

New York University  
Media, Culture, and Communication  
MC-GE 2145.01  
January Intersession 2014  
Mon-Thurs 2-4:45  
239 Greene St Room 712

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## METHODS IN INTERPRETING POPULAR CULTURE

### **Course description:**

This course is an introduction to methods of cultural analysis for interpreting popular culture as site of cultural meaning. It provides an introduction to the fundamental qualitative methods (and related theories) for understanding the construction of meaning in film, television, popular music, digital media, and advertising, tracing the study of popular culture through film theory and mass media analysis to cultural studies. This course surveys methods of analysis such as structuralism, semiotics, genre analysis, psychoanalysis, socio-historical analysis, ideological analysis, discourse analysis, political economy, reception theory, feminist method, and ethnography as tools through which to understanding popular culture in depth.

The aim of the course is to establish a vocabulary for methodological approaches to research, to examine the nature of research questions served by different methods, to analyze the usefulness and limits of certain methods, and to prepare students to design a research project. Readings include explanations of method as well as examples of particular theoretical/methodological approaches.

The course's approach is both practical and meta-theoretical. We will unpack the assumptions, techniques, and aims of different methods, and do short exercises in using them. We will look at the methodological aims and approaches of a range of texts, examining the ways in which various scholars construct their arguments, define their materials, data, and objects of study, and justify their examples as representative of broader cultural and media contexts. With each approach, we will examine what kinds of questions a method will help us to ask (and not ask) and the limits and strategies of each approach.

In looking at readings we will consider the following questions: What questions is the author asking? What is the object of study? What is the data? What is the argument? What methods is the author using to make this argument? How do you know, i.e. how does the author reveal his/her method and what consequence does this have? How persuasive is the argument? How does the author argue that his/her object(s) of study is representative of a larger field? What is gained by this choice of method? What is not available to the author through this choice?

**Course Requirements:**

Students are required to attend all seminars, to undertake the reading assignments seriously, and to participate fully in seminar discussions. You should come to class prepared to discuss the readings. There will be 11 short assignments throughout the semester in which you use a different methodological approach, of which you need to complete 10 in total. It is crucial to the experience of the class that you do these assignments on time each week—within 2 days. Each assignment should be about 2-3 pages (longer is fine). Grades will consider short assignments 90%, participation 10%.

**Required Texts:**

The readings will be posted in pdf on NYU Classes.

**Recommended Texts:**

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking Second Edition* (Oxford, 2009)

Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies, Third Edition* (Sage, 2011)

**Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism**

Academic integrity is the guiding principle for all that you do in the university, from taking exams to making oral presentations to writing term papers. It requires that you recognize and acknowledge information derived from others and take credit only for ideas and work that are yours.

You violate the principle of academic integrity when you

- cheat on an exam,
- submit the same work for two different courses without prior permission from your professors,
- receive help on a take-home examination that calls for independent work, or
- plagiarize.

Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud. In a community of scholars, whose members are teaching, learning, and discovering knowledge, plagiarism cannot be tolerated.

Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score, and/or other materials that are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following:

- copy verbatim from a book, an article, or other media;
- download papers from the Internet and claim they are your own;
- purchase papers and claim they are your own;
- report from other's oral work;
- paraphrase or restate someone else's facts, analysis, and/or conclusions; or
- copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you.

The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development imposes heavy penalties for plagiarism in order to safeguard the degrees that the University grants. Cases of plagiarism are considered among the most serious of offenses. Do not take this policy lightly. Please consult with me if you are unclear about this policy.

## Student Resources

- Students with physical or learning disabilities are required to register with the [Moses Center for Students with Disabilities](#), 719 Broadway, 2nd Floor, (212-998-4980) and are required to present a letter from the Center to the instructor at the start of the semester in order to be considered for appropriate accommodation.
- Writing Center: 269 Mercer Street, Room 233. Schedule an appointment online at [www.rich15.com/nyu/](http://www.rich15.com/nyu/) or just walk-in.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1:

#### **Class 1, Monday, January 6: Introduction--Cultural Analysis, Evidence, and Empiricism**

##### Reading:

Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, “Defining Popular Culture”  
James Schwoch and Mimi White, “The Questions of Method in Cultural Studies”

##### Recommended:

Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, “Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture”

#### **Assignment 1:**

**Choose a scholarly text that has influenced your interests and explain how it makes its argument and how you understand its method.**

#### **Class 2, Tuesday, January 7: Structuralism and Semiotics**

##### Reading:

David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson, *Film Art*, “The Significance of Film Form”  
Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Introduction and Chapter 1  
Will Wright, “The Structure of Myth and the Structure of the Western Film”

