, the conflicts between Carrie’s desire for independence and her ongoing pursuits of men offer a 21st century spin on the virgin/whore stereotype.” Have fun and be creative in crafting an interesting, specific thesis that offers a fresh argument about the topic you explore.

In supporting your thesis you will need to *use specific examples.* When talking about the use of camera shots or sound on *Lost*, you should discuss specific scenes or moments in the program and then analyze these in order to show how they support your thesis. *It's not enough to pick good examples alone; you need to show your reader how to understand these examples in the context of your argument.* One useful way of thinking about the number and kinds of examples you might use is to assume an open minded but cynical reader. This means going beyond asking whether or not you have given enough detail to illustrate the scene to someone who might not have seen the program you are discussing. Rather, you should ask yourself whether you have given enough evidence to convince an antagonistic reader who would not otherwise be inclined to believe your point or to agree with you (imagine your paper being read by someone who always seems to disagree with you). Depending on the type of analysis you are performing (aesthetic, economic, audience, etc.,) you will likely need to use different sorts of examples. Think carefully about the best examples to use for your papers!

As you do each of the above, be sure that you *maintain a specific focus for your essay.* *Pick only the most relevant examples so that you can talk about them in detail.* You won't be able to talk about every aesthetic feature, rhetorical element, character, plot line, or sign, of any one program. Be selective in order to ensure a tightly focused, well-organized, well-argued essay.

Guidelines for Essay Grades:

A (90%-100%): “A” level papers satisfy the criteria of the assignment in exemplary ways. They have specific, focused central arguments that are illustrated with pertinent examples and supporting arguments. Each of the author’s points is clearly explained and developed, and all of these arguments and examples are clearly linked to one another and to the essay’s overall thesis. These essays offer insights about their topic that might not be obvious to a casual, everyday media user. “A” level essays are well-written, organized and illustrate a careful attention to editing and

proof-reading (they have no more than one grammatical or proofreading error per page, taken as whole throughout the essay—i.e. no more than 11 such errors in an 11 page essay). They should be interesting and fun to read (and to write).

B (80%-89%): “B” level papers satisfy the basic criteria of the assignment and do so in a thoughtful, well-developed manner. These essays have clearly defined central arguments that are illustrated with a series of supporting examples. They make a genuine effort to critically engage their topic. These essays show an attempt towards careful proofreading and editing, even if they do not meet the criteria for “A” level work.

C (70%-79%): “C” level papers satisfy the basic criteria of the assignment, but lack the development, focus, or sophistication of “A” or “B” level papers. These papers may have unclear central arguments, or examples that are not clearly linked to each other or to the main topic of the essay. They may lack the careful proof-reading that characterizes “A” or “B” level essays, as illustrated by frequent spelling or grammatical errors.

D/F (0%-69%): “D” or “F” level essays fail to meet the basic criteria of the assignment in one or more ways, are turned in late, or show little effort to engage the topic of the assignment.

Deadlines:

Deadlines are clearly marked on all assignments. As a general rule, late assignments are unacceptable and when accepted will result in a substantial penalty. In addition, you must be present on exam dates in order to complete examinations. If you must miss an exam date, please speak with me well in advance. Such requests will be taken on a case by case basis.

I WILL NOT ACCEPT ASSIGNMENTS VIA EMAIL WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL. If you cannot be in class when an assignment is due, you should give it to a classmate to turn in, or place it in my mailbox (in 1117 CL) prior to class.

It is your responsibility to be sure that your computer files are properly backed up, that you have ample time to print your assignments before they are due, and that you are prepared for any other technology mishap that might occur in the process of completing an assignment. Malfunctioning computer equipment is not an adequate reason for a late assignment.

Participation and Attendance:

Participation in class discussions is an essential component of this course. You should make every effort to attend each class period and be prepared to contribute in insightful ways. If you must miss a class, be sure to notify me well in advance whenever possible. **Both the quantity and quality of your contributions are important. The most prepared students will make daily contributions that are insightful, interesting, and encourage discussion from fellow students—making efforts to engage, respond to, and converse with classmates in intelligent ways without monopolizing discussion or discouraging others from participating.**

Guidelines for Participation Grades:

A (90%-100%): These students ***attend all or virtually all class periods*** and ***make daily contributions to class***. These students evidence careful preparation for each class, complete daily reading assignments, and offer insightful, challenging, and critical commentary without monopolizing class discussion, or silencing other class members.

