

CommRC 1122: Media Criticism

Spring 2003

Carrie A. Rentschler

1109G Cathedral of Learning

Office Hours: Tuesday 11:00-12:00, Thursday 2:30-3:30

Email: carrie10+@pitt.edu (Allow 24-48 hours for a response)

To leave a phone message: (412) 624-6567 (I check my messages every two days)

Office phone (only during office hours): (412) 624-5698

Prerequisite

Mass communication process (CommRC 0320). Students must have taken and passed mass communication process in order to take this course. If you have not taken and passed (with at least a C grade) Mass Communication Process, you must drop this course. No exceptions.

Course Description

In contemporary society, mass media are economic and ideological institutions that shape how we think about the world and our place in it. They structure our everyday perceptions of local and global events and systems of thought; they both describe and prescribe representations of reality, priming how we can and should think, and what we should be thinking about. The goal of this course is to develop a critical understanding of the role and function of news and entertainment media in U.S. culture. This course will provide students with ways of understanding media as for-profit institutions that produce and distribute symbolic content; and as cultural artifacts and practices. Media are culture industries, texts and practices that can all be interpreted in unison.

To these ends, students will first examine the experiences of a media-saturated environment, and the economics that drive this saturation. The mass media are for-profit businesses that have a real stake in economic and political stability, and by extension the status quo. Students will also examine how the media produces and distributes ideology through the use of narrative conventions and framing. One of our points of entry into this analysis will be an examination of how establishment news institutions criticize other news outlets for their politicized coverage. We will look at the mainstream news coverage of the CIA/crack cocaine connection as an example of this behavior. Finally, students will examine advertising and popular culture as economic and political practices. We will pay particular attention to the culture of youth marketing.

Students must be prepared to devote a lot of time to this class, and to the processes of reading and analysis in particular. Those of you who are unable to make a substantial work commitment to this course are advised to drop.

Required Texts

All the readings for our course are available in a course packet available at the Pitt Bookstore. A copy of the course packet will be placed on reserve at Hillman Library.

Students should keep their eyes open for interesting newspaper and magazine articles, TV shows, videos, radio shows or music that would be useful to discuss. Bring them to class.

Students should regularly read newspapers (the *New York Times* is recommended) and watch national and local evening news while enrolled in this course. Many national newspapers are available for free on-line. Students are also encouraged to familiarize themselves with alternative news publications and journalism, such as *The Nation*, *Extra! A Newsletter of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, *Counterpunch*, *In These Times*, *The Progressive*, and *Adbusters*, among others. In addition, several alternative news sources can be found archived on the World Wide Web at websites such as IndyMedia.org, AlterNet.org, and Commondreams.org, among others. These publications will be useful for presentations and class discussion. Many of them regularly report on the workings of media institutions and offer analysis that is not available in more mainstream sources. In particular, they provide investigative and critical coverage of world and domestic affairs rarely found in mainstream news outlets. You can find them at the Carnegie Public Library, in the Social Science Library (on the second floor) and in Hillman Library's Journal Room on the 4th floor of the Library. Hillman also keeps recent issues of several local, national and international newspapers. *Extra!*, *Counterpunch*, and *The Nation* can all be accessed on-line for free.

What You'll Do In This Class

There are three important skills to develop for this course: reading, writing and discussion. They are skills upon which everyone can improve. Students should treat them as if they are learning a craft.

Reading:

Reading is a skill that one develops over time. This course will emphasize careful and generous reading, so that you can then make full use of our course texts when you write and present.

In order to read well, you should expect to do the following:

1. Readings are assigned at particular times for particular reasons. Do the reading when it's assigned.
2. Set aside a significant amount of time each week *just* for reading. Reading requires concentration and reflection; it should not be combined with other activities, like socializing or watching TV.
3. Mark important passages and passages that raise questions in your mind. Some people prefer to take notes on readings in a reading journal; others prefer to directly mark up the text. Choose one, and stick with it.
4. You should keep a dictionary close at hand and look up words you do not understand.
5. Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the reading, you should be able to provide thoughtful answers to questions like: Why is the topic important? What was the author intending with this piece? What are the main points he or she wants to get across? Why did the author choose these particular examples or topics? What did I learn by reading this article?

Writing:

There are no secrets to becoming a better writer, but it does take hard work. Good writers do the following things, and so should you if you want to improve: 1) they read extensively and carefully; 2) they write regularly; 3) they discuss their writing and ideas; and 4) they revise a lot. This course will provide the opportunity for the first three – four is on you. It is always good to have other people read your writing and offer constructive suggestions on the clarity and organization of the content, the persuasiveness of the argument, and choice of language. Your instructor is also available to discuss your writing, and she encourages you to take advantage of her feedback.