##### Recommended:

Dennis Porter, “The Perilous Quest: Baseball as Folk Drama”  
*Practices of Looking*, Chapter 1  
*Visual Methodologies*, Chapter 6

#### **Assignment 2:**

**Do a semiotic and/or structural analysis of an image, object, or print advertisement.**

**Class 3, Wednesday, January 8: Semiotics Cont'd and Ideological Analysis**

Reading:

Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" and excerpts from *Mythologies*

Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other"

Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Critical Visuality Studies"

Recommended:

Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Chaps 6-7-8

Larry Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, Charles Whitney, "Ideology"

*Practices of Looking*, Chapter 2**Assignment 3:****Do an ideological analysis of a film or television show.****Class 4, Thursday, January 9: Socio-Historical Analysis and Media Archaeology**

Reading:

Lynn Spigel, "Introduction to *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*" and "Outer Space and Inner Cities"

Lisa Gitelman, "Media as Historical Subjects"

Recommended:

Lisa Gitelman, Introduction to *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, Introduction to *Media Archaeology*Jason Gallo, "Doing Archival Research" from *Research Confidential***Assignment 4:****Analyze the historical meaning of an image or object or media artifact.****WEEK 2:****Class 5, Monday, January 13: Genre Theory/Feminist Theory**

Reading:

Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise*

Jason Mittell, "Television Genres as Cultural Categories"

**Assignment 5:****Define the formulas and characteristics of a film or television genre.**

**Class 6, Tuesday, January 14: Discourse Analysis**

Reading:

Marita Sturken, “*Tourists of History*: “Tourism and Sacred Ground”Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, Chapters 8 and 9

Recommended:

Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”

*Practices of Looking*, Chapter 3 (first half)**Assignment 6:****Choose a particular event or situation and discuss the discourses that are competing to define it.****Class 7, Wednesday, January 15: Political Economy of Culture**

Reading:

Dana Polan, “Cable Watching: HBO, The Sopranos and Discourses of Distinction”

Shawn Shimpach, “Realty Reality: HGTV and the Subprime Crisis”

Kevin Sandler, “Modern Family: Product Placement”

Recommended:

Jonathan Gray, “Texts that Sell: The Culture in Promotional Culture”

**Assignment 7:****Conduct a political economic analysis of a particular film, TV series, or website/software.****Class 8, Thursday, January 16: Postmodernism—Redefining Genre/Reading Irony**

Reading:

Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Is Nick for Kids?: Irony, Camp and Animation in the Nickelodeon Brand”

Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, Chapter 1

Jason Mittell, “Making Fun of Genres”

Recommended:

George Lipsitz, “Cruising Around the Historical Bloc”

Lawrence Cahoon, Introduction to *From Modernism to Postmodernism**Practices of Looking*, Chapter 8**Assignment 8:****Analyze a film, television show or other cultural product as postmodern.****WEEK 3:****Monday January 20, Martin Luther King Day, NO CLASS**

**Class 9, Tuesday January 21: Spectatorship and Psychoanalysis**

Reading:

Judith Mayne, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship"

Tania Modleski, "Hitchcock, Feminism, and Patriarchal Consciousness" and "Rear Window"

Josefina Saldaña Portillo, "In the Shadow of NAFTA"

Recommended:

*Practices of Looking*, Chapter 3 (second half)*Visual Methodologies*, Chapter 7**Assignment 9:****Apply one or two concepts from psychoanalysis to a cultural product.****Class 10, Wednesday January 22: Reception Theory and Media Ethnography**

Reading:

John Corner, "Reception"

Ellen Seiter, "Qualitative Audience Research"

Jonathan Gray, "Spoiled and Mashed Up: Viewer Created Paratexts"

Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* excerpt

Recommended:

Eszther Hargittai, *Introduction to Research Confidential**Visual Methodologies*, Chapter 10**Assignment 10:****Observe a place for an hour and describe the patterns of behavior that you see.****Class 11, Thursday January 23: Ethnographic Audiences/Digital Media Research**

Reading:

Mizuko Ito et al, *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian*, excerptsMizuko Ito et al, Introduction to *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out*Tom Boellstorff et al, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, excerpts

Recommended:

Gina Walejko, "Online Survey" and Dmitri Williams and Li Xiong, "Herding Cats Online" from *Research Confidential***Assignment 11:****Choose a website (blog, social network site, online game, etc.) and analyze the potential benefits and pitfalls methodologically of doing an ethnographic study of it.**