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, 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 12 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. Each assignment should be about 3 pages (longer is fine). Grades will consider short assignments 90%, participation 10%.

Required Texts:
Dick Hebdige, Subculture (Routledge, 1981)
Marita Sturken, Thelma & Louise (British Film Institute, 2000)
The rest of the readings will be posted in pdf on Blackboard.

Recommended Texts:

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/ or just walk-in.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1, September 7: Introduction--Models for Thinking about Popular Culture

Week 2, September 14: 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”
Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, “Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture”

Week 3, September 21: Structuralism and Film Form
Reading:
Umberto Eco, “Narrative Structures in Fleming”
Will Wright, “The Structure of Myth and the Structure of the Western Film”
Salman Rushdie, The Wizard of Oz (excerpt)
Excerpt from David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson, Film Art, “The Significance of Film Form”
Assignment 1 due
Week 4, September 28: Semiotics
Reading:
Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Introduction and Chapter 1
Kaja Silverman, “From Sign to Subject: A Short History”
Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, excerpts
Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other”

Recommended:
*Practices of Looking*, Chapter 1
*Visual Methodologies*, Chapter 5

Assignment 2 due

Week 5, October 5: Ideological Analysis
Reading:
Larry Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, Charles Whitney, “Ideology”
Lauren Berlant, “The Theory of Infantile Citizenship”
Manuel Castells, “The Culture of the Internet”

Recommended:
*Practices of Looking*, Chapters 2, 6

Assignment 3 due

Week 6, October 12: Socio-Historical Analysis
Reading:
Lynn Spigel, “Introduction to *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*” and “Outer Space and Inner Cities”
Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, except
Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine*, excerpt

Assignment 4 due

Week 7, October 19: Genre Theory/Feminist Theory
Reading:
Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise*
Jason Mittel, “Television Genres as Cultural Categories”
Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud”

Recommended:
Charlotte Brunsdon, “Identity in Feminist Television Criticism”
Larry Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, Charles Whitney, “The Interpretation of Meaning”

Assignment 5 due
Week 8, October 26: Political Economy of Culture
Reading:
Dana Polan, “Cable Watching: HBO, The Sopranos and Discourses of Distinction”
Toby Miller, et al., Introduction to *Global Hollywood 2*
Pietra Rivoli, *The Travels of a T-Shirt* (excerpt)
Jonathan Gray, “Texts that Sell: The Culture in Promotional Culture”
**Assignment 6 due**

Week 9, November 2: Discourse Analysis
Reading:
Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, excerpts
Edward Said, *Orientalism*, excerpt
Marita Sturken, “Tourists of History: “Tourism and Sacred Ground”
Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”

Recommended:
Practices of Looking, Chapter 3 (first half)
Visual Methodologies, Chapter 8
**Assignment 7 due**

Week 10, November 9: Spectatorship and Psychoanalysis
Reading:
Judith Mayne, “Paradoxes of Spectatorship”
Tania Modleski, "Hitchcock, Feminism, and Patriarchal Consciousness" and “Rear Window”
Josefina Saldana-Portillo, “In the Shadow of NAFTA”

Recommended:
Practices of Looking, Chapter 3 (second half)
Visual Methodologies, Chapter 6
**Assignment 8 due**

Week 11, November 16: Postmodernism
Reading:
Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*, excerpt
Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Is Nick for Kids?: Irony, Camp and Animation in the Nickelodeon Brand”
Jason Mittel, “Making Fun of Genres”
George Lipsitz, “Cruising Around the Historical Bloc”

Recommended:
Practices of Looking, Chapter 8
**Assignment 9 due**
Week 12, November 23: Reception Theory and Media Ethnography
Reading:
Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, excerpt
Ellen Seiter, “Qualitative Audience Research”
Huimin Jin, “British Cultural Studies, Active Audiences: An Interview with David Morley”
Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, excerpt

Recommended:
David Morley, “Methodological Problems and Research Practices”
John Corner, “Reception”
Janice Radway, “Reading Reading the Romance”
Assignment 10 due

Week 13, November 30: Ethnographic Audiences/Digital Media Research
Reading:
Mizuko Ito et al, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out*, excerpts
Gabriella Coleman, “Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media”
Andrea Press and Sonia Livingstone, “Taking Audience Research into the Age of New Media”
Gabriella Coleman, “Code is Speech”
Assignment 11 due

Week 14, December 7: Conclusion
Assignment 12 due
ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 1: Tell a personal story that makes a larger point from its specific narrative.

Assignment 2: Do a structural analysis of a television series, sports activity, or cultural product.

Assignment 3: Do a semiotic analysis of an image, object, or print advertisement.

Assignment 4: Do an ideological analysis of a film or television show. Assignment 5: Take an image or object and analyze its historical meaning. Assignment 6: Define the formulas and characteristics of a film or television genre.

Assignment 7: Choose a particular media or cultural product and map out the elements of its political economic context.

Assignment 8: Choose a particular event or situation and discuss the discourses that are competing to define it.

Assignment 9: Apply one or two concepts from psychoanalysis to a cultural product.

Assignment 10: Analyze a film, television show or other cultural product as postmodern.

Assignment 11: Observe a place for an hour and describe the patterns of behavior that you see.

Assignment 12: Interview one person who you know well and one person you don’t know about their iPod, TV viewing habits, or consumer habits. Compare the two interviews in terms of strategy, information you got, general conclusions you could make about the topic.