MEDST 160: Advertising Aesthetics: History & Visual Communication
Syllabus
Spring 2025

COURSE SUMMARY
Imagery and design are at the heart of commercial communication. From billboards in Times Square to Super Bowl commercials to attention-grabbing photos in Instagram feeds, visual content is created to captivate us, to tap into our emotions and to persuade us to buy a product or vote for a political candidate. While advertising started as simple words on paper, today media technologies enable art directors to create immersive worlds, both real and imagined. It is critical to understand how these images and environments are produced, how they are understood by humans, and the historical and cultural context of their creation.

The purpose of MEDST 160 is to provide an **overview of persuasive visual communication in advertising**. This historical survey course will examine advertising from the printed page to television commercials to augmented and virtual realities using multiple analytical perspectives with an emphasis on semiotics and, especially, ***aesthetics***. For our purposes, **advertising aesthetics refers to the artistic properties of, and sensory and emotional responses to, advertisements**.

The course follows a historical, contextual, and critical approach to advertising aesthetics, focusing on the ways culture influences the evolution of advertising from 1880 to the present. This approach results in a new critical awareness of the ways advertising uses art, culture, and trends, that creates long-lasting aesthetics and impactful changes in society and consumerism.
This course is an **in-person course** in **Kiely 319 every Tuesday** from **1:40pm – 4:30pm**. You are expected to be present - and on time! - for these sessions and participate as much as possible. There is a grade for participation, and you will lose points if you miss in-person sessions.

INSTRUCTOR
Professor and Department Chair: Dr. JV Fuqua (they/them)
Email: jv.fuqua@qc.cuny.edu
Office hours are Wednesdays 11AM-12PM in G100, G Building. (G-Building is not an accessible building, therefore I will gladly meet elsewhere if you email me in advance.)
Additional office hours are by scheduled appointment. I can also be available for Zoom appointments. Email me to inquire about this availability.

NOTE ABOUT SERVICE DOG
My service dog, Granger, will be with me most every class unless something prevents him from attending. Do not pet him or try to give him food. If he should approach you, ignore him. I will try to keep windows open to ensure air flow in the classroom. We will take a 10-minute break each class.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Familiarize students with an historical perspective of visual advertising communication;

• Provide a critical base for understanding a variety of visual commercial forms across time and within specific historical contexts;

• Expose students to principles of visual communication theory and terminology and the fundamentals of advertising conceptualization

COURSE OUTCOMES

• Students will develop knowledge about the evolution of advertising over time and an understanding of the tools and techniques that are used to create persuasive advertising communications;

• Students will become familiar with advertising histories and their implications for commercial communication as currently practiced;

• Students will learn to how to critically analyze the visual language of advertising communication in contemporary consumer cultures.

CLASSROOM POLICY ON AUDIO & VIDEO RECORDING

Queens College Classroom Photography and Recording Policy:
Neither photographs nor recordings (audio or video) of all or parts of classes at Queens College may be made without written permission from the course instructor(s).

The Office of Student Affairs and the Office of Special Services may provide for the recording of classes on behalf of a student receiving disability accommodations, missing class due to religious beliefs, or experiencing extended absence due to medical or other exigent circumstances.

The Queens College Classroom Photography and Recording Policy applies to both students and visitors. Students and visitors are not authorized to copy, download, or disseminate authorized recordings and photographs to others. Students in violation of this policy are subject to disciplinary action, and visitors in violation of this policy are subject to removal from the classroom and/or campus.

(Adopted at Queens College Academic Senate Meeting, November 14, 2024)

GRADING & ASSIGNMENTS

• Class Participation: 25%
• Midterm: 25%
• Final: 30%
• Quizzes: 10 @ 2pts each: 20% One of these "quizzes" is the Lydia Pinkham assignment; one "quiz" is also on *Merchants of Cool*

TEXTBOOK

You must have Juliann Sivulka's *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Second Edition) for this course. This will be shared via PDF early in the semester. If you prefer a physical copy, you should buy it online. You WILL need this book.
Link: https://www.amazon.com/Soap-Sex-Cigarettes-Cultural-Advertising/dp/113331113X
It is also available through QC Bookstore links.

HOMEWORK NOTE:

Each week, you have homework. Each week, you will read required book chapters, articles, web-based materials and or watch required videos. You must complete the required homework ***before*** that week's class meeting. Quizzes will be based upon your understanding of that week's homework assignments.

COURSE SCHEDULE: WEEKLY TOPICS

1/28: Week 1: Introduction
Syllabus, course structure, assignments. **What is aesthetics?** Live Survey.