B (80%-89%): These students ***attend all or virtually all class periods*** and ***make at least weekly contributions to class***. While these students may not speak up every class period, it is clear

that they have prepared for class, completed daily readings, and that they make a genuine effort to engage in a productive, thoughtful conversation.

C (70%-79%): These students *miss several classes* or *make irregular contributions to class*. If these students miss several classes, then they make up for it by making frequent, insightful, contributions when they are present. If these students do not participate regularly, then they make up for it by regular attendance, careful preparation, and at least some effort to participate in class sessions.

D/F (0%-69%): Generally, these students miss a high number of class periods and/or make little or no effort to engage in class discussions.

Reading Responses:

You will complete weekly reading responses throughout the semester. These should be approximately one single-spaced, typed page, and are due in class each week. These should respond to the prompt offered on the syllabus and make a genuine effort to engage the question or exercise of the week.

There are 13 possible Critical Responses, with your 6 best figuring in your final grade. Your individual responses will be evaluated on the following scale:

√ (100%): These responses make a genuine effort to address the week's question in a thoughtful, interesting manner. While these responses need not be perfectly written, they show an ongoing attempt to write and think in provocative, challenging ways.

√- (70%): These responses do not fulfill the basic requirements of the assignment in one or more ways: they do not devote sufficient time or space to the question, or fail to take up the day's question completely; they are disorganized, or lack a coherent point.

Late responses and e-mailed responses will not be accepted.

Peer Facilitated Discussion:

Throughout the course various class days will be devoted to a Peer Facilitated Discussion in which a group of three to four students serve as presenters and discussion leaders for the class as a whole. Here, the group should explore the assigned reading by utilizing a relevant media example, offering a critical analysis of its content, and engaging the class in a critical discussion of both the readings and the topic of the day. **YOUR TASK IS NOT TO SUMMARIZE THE READINGS OR TO HAVE THE CLASS RECITE THEIR RELEVANT FACTS.** Rather, you should "digest" the reading, showing your ability to critically engage it in insightful, interesting ways. Ultimately, each group should offer a focused, original, compelling argument that demonstrates your engagement with both the readings and contemporary media that teaches your peers something they might not have known or gleaned from their own reading of the material.

Your presentation will take up the last 45-50 minutes of class. You should be well prepared and able to engage your classmates for the duration of this time.

Each group of presenters will do all of the following:

- 1) **MEET WITH ME BY THE WEEK PRIOR TO YOUR PRESENTATION.** At this time you should be prepared to brainstorm and discuss ideas for your presentation, suggesting directions you might take, examples you might use, arguments you hope

to consider, and so forth. These meetings will probably last between 30 minutes and one hour.

- 2) **PREPARE A RELEVANT EXAMPLE (OR EXAMPLES) FOR THE CLASS.**
These should help to demonstrate the issues under discussion for that day's class. Depending on the readings, these might be film clips, songs, television programs, online sources, or still other media examples. These should be directly relevant to the day's readings and should be both long enough to demonstrate the day's concepts effectively and short enough to allow for sufficient time to discuss the example in detail. Pick examples that will clarify points from the day's readings and provoke a lively, interesting discussion. Be creative in your selection!
- 3) **OFFER A SET OF ARGUMENTS, THEMES, OR QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASS TO CONSIDER.** While you should spend a significant portion of the period engaging your classmates in conversation, you should do more than merely "draw-out" the class. Rather, you should have a set of well-prepared issues, problems, questions, etc., which you can explain and demonstrate to the class, utilizing ideas from the readings in combination with your selected examples. These need not be completely self-contained—that is, you need not tell the class how to understand everything you present; you don't have to answer every question you raise, but you should have a clear frame for your discussion and be raising a specific set of issues through out.
- 4) **ENGAGE THE CLASS IN A PROVOCATIVE, INTERESTING, AND INSIGHTFUL CONVERSATION.** Your ideas, questions, problems, and examples should all invite your classmates to participate in an interesting conversation that helps them think about the readings, and contemporary media, in ways that complicate and enhance their thinking.

