

OKANAGAN COLLEGE
Department of Communications
CMNS 240: The Culture of Television

Course Description

This one-semester course examines the medium of Television as a cultural icon, a significant reflector and determinant of cultural moods and ideas, and as the dominant communications medium of the twentieth century, and beyond.

Emphasis will be placed on 'reading' and interrogating televisual programming and advertising, charting Television's rise to media ascendancy, analyzing Television's ironic self-reflexivity, as well as engaging the more commonplace elements of the televisual entertainment industry. As such, we will explore the many ways in which Television is *not*, as the American Federal Communications Commission Chair Mark Fowler blithely professed in 1981, simply "just another appliance, a toaster with pictures."

Prerequisite: Successful completion of CMNS 100 or second-year standing.

Outcomes

Students will:

1. Read, think, and write critically about Television and texts regarding Television
2. Consider the practical implications of televisual discourse on their own immediate culture and lives
3. Analyze the ways that Television is both a "disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere" in which they live (Wallace 155)
4. Engage actively in the interpretive process and apply the results to their own cultural proximity
5. Develop and refine analytical skills using theoretical methodologies and practical analysis
6. Understand complex cultural texts, and link these to the practical concerns of lived experience
7. Recognize and identify ideologies as represented through Television
8. Apply newly acquired theoretical concepts to applied communications models

Topics

1. History of TV
2. The cultural impact of new communicative technologies
3. Mediation
4. Self-reflexivity/Self-consciousness in programming/advertising
5. Juxtaposition and the power of strategic imagery
6. The politics of televisual representation
7. The cultural influence of Television
8. Reality/Documentary Television (constructed spontaneity, artificial reality)
9. TV and cultural phenomena
10. TV's genres: old and new

Method of Instruction

As a learner-centred course, students share responsibility with the instructor for the success of each class session. Having carefully read and contemplated the texts and topics under consideration in advance of a given class, students should be prepared for vibrant class discussion. Classes will feature a fluid combination of lectures, presentations, individual and collaborative work, workshops, and seminars.

Texts

Bourdieu, Pierre. *On Television*. New York: New Press, 1998.

Fiske, John. *Reading Television*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Custom Courseware (selected readings may include): David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction"; Thomas Frank, "Why Johnny Can't Dissent" and "Advertising as Cultural Criticism"; Marshall McLuhan, "The *Playboy* Interview"; Marie Gillespie, "Cool Bodies: TV Ad Talk"; John Pungente, "Television Gives Good Grief: From JFK to Diana" and "You Provide the Prose, I'll Provide the War: Television News"; Sylvia Harvey, "Who Rules TV? States, Markets, and the Public Interest"; Annette Hill, "Reality TV: Performance, Authenticity, and Television Audiences."

Note: Course readings will be supplemented with sources directly relevant to students' coursework.

Course Requirements

Reading Tests (four @ 5% each)	20%
Cultural Influence Analysis (three-page analysis of a public issue & TV)	15%
Mediation Analysis (three-page analysis of programming/commercial)	15%
Content Analysis (three-page program-content deconstruction)	15%
Final Examination	25%
Participation (including attendance, preparation, responses to study questions, informal group presentations, engagement in class activities, and low-stakes writing assignments)	10%

Evaluation and Assessment

Students will collaborate with the instructor to determine criteria for each assignment. The criteria will vary according to each assignment’s audience, purpose, content, and communications medium, and will be developed in advance of a given assignment’s submission date. Students will also engage in reflective self-assessment as a means of better integrating evaluation with learning.

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Sample Assignment: Critical Mediation Analysis

Worth: 15% of final grade

Instructions:

1. **Select** a widely disseminated Television program or commercial advertisement from one of the major TV networks.
3. **Analyze** the several components of the program/advertisement employing the analytical methodology used in class discussions. Your analysis should also make use of chapters two and three of John Fiske's *Reading Television*, "Content Analysis" (8) and "The Signs of Television" (22).
3. **Write** a critically engaged and logical three-page paper that carefully discusses the ways that the concept of mediation is employed in the selected program/advertisement. (Papers must frame a cogent argument at the outset).

Your discussion may include, but is not limited to, references to the following:

- The ways that TV directly implicates the viewer and to what ends;
- The ways that TV actively disguises mediation and the reasons behind this posturing;
- The purpose of 'in-jokes' and ironic self-reference in advertising;
- The interpenetration of programming and advertising.