In-Class Screening: *It Should Happen to You* (George Cukor, 1954)

Online Survey

2/4: Week 2: The earliest aesthetics in advertising and the Industrial Revolution (September 4)
Lydia Pinkham, one of the first influencers. Mass media history. Gutenberg's Moveable Type. The agenda of text. The emergence of mass visual culture, magazines, and national advertising. Understanding Advertising History and its impact. How is advertising magic?

For HW:
Read

- Sivulka Chapter 2: "Selling the Goods, 1880-1900". "Taste of the Time" insert, p.43 and pp: 59-77.
- Raymond Williams, "Advertising: The Magic System"

Suggested Reading:

- Karl Marx, "The Commodity" (pp. 1-2)

Assignment: Recognizing Pinkham's tactics. Due Feb. 18. Mandatory.

2/11: Week 3: Advertising at the Turn of the Century
Reading quiz 1. Kahoot. Note: the quiz is over Sivulka Chapter 3, the reading for this week.
Arts nouveau and deco, art history, and dominant forms of art and culture. Bubbles Pear's Soap. Icons, characters, mascots, and branding - racial stereotypes and inequalities. The advent of agencies.
Pinkham's Aesthetic Tactics Due

For HW: Read:

- Sivulka Chapter 3: The Consumer Economy. pp: 82-102 and 113-116.

Readings/Screenings (In Class)
● Advertising Timeline: https://adage.com/article/special-report-the-advertising-century/ad-age-advertising-century-timeline/143661

● Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920. Duke University Library Collection: https://repository.duke.edu/dc/eaa

2/18: Week 4: No MEDST 160. Follow Monday Schedule

2/25: Week 5: The Consumer Economy and Birth of Consumer Culture
Reading quiz 2.
New products and new markets are a side effect of advertising's role in consumption. Conspicuous consumption. Class differences. Aesthetics at the turn of the 20th century. The advent of cinema. The teens and twenties. Broadcast radio and World War I.

For HW: **READ**

- Sivulka Chapter 4: Roaring Twenties (pp: 125 - 145)

- *Thrift Education* (1924), excerpts, pp. 1-4; 11 (Helen Atwater's remarks on "home economics" and "thrift")

3/4: Week 6: The Consumer Economy, the 20s
Reading quiz 3. Kahoot.
The Roaring Twenties. Women's Suffrage movement. New aesthetics for women. Fashion, Refrigeration, and Mass Electricity. Frigidaire Ad and modern equivalents. Cars and a shift in priorities.

Introduce Midterm Deck Project – DUE: 3/18

● *Boardwalk Empire* (clips)

For HW: READ:
- Sivulka, Chapter 5: The Depression through WWII: 168 - 180, 184 - 199

3/11: Week 7: 1930s and 40s
Reading quiz 4. Kahoot.
Go over mid-term instructions again.
Advertising in an era of depression. Entering a war and reconfiguring the consumer. Gender roles. Kitchen appliances. Contextualizing the past before the postwar shift and the world we live in today.
For HW: READ:
- Sivulka, Chapter 6: The Postwar Boom - 1945-1960 pp. 201 - 219, 228 - 231
- Spigel, Lynn, "

3/18: Week 8:
Midterm Due
We will discuss your completed midterm projects in class.

3/25: Week 9: Contemporary American Advertising – The Creative Revolution (1960s & 1970s)
Reading Quiz 4. A cultural revolution was brewing after the immediate postwar period as suburban life meant conformity and a new generation developed reactionary aesthetics. Civil rights, JFK's assassination, the Vietnam War, and the Space Race, and color television shape a new United States. Think Small ad.

For HW: READ:
- Sivulka, Chapter 7; pp. 244-284

In-class screening: Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

4/1: Week 10: Chapter 8: Positioning: 1975-1980
Quiz 5
The new markets settle into neoliberalism, where everything is commodified and new markets emerge at the same time as completely new technology, credit cards, 24/7 news, and MTV. A new generation is the new market. Huge agencies emerge as the new Mad Men evolve advertising. Pepsi Generation ad. Apple 1984 ad. (Reminder: It's now been a century of advertising with aesthetics in mind.)
For HW: Sivulka, Chapter 8, 284-324

4/8: Week 11: The 90s
Quiz 6

Gen X defines aesthetics. Cyberpunk versus Grunge. Emo and anxiety. New aesthetics, fonts, approaches. The browser opens new doors to an infinite wonderland. Decadence, bad behavior, and new markets. Reality TV, The Matrix, Fight Club, Office Space: Gen X gets existential. Y2K. In class: *The 90s -- max*
Read: Sivulka: chapter 9, The Information Revolution 324-363

4/15: Week 12: No Class: Spring Recess

4/22: Week 13: The Aughts and the Naughties
Quiz 7
TRL, toxic masculinity, and the post 9/11 world. The early 2000s aesthetics. Midriff advertising. Abercrombie and Fitch. Facebook, Twitter, and the new digital worlds. Banner ads and targeted ads.