Students will write a midterm essay in the course. This assignment is explained in more detail in the section on Assignments and Grading.

Discussion:

This course requires the engaged and active participation of students. Participation is crucial in making the course both lively and successful, and to this end, there is a formal participation grade for the course (see “Assignments and Grading” below). Class time will be divided between lectures, discussion, student presentations and the presentation of media materials. All students must come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, which means coming to class with questions that will generate discussion.

Discussion requires a set of skills. The Department of Communication offers an entire course on the topic, but here are some basic skills and techniques to keep in mind:

1. **Active listening:** Listen for the specific words speakers use. Do you know what they mean? Do they suggest a particular standpoint? Ask if you don’t know.
2. **Questioning:** If you are not absolutely sure what a speaker means, or if you don’t understand something a speaker says, ask for clarification.
3. **Pushing Others:** Encourage colleagues to clarify or elaborate on what they mean to say. Push them to generalize and make interpretations. Speculate!
4. **Embellishment:** Build upon what others have said. Do you agree? Then add something. Do you agree partially? Then point out some differences. Do you disagree, or are you unsure? Present another perspective on the topic we’re discussing.
5. **Dissemination:** Direct your comments to more than one person: discussions are for the whole class. Address the whole class; make eye contact.
6. **Engagement:** Good discussions are lively and freewheeling. Do not be afraid of speaking up. If you have a question, odds are that other students will have the same question. Basic questions and comments are encouraged. They are often the most important contributions to the discussion. Really.

Ground Rules for Class Discussion:

1. Follow the golden rule. Treat other people as you would like to be treated.
2. Wait your turn – do not interrupt others.
3. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.
4. Disagreements are natural and welcome in scholarly discussion. So are arguments. But arguments are not contests. You should grant the same courtesy and respect to the people with whom you disagree that you would want for yourself.
5. Students bring lots of interesting experiences to the classroom, and you are encouraged to bring up your experience when it is relevant to class discussion (and when you feel comfortable doing so). Everyone’s personal experience deserves respect. But if you bring up your own experience in class, please recognize that it becomes a public topic for discussion. Others may interpret your experience differently than you do, and they are free to respectfully disagree with your interpretation.

Assignments and Grading

Below is a general outline of assignments for the semester. The specifics of each major assignment will be explained over the duration of the course. The numbers in brackets indicate the cumulative weight of each category toward the semester grade. Please note: students must turn in all assignments to pass the course.

Students' grades will be largely determined by their ability to demonstrate in writing and oral presentation their comprehension of the readings, lectures and discussions. **Very Important: Because participation is absolutely essential to students' grades and to the quality of the course, students who are unable to attend every class and do all the required readings are advised to drop the course. See the very serious attendance policy on p. 5.**

Quizzes: [20%] In lieu of a midterm exam on the course readings, a number of quizzes will be administered throughout the course to insure students keep up with the reading and comprehend lectures and discussion. Quizzes will be administered at the beginning of class. Students who are not present in class for the quiz lose credit for the quiz, and they cannot be made up. Students should expect to be quizzed in every class meeting. At the end of the semester, the instructor will throw out each student's two lowest quiz grades; a missed quiz will be included in this number if it is applicable. Quizzes are graded on the following scale: 100% (got it right), 85% (clearly did the reading but got the answer slightly wrong), 50% (some evidence of having done the reading), 25% (took the quiz, shows no evidence of having done the reading), 0% (did not take the quiz).

Participation: [10%] As a discussion class, the instructor encourages participation! Participation means attending *all* class meetings, being prepared and attentive, having something relevant to ask or tell, and being respectful and courteous to your classmates and your instructor. To help facilitate class discussion, students are expected to read our course materials closely, and be prepared to substantively discuss and argue about ideas. Take notes and mark key passages in the texts we read to help stimulate discussion questions. Note that no participation means 0% (regular absences, have not done the reading, not prepared for discussion, does not speak in class), slight participation means 4% (no absences, have done the reading, ready for discussion, does not speak in class or very rarely does) adequate participation means 7% (no absences, regularly speaks in class and has carefully done the readings), and exceptional participation means 10%.

Student Presentations for Discussion: [20%] In groups of three, students will lead class discussion on an assigned reading (or group of readings) for that day. Students will write questions for our class discussion, make a short 5-10 minute presentation (maximum) on the reading, **and** present a media document that further facilitates discussion and application of the reading(s). Your instructor will help facilitate the discussion. The questions students write should be substantive, fair and directed.

- **Substantive:** Deal with the substance of the author's argument. What claims is he/she making? Based upon what evidence? Is the author's argument persuasive (see discussion of Fairness)?
- **Fair:** Our primary goal is to understand what the text does and argues for, and for what purpose. What is it trying to do, and why? What does it help us think about and perceive differently about the mass media? Think about what the author was trying to accomplish.