Presentations that are well planned, well prepared, and satisfy all of the above criteria will receive full credit.

Our classroom has a DVD player, but if you are using computer files or internet sites in your presentation, **YOU WILL NEED TO PROVIDE YOUR OWN LAPTOP COMPUTER.** If you use a Macintosh computer, you will need to be sure that you have an adaptor for the video projector. We will have a standard VGA cable available in class.

You should verify before class that you can play all of the necessary clips and files, that you know how to locate your clips quickly, that you know how to access the internet on campus if necessary, and are otherwise well prepared. You should also have a backup plan in case any of your files or DVDs does not work (e.g. questions you can ask in the absence of your clips).

You will sign-up for presentation dates beginning on the second day of class.

Grading:

Grading for the course breaks down as follows:

| | |
|---------------|----|
| Midterm Exam: | 25 |
| Final Exam: | 25 |
| Essay: | 20 |
| Participation | 15 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Reading Responses: | 10 |
| Peer Facilitated Discussion | 5 |

Problems and Concerns:

Please see me about any problems or concerns that might arise throughout the semester. I will be available during my office hours, and at other times by appointment.

I would like to hear from anyone who has a disability which may require some modification of seating, testing or other class requirements so that appropriate arrangements may be made. I also encourage you to contact Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890/(412) 383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and suggest reasonable accommodations for this course.

Cell Phone Policy:

Cellular phones may not be used during class—this includes phone conversations as well as such silent communication as texting or IM. You should verify that you have turned your phone off before each class period. In addition, if you are seen talking on, texting, or otherwise using your phone during exam periods you will be subject to possible failure on the examination and other disciplinary action.

Plagiarism:

Using someone else's work as your own, or without proper citation, constitutes plagiarism, and as such is grounds for failure of an assignment, of this course, and disciplinary action on the part of the college. If you have questions about properly citing an article, or what can be considered plagiarism, please feel free to speak with me. It is your responsibility to make sure that your work is original and contains the appropriate citations and references.

**Media Criticism
Fall 2012**

Weekly Syllabus

Week 1

August 28, Tuesday:

COURSE INTRODUCTIONS

August 30, Thursday:

INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA CRITICISM

Week 2

September 4, Tuesday:

FROM HIGH CULTURE TO HEGEMONY: SOME PRELIMINARY APPROACHES TO MEDIA
CULTURE

Reading for Discussion:

“Introduction: The Study of Popular Culture and Cultural Studies” by John Storey (in
Cultural Theory and Popular Culture [CTPC] pp. xv-xxii)

“The Analysis of Culture” by Raymond Williams (*CTPC* pp. 32-40)

September 6, Thursday:

CASE STUDY #1: ZEITGEIST, STRUCTURES OF FEELING AND 9/11

Reading for Discussion:

“Introduction: 9/11 Questions (and Answers)” and “Rumors” by Jeffrey Melnick (in
9/11 Culture [9/11], pp. 1-49)

Reading Response #1 Due in Class

How would you describe the “zeitgeist” or “structure of feeling” in post 9/11 America?
Pick a media example (film, television program, music recording, etc.) that you think helps
demonstrate this.

Week 3

September 11, Tuesday:

INTRODUCTION TO MARXIST APPROACHES TO CRITICISM

Reading for Discussion:

“Introduction” by John Storey (*CTPC* pp. 55-57)

“Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas” by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (*CTPC* pp. 58-59)

“Base and Superstructure” by Karl Marx (*CTPC* p. 60)

“On Popular Music” by T. W. Adorno (*CTPC* pp. 63-74)

September 13, Thursday:

MARXIST CRITICISM CONTINUED

Peer Facilitated Discussion #1: Mediating September 11th Culture

“Telethon” and “Snapshots” (*9/11* pp. 50-77)

Reading Response #2 Due in Class

Option 1: Marx and Engels say that the people who control “material production” also control “mental production.” What could they mean by this? How might these ideas connect to kinds of stories we get about 9/11?

