

Visual Literacy

Hermeneutics

This module covers the chapter on Hermeneutics in your textbook. It also serves as a concise distillation of all the chapters in the theory section of your textbook and a helpful guide for the exam.

Hermeneutics is defined as the study of interpretation. Its reach is quite wide, but the authors focus on Anthropologist Clifford Geertz to elaborate on the subject. Geertz was a famous theorist and scholar who observed and documented other cultures. One of his most famous essays dealt with the subject of illegal cockfighting in Bali, in which Geertz found a process that the Balinese used to help “define” them as a culture.

As in previous chapters, the authors point out criticism for Geertz’s approach to analyzing other culture from a “perceived” advantageous perspective. To avoid such pitfalls, they suggest that the observation of a different culture should be an endeavor to both learn from them and perhaps gain more insight into our own culture in the process.

Ultimately, the main goal of Geertz’s study was to identify the study of culture as an interpretive science rather than as a collection of scientific laws. This celebration of interpretation supports many of the theories we’ve discussed in the course thus far.

Geertz called culture “an assemblage of texts”, that cannot be viewed simply on the surface. The meaning of any cultural activity must be discerned through careful study.

I want to take an opportunity here to explore the world of comic books while we look a little deeper into the use of hermeneutics as an interpretive tool. Comic books are of course an art form and a source of entertainment, but they are also illuminating cultural texts that reveal volumes of information about the societies in which they exist.

Visual Literacy



Marvel Comics character collection

Many of us were exposed to these comic book heroes as kids, but for some adults it continues to be a lifelong interest. Beyond the original realm of comics themselves, comic book characters and story lines have become pervasive in every art form, dominating Hollywood movies and video games.



A lexicon of popular Japanese anime

Visual Literacy

Like in other forms of creative expression, comics are a huge part of many different cultures. These different approaches to the art form can transcend national boundaries. Japanese Anime, for example, is a particularly dominant force in American culture.

Beyond the original texts themselves, and the extensions of these texts in popular culture, comic books are celebrated culturally by multitudes of fans that participate in cosplay, or costume play.



Wolverine cosplayer

In groups, organizations, and huge travelling conventions, Cosplayers go far beyond simple Halloween costumes. Many players craft elaborate and meticulously designed costumes that celebrate their favorite comic book, video game, or cartoon character, thereby transforming the act of dress-up into a new art form. Well, maybe not the Wolverine guy above but...

Visual Literacy



Transformers cosplayer

Visual Literacy

From a hermeneutics perspective, what can one say about the culture of comic books? Certainly it plays a significant role in American culture and allows for a growing legion of fans to express themselves in creative ways. From the images of comics, comic-based films, television, and video games, and the cosplay discipline, how can we interpret its effects on our society?

For this week's discussion board, post an image of something found in the comic book universe. This could be anything from an original character to a cosplayer or a comic convention. It could be something you find online or perhaps one of your own pictures. Along with the image, provide a bit of hermeneutic commentary. Interpret what you feel the image reveals about our culture as a whole. If you choose an image from another culture, be sure to approach your interpretation as a visitor, so to speak. As the text suggests, review the image carefully, recognize your limitations as a distant observer of another culture, and look to glean some insight into your own culture in the process.