- **Directed:** How might you apply this author's argument today? How can we take what the author discusses and apply it to our understanding of mass media in the present?

Mid-term Media Critique: [25% total] Students will write a 3-4 page long critique of a media document (of students' choice) at mid semester. The purpose of the critique is to apply concepts or theories from two course readings to a media text or practice. Critiques will be graded according to students' understanding of the concepts they apply, the clarity of their application of the concepts, and the strength of their analysis. The critiques must present an argument, with a clear strong thesis. Students will also be rewarded for their creativity in completing this project. The specifics of the assignment will be explained in more detail in a hand out.

Final Take-Home Exam: [25%] Students will complete the course with a cumulative take-home final exam. The exam will test student's abilities to critique mass media representations and practices based on concepts from the course. The exam will be graded on the typical university % scale. An "A" grade is 90-100%, "B" is 80-89%, "C" is 70-79%, "D" is 60-69%, and "F" is below 60%.

Other Course Policies

These are important: READ THEM.

1. **Compliance**

By staying enrolled in this class, you acknowledge that you understand – and agree to abide by – the following rules and regulations *and* the University's policies (see addresses for Code of Conduct and Academic Integrity below). Failure to follow the letter *and the spirit* of these reasonable guidelines can result in a reduction of your final grade, failure of the course, and/or other penalties as set by University policy.

2. **Attendance: VERY IMPORTANT**

You are paying for an opportunity to learn. Absences hurt your ability to learn and they hurt your grade. Signing up for this class indicates that you are committed to being here for the full class period each class meeting. **For the purposes of this policy, you are either present for an entire class meeting or not. Late arrivals and early departures will count as absences — really.**

You are allowed three unexcused absences over the course of the semester. For each absence above three, students will have their semester grade reduced by 1/3 grade. Further, in-class assignments and quizzes cannot be made up. If you miss class, you are still responsible for whatever was covered in lecture and discussion that day. YOUR INSTRUCTOR IS VERY SERIOUS ABOUT THIS POLICY, AND SHE ENFORCES IT.

Unexcused absences in excess of three will be excused only under exceptional and unavoidable circumstances. Requests for excused absences must be submitted in writing, with documentation, and immediately upon a student's return to class. **Students who enroll late are not exempt from this policy.**

3. **Assignments and Extensions**

Assignments (except for quizzes, in-class work, and the like) will be announced well in advance of due dates. If you know in advance that you can't make a due date, please discuss it with me beforehand. In all other cases, late assignments will not be accepted.

4. **Grades**

I am eager to help you do well on assignments before they are due. Please visit me during office hours to ask me questions when you are working on an assignment or reviewing material.

Grades are final. I grade assignments and quizzes on performance, not effort. Effort will be recognized in your participation grade for the course. Here are the circumstances under which I would change a grade: (a) if I have made an error, or (b) if I have failed to hold you to the same standard as everyone else. In the event that you feel you received an undeserved grade, you should make your case in writing to me within two weeks of receiving the grade. Under no circumstance will I award a grade of "incomplete" for the course.

Final grades will be based on the standard university scale:

90-100% = A range
80-89% = B range
70-79% = C range

60-69% = D range
0-59% = F

The instructor reserves the right to adjust students' semester grades based upon her evaluation of their overall performance. Grades are not given out over email or the telephone.

5. **Accommodations:**

If you require special testing accommodations or other classroom modifications, please notify both the instructor and Disability Resources and Services by the end of the first week of the term. Disability Resources and Services is located in 216 William Pitt Union (648-7890 [voice or TDD]), and their website is at: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~osaweb/drs/drs.html>].

6. **Nondiscrimination Statement**

As an instructor at the University of Pittsburgh, I value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic/cultural diversity. Be assured that I will promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, disability, or status as a disabled veteran or a veteran of the Vietnam era. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, I do not discriminate on the basis of political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with me in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, you are under no obligation to agree with it. I also make every effort to avoid discrimination on the basis of class or income. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

7. **Other Policies You Should Know**

Student Code of Conduct: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~osaweb/usjs/code.html>]

Academic Integrity: [<http://www.pitt.edu/~graduate/ai1.html>]

Plagiarism is using someone else's ideas as your own in formal writing. If you use someone else's ideas, you are expected to cite them. If you use someone else's exact words, even if it is part of a sentence, you should put quotation marks around them and cite them. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please see me. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and can result in failure of the assignment, the course, and other serious sanctions.

Semester Schedule of Readings and Assignments

This schedule is subject to change over the semester. Readings with an * (asterisk) have been chosen for student-lead discussions.

