

OKANAGAN COLLEGE  
Department of Communications  
**CMNS 310: Contemporary Visual Culture**

**Course Description**

This one-semester course examines how a range of visual texts mediate contemporary North American experience. Emphasis will be given to close-reading and interpretation of such visual texts as film (documentary and mainstream cinema), print and electronic advertising, the Internet and Blogs (new media), print media, and Television.

The course interrogates the contemporary culture of vision and how concepts and attitudes are fostered and propagated via visual culture. Special emphasis will be given to certain movements and successful advertising campaigns (United Colors of Benetton, for example) that have shaped cultural perceptions and coalesced into political action. As such, the course examines the interpenetrating relationship between political ideology and visual images in contemporary culture.

**Prerequisite:** 3<sup>rd</sup>-year standing and the successful completion of six Arts credits.

**Outcomes**

Students will:

1. Read, think, and write critically about visual texts and their implications on their culture
2. Engage actively in the interpretive process
3. Develop and refine analytical skills
4. Understand complex cultural texts, and link these to practical concerns
5. Recognize and identify ideologies as represented through visual discourse
6. Apply newly acquired theoretical concepts to applied communications models

**Selected Topics**

1. Reading visual texts and redefining 'text'
2. Visual identity in the digital era
3. Envisioning place: interpreting visual environments
4. The politics of visual advocacy
5. Advertising culture
6. The documentary visual
7. Publicizing the private: visual texts and Blogs
8. Advancing cultural agendas through visual media

### 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

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Visual Culture Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Knopf, 1999.

Custom Courseware (selected readings may include): Roland Barthe, "Rhetoric of the Image"; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"; Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision"; Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"; Jean Baudrillard, from *Simulacra and Simulacrum*; John Fisk "The Jeaning of America"; Malcolm Gladwell, "The Cool Hunters"; Garret Keizer, "A Picture Worth Exactly a Thousand Words"; Thomas Frank, "Why Johnny Can't Dissent" and "Advertising as Cultural Criticism."

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

### Course Requirements

Reading Tests (four @ 5% each)	20%
Cultural Issue Blog Analysis (three-page response paper)	15%
Political/Ideological Website Analysis (three-page response paper)	15%
Electronic Ad-Campaign Analysis (three-page response paper)	15%
Long Analytical Paper	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.

**CMNS 310: Contemporary Visual Culture**  
**Sample Assignment: Cultural Issues Blog Analysis**  
**Worth:** 15% of final grade

**Instructions:**

1. **Visit** the dedicated public blog site for the fashion firm, United Colors of Benetton at < <http://www.benettontalk.com/> >.
2. **Familiarize** yourself with the site's content and threads of discussion. Carefully observe the patterns of blogging on this site, the instructions, and corporate waivers.
3. **Analyze** Benetton's strategic harmonizing of the two realms of economics and global citizenship in their blogspace employing the analytical methodology used in class discussions and readings.
4. **Consider** the ways in which the supposedly contradictory human interests of *economics* (commerce, marketing, branding) and *global citizenship* (the environment, world health, urban living) strategically intersect.
5. **Write** a critically engaged and logical three-page paper that carefully discusses the ways in which business interests intersect with universal human concerns. **Note:** papers must frame a cogent argument at the outset.

Your responses should discuss the following terms | questions | ideas:

- The concepts of *cultural literacy* and *global citizenship*.
- How are public issues strategically deployed to sell Benetton clothing and fashion gear?
- What are the latent ironies involved in such branding | commercial targeting?
- How is the discussion of "global themes" undermined by a basic corporate desire to sell products?
- Discuss the implications of merging these two spheres of human interest (business and humanitarian). Is there a legitimate split? Discuss the ethics involved in a corporation's advocacy of human rights while selling commercial products.
- Discuss the ways that such a relationship (between business and humanitarian interests) can be ethically negotiated | established.