For HW:
Read: Sivulka, chapter 10, pp. 366-405
Watch The Full Program: *Merchants Of Cool* | FRONTLINE | PBS and respond to prompts.
Skim: 2010s Internet
& "What were the 2000s?" - by Max Read
Extra Credit: Watch *Trainwreck* | Netflix Official Site

Introduction to Structuralism: Structuralism and Semiotics: WTF? Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and Structuralism Explained (20 mins)

4/29: Week 14: Semiotics and the 2010s
Quiz 8 & 9
"The signs in media texts are read in relation to other signs and other texts in a social and cultural context. Each medium has features specific to it and features what are shared with other media. Texts and media position their audiences in particular ways. Audiences understand and enjoy the media in different and diverse ways. The negotiation of meanings between media and audiences are important in establishing terms through which we understand ourselves and our culture…We are encouraged to see ourselves, the products or services which are advertised, and aspects of our social world, in terms of mythic meanings, ads draw on and help promote… [these ads not only sell things, they] create structures of meaning, [which has traditionally been the purview of art and religion]." *Media Semiotics*

For HW: Semiotic approaches to advertising texts and strategies: Narrative, passion, marketing, Cinzia Bianchi (academic text): Semiotic approaches to advertising texts and strategies: Narrative, passion, marketing
Read:
Excerpt on Semiotics &
"Will the Millennial Aesthetic Ever End?" https://archive.ph/PSPeE

5/6: Week 15: Digital Advertising and the Aesthetics of Internet Culture
Quiz 10
The 2020s are a whole new world for aesthetics. The pandemic introduced hyper-niche "cores" and micro styles, influencers became a delivery system, and targeted ads dominated the space. The downside is partnerships that go awry (Dylan Mulvaney/MrBeast) or collabs that just don't work. Reading ads online.
For HW:

Read: "Why AI Art Will Always Kind of Suck": https://www.vox.com/culture/351041/ai-art-chatgpt-dall-e-sora-suno-human-creativity by Rebecca Jennings
And TBA on influencers

Final Project Assigned

5/13: Last Class Day
Review Final Exam Project Ideas. In-Class Discussion of Project Ideas/Plans

Final Exam Project DUE:
Final Rubric revealed on Brightspace

CUNY POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY ▪ Academic dishonesty is prohibited in the City University of New York and is punishable by penalties, including failing grades, suspension, and expulsion as provided at: http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/provost/policies/index.html.

ADA STATEMENT ▪ Students with disabilities needing academic accommodation should: (1) register with and provide documentation to the Special Services Office, Kiely 171; (2) bring a letter to the instructor indicating the need for accommodation and what type. This should be done during the first week of class. For more information about services available to Queens students contact: Pratik Patel, Special Services Office; 171 Kiely Hall; 718-997-5870 (8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.); e-mail address: pratik_patel@qc.edu.

USE OF STUDENT WORK ▪ All courses in the Perspectives on the Liberal Arts and Sciences (PLAS) program at Queens College undergo periodic reviews. For these purposes, samples of students' work are made available to those professionals conducting the review. Student anonymity is assured under these circumstances. If you do not wish to have your work made available for these purposes, please let the professor know before the start of the second class. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Plagiarism ▪ There are few academic matters more serious than plagiarism. Any written work for a college course must be wholly original, or it needs to be cited. If you take any idea from an outside source, whether it is a website, book or any media form, you must indicate where you obtained that information. Copying anything off of the Internet without noting the source is considered plagiarism. If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the instructor before submitting your work. Do not assume something is common knowledge unless it would be blatantly obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of the subject. For instance, that the famous Apple MacIntosh *1984* commercial was screened for a national audience only one time during the Super Bowl in January 1984 is widely known by people even if they have never seen the advertisement; in contrast, an interpretation of the ad - its aesthetics, its brand positioning and its use of science fiction tropes is not common knowledge. Copying materials from website and books without noting where it can be found and verified by another individual is considered plagiarism; it is not research! (Properly sourcing materials is research, using it without attribution is plagiarism.) Plagiarism is a violation of the Code Of Academic Integrity, not to mention dishonest and a form of fraud. Please take a moment and review the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy, which is available @ http://www.qc.cuny.edu/StudentLife/Pages/default.aspx

Work that is plagiarized will result in the following consequences:

i. The Student will receive an F for the assignment.
ii. Second violations will result in disciplinary action. The student will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and face possible penalties including suspension from the university.

Note on GPT use • There is no way to prevent you from accessing generative AI tools. That said, you should only use them as a start point. I am very good at identifying synthetic text and have several tools that detect AI generated writing. If you hand in something synthetic, your grade will reflect a grade that a machine deserves, not a human. Be human. You are worth it.