Tues, January 7th: Introduction to Media Criticism

An Introduction to Mediated Life

Thurs, January 9th: Media Supersaturation and the Desire for "Feeling"

Gitlin, Todd. (2001). "Introduction" In *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1-11.

Tues January 14th: Continued . . .

Gitlin, Todd. (2001). "Supersaturation, or, the Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling" In *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 12-35.

Thurs January 16th: Continued . . .

Gitlin, Todd. (2001). "Supersaturation, or, the Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling" In *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 35-70.

Tues January 21st: A Critical Introduction to the Global Media System

McChesney, Robert. (March 2001). "Global Media, Neoliberalism, and Imperialism." *Monthly Review*, 52(10), 1-19. Also online at www.monthlyreview.org/301rwm.htm.

Propaganda, News and Perceptions of Reality

Thurs January 23rd: Public Relations: "Engineering Consent"

Ewen, Stuart. (1996). "The Unseen Engineers: Biography of an Idea" In *PR! A Social History of Spin*. New York: Basic Books, 146-173.

Tues January 28th: Continued . . .

*Ewen, Stuart and Carrie McClaren. (January 1998). "PR!: An Interview with Stuart Ewen" *Stay Free!*, 8-18.

Thurs January 30th: A Case Study in PR

*Hager, Nicky and Bob Burton. (1999). "Introduction," "The Privatization of Politics," and "Controlling the Media" In *Secrets and Lies: The Anatomy of an Anti-Environmental PR Campaign*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 11-29, 111-124.

Tues February 4th: Language, Propaganda and Power

Orwell, George. (1950). "Politics and the English Language." In *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays and Reportage by George Orwell*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 355-66.

Thurs February 6th: Continued . . .

*Chomsky, Noam. (1992). "Language in the Service of Propaganda." In David Barsamian. (Ed.). *Stenographers to Power*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 63-85.

Tues February 11th: Gulf War Coverage and the Language of Advertising

*Anderson, Robin. (1995). "Advertising and The Persian Gulf War." In *Consumer Culture & TV Programming*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 211-224.

Thurs February 13th: Agenda Setting and the Gulf War

Iyengar, Shanto and Adam Simon. (1997). "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda Setting, Priming and Framing" In Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves (Eds.) *Do the Media Govern?* Thousand Oaks: Sage, 248-257.

Tues February 18th: The San Jose Mercury News Investigative Report on the CIA and the Crack Cocaine Crisis

*Webb, Gary. (1996, August 18,19 and 20). "Dark Alliance" Series on CIA and Crack Cocaine, San Jose Mercury News.

*Solomon, Norman. (1997, January/February). "Snow Job: The Establishment's Papers Do Damage Control for the CIA." *Extra! A Newsletter of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*. Online at: <http://www.fair.org/extra/9701/contra-crack.html>.

Thurs February 20th: Review Day

Media and Ideology

Tues February 25th – Thurs February 27th: News Photography Shapes What and How We See

Hall, Stuart. (1973). "The Determinations of News Photographs" in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young (Eds.) *The Manufacture of News*, 176-190.

TUES MARCH 4 - THURS MARCH 6: SPRING BREAK.

Tues March 11th – Thurs March 13th: News as Narrative

Hall, Stuart (1984, March). "The Narrative Construction of Reality: An Interview with Stuart Hall." *Southern Review* 17, 3-17.

Tues March 18th: Television News and the Cocaine Narrative

* (two groups) Reeves, Jimmie and Richard Campbell. (1994). "The Cocaine Narrative: A Thoroughly Modern Morality Tale" and "The Siege Paradigm: Re-Writing the Cocaine Narrative" In *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade and the Reagan Legacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 15-34; 129-161.

Thurs March 20th: Race and Ideology in the Mass Media

Hall, Stuart. (1990). "The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media." In Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson (Eds.). *The Media Reader*. London: BFI Publishing, 7-23.

Tues March 25th – Thurs March 27th: Modern Day Minstrelsy

Video screening of Spike Lee's "Bamboozled"

Tues April 1st: Review Day

Advertising and Capitalist Pop Culture

Thurs April 3rd: The Language of Publicity

*Berger, John (1973/1977). *Ways of Seeing*. BBC Publishing and Penguin Books, 129-155.

Tues April 8th: Advertising is Capitalism's Way of Saying I Love You to Itself

*Schudson, Michael. (1984). "Advertising as Capitalist Realism" In *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books, 209-233.

Thurs April 10th: Youth Marketing and "The Cool Factor"

*Klein, Naomi. (1999). "Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool" In *No Logo*. New York: Picador, 63-86.

Tues April 15th: Review Day on Advertising

Thurs April 17th: LAST DAY OF CLASS