Media Technology Theory
Communication 384/Art History 465
Film & Media Studies 465A
Spring, 2020
Wednesdays, 3:00-5:50
Online via Zoom

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Goals:

This course aims to introduce and compare key theories of media and media technology. We hope to help you develop your own answers to such questions as, what should we study when we study media? And, how should we think about technology when we’re thinking about film, communication, and the arts? The course is a reading seminar, and in that sense will demand that you develop a rich fluency in the literatures we take up. In particular, you will develop an appreciation for the differences between humanistic and social scientific approaches to media, and for the distinctions between theory, analysis and description in otherwise empirical scholarship. Finally, we hope to help you imagine applying a variety of new theoretical lenses to your own empirical research questions.

Assignments & Grading:

The assignments in this course aim to get you to do two things simultaneously: think hard about the readings we’re doing and practice applying their approaches to areas of your own concern. Thus, you will have several sorts of writing assignments.

Individual Assignment: Imitation and Synthesis:

1. Proposal

At the start of class in Week 2 (April 15) you will need to submit a proposed topic for research in this class in a 1-2 page paper. The paper will feature a one-paragraph description of what you intend to research, and a list of places you might look for primary source materials that match the kinds of materials we’ll be thinking about in our course readings. Please also list 5 secondary sources you can consult, ideally other scholars in your field or a related field, who have written about your topic. Good topics tend to have a strong empirical base (e.g., works of art or film, events, objects, archives) and to have had at least a little scholarly attention already. They tend to be large enough to sustain a conference paper or two, but no larger.
Note: This is **not** a provisional commitment. Once we’ve approved your topic (and we may ask you to modify it), you are committed to it for the entire quarter, though you can take it anywhere you like.

Your topic should be broad enough to keep you interested for 10 weeks and narrow enough to actually yield something like a conference paper or journal article.

Your topic **does not have to be completely original.** You can definitely research something that’s already been researched. Don’t worry about trying to be too original at this point.

Your topic **may not be your dissertation topic.** Choose something similar, related, allied, or completely different, so long as you’re comfortable with the topic and it interests you. This will let you experiment more with your writing and free you from a certain amount of ego-investment in the topic.

2. **Bi-weekly Imitation Papers**

You’ll notice that the course covers four discrete bodies of literature, in two-week blocks. You’ll need to write one brief (500-800 word) paper for each block. The paper will focus on some element of or object related to the topic you chose in Week 2.

*The paper must be written in the style of one of the authors and texts we have read for that block. Choose a single aspect of a single work and do your best to imitate it.* Your job is to try to occupy the same analytical or stylistic space as the article or book, but with your own material. What you choose to mean by “style” is up to you. Is there something about the author’s prose style that is relevant? Their analytical approach or theoretical commitments? The types of source materials they use?

Papers are due before class on the following dates: April 29, May 13, May 27, June 10. Please email papers to both professors.

3. **Optional Final Synthesis**

By this point, you will have produced 12-15 pages of text, in a variety of styles. For this project, you will revise and synthesize those pieces and turn them into a single paper, with a coherent argumentative arc and style. *This is strictly an exercise in writing and revision. Please do no new research.*

You should aim to produce a paper of 1800-2000 words excluding footnotes and bibliography, suitable for presentation at a conference.

The paper will be due at your leisure. But we recommend doing it!

**Grading:**
4 short papers = 20% each

Class participation, including proposal = 20%

**Readings:**

Articles will be available as PDFs on Canvas.

*Please buy the following books online or better yet, through your local bookstore. Please be careful to get these editions; otherwise, it will be difficult to point to the same pages during class.*


**Course Schedule:**

**Week 1— April 8: Introduction: What are “media”? And what do they have to do with “technology”?**

**Readings:**

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*


**Week 2 – April 15:** Media Technologies and their Politics: Frankfurt School Part 1


**Week 3 – April 22:** Frankfurt School Part 2


**Week 4 – April 29:** Media Archaeology – Foucault, Kittler, etc. – Part 1

**DUE: Imitation Paper 1**


**Week 5 – May 6:** Media Archaeology, Part 2


Week 6 – May 13: Media Philosophy: Phenomenology, Part 1

DUE: Imitation Paper 2


Week 7 – May 20: Media Philosophy: Phenomenology, Part 2


Week 8 – May 27: Approaches from STS: Actor Network Theory

DUE: Imitation Paper 3


Week 9 – June 3: Approaches from STS: Media as Infrastructure


**Week 10 – June 10:** Some Future Directions: Ecocriticism and New Materialism

**DUE: Imitation Paper 4**