Option 2: Adorno claims that all popular music is “standardized.” While he is writing about an earlier moment in time, many media scholars have applied his theories to contemporary popular music. Do you agree or disagree with Adorno’s claim? If you agree with him, offer current examples that help demonstrate this. If you disagree, offer examples that counter his claims. To what extent might Adorno’s ideas apply to other media (such as those that Melnick discusses)?

Week 4

September 18, Tuesday:

MARXIST CRITICISM CONTINUED

Reading for Discussion:

“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” by Louis Althusser (*CTPC* pp. 302-312)

September 20, Thursday

ISAs AND RSAs CONTINUED

Peer Facilitated Discussion #2: 9/11 Ideologies

“Rising” and “Us” (*9/11* pp. 78-121)

Reading Response #3 Due in Class

Louis Althusser argues that we are all subjects of the dominant ideology. For him, contemporary communication media are simply “ideological state apparatuses” that help perpetuate the ideas of the ruling class. Defend or refute Althusser’s position: Are all mainstream media ISAs perpetuating a dominant ideology? Are people persuaded to follow this ideology? If so, what are some features of this dominant ideology? What are/could be the consequences of this? Use specific media examples (such as the media Melnick discusses) to support your claims.

Week 5

September 25, Tuesday:

GRAMSCIAN HEGEMONY AND NEO-MARXIST CRITICISM

Reading for Discussion:

“Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State” by Antonio Gramsci (*CTPC* pp. 75-80)

September 27, Thursday

HEGEMONY CONTINUED

Peer Facilitated Discussion #3: Hegemony Post 9/11

“Tools” and “Shout Outs” (*9/11* pp. 122-159)

Reading Response #4 Due in Class

Gramsci suggests that the dominant culture often maintains its power by “winning the consent” of the dominated classes—getting people to willingly participate in the dominant

culture even when it might not be in their best interest. Using one of the media examples that Melnick discusses, offer a discussion of how hegemony works through the media today.

Week 6

October 2, Tuesday:

INTRODUCING STRUCTURALISM AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

Reading for Discussion:

- “Introduction” by John Storey (*CTPC* pp. 241-245)
- “The Dream Work” by Sigmund Freud (*CTPC* pp. 246-254)
- “The Mirror Stage” by Jacques Lacan (*CTPC* pp. 255-260)

October 6, Thursday:

PSYCHOANALYSIS CONTINUED

Peer Facilitated Discussion #4: Case Study #2, Reality TV

Reading for Discussion:

- “Introduction” and “Charity TV: Privatizing Care, Mobilizing Compassion” by Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (in *Better Living through Reality TV [BLTRTV]* pp. 1-62)

Reading Response #5 Due in Class

Freud’s theories—as they have been applied in media and film studies—suggest that every film, television program, advertisement, song, etc., can be read as a dream in the sense that it fulfills some hidden desire for its intended audience. Using Freud’s theory of dream work, interpret some contemporary reality television program. What does your analysis tell us about the fantasies and desires of the audiences for this program?

Week 7

October 9, Tuesday:

No Class: Go to your Monday Classes Today

October 11, Thursday:

STRUCTURING MYTH: SIGNIFIERS, SIGNIFIEDS, AND DE-POLITICIZED SPEECH

Reading for Discussion:

- “Myth Today” by Roland Barthes (*CTPC* pp. 261-269)
- “The Structure of Myth & The Structure of the Western Film” by Will Wright (*CTPC* pp. 270-284)
- “Television: Polysemy and Popularity” by John Fiske (courseweb)

Reading Response #6 Due in Class

Using the ideas of Barthes, describe and analyze the signifiers, signifieds, and signs, of a PRINT ADVERTISEMENT of your choice. What overall message or feeling does this ad want to project? Include the advertisement with your discussion.

