Assignment 1: Digital Cultures and Storytelling

Due Date: March 3, 2026
In-Class Presentation: March 5, 2026 (5-7 minutes + 3-5 minute Q&A)
Weight: 20%

Assignment Overview

This assignment asks you to apply the concepts we have explored in Modules 1 and 2 (visual grammar, representation, identity construction, memes, and political culture) through either creative practice or critical analysis. You have two options:

Option A: Photo Series / Visual Narrative

Create a sequence of images (minimum 6, maximum 12) that tells a story or explores a theme through visual composition. This series should demonstrate your understanding of visual grammar, representation, and meaning-making.

Content Guidelines:

Subject Matter (Choose One):
•Family history or personal memory
•A theme or topic that inspires you
•A current event or social issue
•An aspect of your city or community
•Any other subject that allows for meaningful visual storytelling
Creative Freedom:
•Use photographs you capture yourself OR curate from family archives/personal collections
•Combine images in any format: scanned, digital slideshow, video montage, web page, etc.
•Incorporate text, captions, or titles if desired (but not required)
•Experiment with sequencing, juxtaposition, and visual rhythm

Required Components:
1.The Photo Series (6-12 images with a clear thematic thread)
2.Title for your series
3.Artist Statement (200-300 words) addressing:
•Why did you choose this topic/theme?
•What meaning are you trying to convey?
•What conscious stylistic or compositional choices did you make?
•How do the images work together as a sequence?

In-Class Presentation (March 5):

•Present your photo series (5-7 minutes)
•Explain your creative choices and the meaning you intended to create
•Respond to questions from classmates (3-5 minutes)

Option B: Critical Essay

Write a critical essay responding to ONE of the three questions below. Each question has multiple parts designed to guide your thinking. You should draw on course readings, but you are encouraged to develop your own arguments and bring in outside examples.

Essay Questions (Choose ONE):

Question 1: From Dawkins to Digital Culture
Richard Dawkins originally defined memes as units of cultural transmission analogous to genes. In the digital age, scholars like Limor Shifman have redefined memes as collections of texts that are "circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users."
a) Explain why Dawkins' biological metaphor is inadequate for understanding digital memes.
b) How does Shifman's redefinition emphasize human agency over the "viral" metaphor?
c) Using a specific example of a meme you have encountered, analyze how it demonstrates the shift from "singular" to "plural" that Shifman describes.
d) What are the implications of this shift for how we understand creativity and authorship in digital culture?

Question 2: The Politics of Laughter
Bakhtin argued that laughter is a socially acceptable way for the less powerful to challenge authority. Hannah Arendt claimed that "the greatest enemy of authority is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter."
a) Explain how political memes function as "light critique" (Baishya) in contemporary digital culture.
b) Choose a specific political meme (from any country/context) and analyze how it uses humor to challenge power.
c) Critically evaluate the claim that memes are a "democratizing force" in political discourse. What evidence supports this claim? What evidence challenges it?
d) Discuss the phenomenon of institutional meme production (e.g., political party IT cells). What happens to the subversive power of laughter when the state becomes the meme-maker?

Question 3: Representation and Identity in the Digital Age
Stuart Hall argued that representation is not a reflection of reality but a construction of meaning through cultural codes. We have explored how this applies to social media platforms, filters, and curated online identities.

a) Explain Hall's "Constructionist" model of representation and how it differs from the "Reflective" model.
b) Analyze how a specific digital platform (Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, etc.) constructs particular representations of identity through its visual grammar and affordances.
c) Discuss the concept of the "burden of representation." How does this concept help us understand the politics of visibility for marginalized communities online?
d) Reflect on your own digital identity construction. What conscious choices do you make in representing yourself online, and what cultural codes are you drawing on?

Essay Requirements:

•Length: 1000-1200 words
•Format: Double-spaced, 12pt font
•Citations: You must engage with at least 3 course (or out of course) readings. Use any consistent citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago).
•Argument: Your essay should have a clear thesis and develop a coherent argument, not just summarize the readings.

In-Class Presentation (March 5):

•Present the key arguments of your essay (5-7 minutes)
•Explain why you chose this question and what examples you used
•Respond to questions from classmates (3-5 minutes)

Submission Instructions

By March 3, 2026:
•Option A: Submit your photo series (as a PDF, link to website/video etc.) + artist statement
•Option B: Submit your essay as a PDF or Word document
On March 5, 2026:
•Come prepared to present your work to the class
•Be ready to engage in Q&A with your peers

Important Note on Extensions

There is no possibility of extension for this assignment. The class on March 5 is the final session before spring break, and we must complete all presentations on that day. Plan accordingly.

Evaluation Rubrics

Option A: Photo Series Rubric

Conceptual Depth (30%) Visual Expression & Meaning (30%) Artist Statement (20%) Presentation & Engagement (20%)

Note: Technical quality (camera equipment, editing software, print quality) is NOT a grading criterion. Focus on expression, meaning, and conceptual development.

Option B: Critical Essay Rubric

Argument & Analysis (25%) Engagement with Course Concepts (20%) Use of Examples (20%) Writing & Organization(15%) Presentation & Engagement (20%)

Questions?

Good luck!