Week 8

October 16, Tuesday:

Mid-term Examination

October 18, Thursday

POSTSTRUCTURALISM CONTINUED

Reading for Discussion

“From Reality to the Real” by Slavoj Žižek (*CTPC* pp. 332-348)

Peer Facilitated Discussion #5: Reality TV and Identity

Reading for Discussion:

“TV Interventions” and “Makeover TV” (*BLTRTV* pp. 63-133)

Reading Response #7 Due in Class

Week 9

October 23, Tuesday:

MEDIATING POWER

Reading for Discussion:

“The Eye of Power” by Michel Foucault (courseweb)

“Method” by Michel Foucault (*CTPC* pp. 313-319)

October 25, Thursday

Peer Facilitated Discussion #6: Reality TV and the Question of Citizenship

Reading for Discussion:

“TV and Self-Defense Citizenship,” “TV’s Constitutions of Citizenship,” and “Playing TV’s Democracy Game” (*BLTRTV* pp. 134-224)

Reading Response #8 Due in Class

Week 10

October 30, Tuesday:

INTRODUCING FEMINISM

Reading for Discussion:

“Introduction” by John Storey (*CTPC* pp. 171-172)

“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by Laura Mulvey (courseweb)

November 1, Thursday

Peer Facilitated Discussion #7: Case Study #3, Postfeminism and the Media

Reading for Discussion:

“Introduction,” “Postfeminism and the Third Wave: *Titanic*,” and “Trouble in Paradise: *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif” by Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (in *Unruly Girls* [UG], pp. 1-75)

Reading Response #9 Due in Class

Week 11

November 6, Tuesday:

FEMINISM, AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND UTOPIA

Reading for Discussion:

“Encoding/Decoding” by Stuart Hall (courseweb)

“*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers” by Jacqueline Bobo (*CTPC* pp. 365-373)

“Soap Opera and Utopia” by Christine Geraghty (CTPC pp. 216-223)

November 8, Thursday:

Peer Facilitated Discussion #8: Feminism and Unruly Girls

Reading for Discussion:

“Girl World: *Clueless*, *Mean Girls*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*,” and “Final Girls and Epic Fantasies: Remaking the World,” (UG, pp. 76-126)

Reading Response #10 Due in Class

Week 12

November 13, Tuesday:

PATRIARCHY AND THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

Reading for Discussion:

“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” by Judith Butler (CTPC pp. 224-238)

November 15, Thursday:

Peer Facilitated Discussion #9: Feminism and Melodrama

“How Reese Witherspoon Walks the Line” (UG, pp.) and “Teen-Girl Melodramas: *My So-Called Life* and *Thirteen*” (UG, pp. 127-190)

Reading Response #11 Due in Class

Week 13

November 20, Tuesday:

INTRODUCING POSTMODERNISM

Reading for Discussion:

“Introduction” by John Storey (CTPC pp. 405-408)

“The Precession of Simulacra” by Jean Baudrillard (CTPC pp. 409-415)

November 22, Thursday:

NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING

Week 14

November 27, Tuesday:

POSTMODERNISM CONTINUED: POSTMODERN RACE

Reading for Discussion:

“Black Postmodernist Practices” by Cornel West (CTPC pp. 383-387)

“Postmodern Blackness” by bell hooks (CTPC pp. 388-394)

Peer Facilitated Discussion #10: Feminisms and Difference

“Girls of Color: Beyond Girl World,” “The Motherline and a Wicked Powerful Feminism: *Antonia's Line*,” and “Afterword”(UG, pp. 191-257)

Final Essay Due in Class

November 29, Thursday:

Peer Facilitated Discussion #11: Case Study #4, Postmodern Media—Music

Reading for Discussion:

“DJ Spooky and the Politics of Afro-Postmodernism” by Jesse Stewart (Courseweb)

“I Am They: Technological Mediation, Shifting Conceptions of Identity and Techno Music” by Sonya Hofer (Courseweb)

Reading Response #12 Due in Class

Week 15

December 4, Tuesday:

Peer Facilitated Discussion #12: Postmodernity, Simulacra, and Videogames

Reading for Discussion:

“The World War II Video Game, Adaptation, and Postmodern History” by Tanine Allison (Courseweb)

“Wii Will Become Silhouettes” by Derek Burrill (Courseweb)

December 6, Thursday

CULTURAL STUDIES, MEDIA CULTURE AND POSTMODERN ETHICS

Reading Response #13 Due in Class

Final Exam: Thursday, December 13, 8:00am-9:50am