

LMC 6316
HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO DIGITAL MEDIA
FALL 2015

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TSRB 318B (office hours by appt)

Description

Examines digital media in the context of earlier media, such as handwriting and printing as well as photography, radio, film, and television.

This seminar will focus on the historical and philosophical aspects of media and technology. In addition to the traditional historical approach to several media forms, we will focus specifically on a number of methods of the material history and analysis of media forms, the evolution of those media forms, and the ways conditions of material accident and influence affect future media.

The course will focus first on several abstract theories of the material history of media and then dive into specific historical media with those perspectives in mind. As such, the course will be very theory-intensive at first, and then settle into more concrete work about specific technologies. Our focus on digital media will be interwoven with earlier “traditional” media, in order to encourage a perspective of material context rather than a historical progress.

By the end of the course, students will be able to discuss and use several influential theories of media, and to put them to use in the historical, cultural, and material analysis of media—not to mention as inspiration and influence for media design no matter the material.

Learning Outcomes

MS in Digital Media

1. Demonstrate the ability to analyze and critically evaluate existing digital media artifacts, services, and environments using formal knowledge, and to explain and defend one's critical evaluation.
2. Analysis: Can analyze digital media as cultural objects
3. Evaluation: Can summarize their work orally and in written form using formal terminology

PhD in Digital Media

1. Students have knowledge, comprehension and ability to apply historical, cultural, and theoretical concepts to the study of digital media.
2. Knowledge: Identify the historical and cultural roots of digital media
3. Knowledge: Identify the major theoretical traditions contributing to scholarly discourse about digital media
4. Comprehension: Discuss and distinguish among historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts for digital media

5. Application: Apply theoretical concepts to specific digital media works

Requirements

This is a seminar course. That means students will be expected to thoroughly read a lot (seriously, a lot) of material each week, to discuss that material in class, and to prepare written responses to this material that will extend their individual goals.

Discussions

Weekly discussions will be serious. The following preparations are recommended. By which I mean, really, you should do this:

- Take notes from and make marginal comments in the text as you read. If you read electronically, this is harder, so find a way.
- Prepare a few specific questions about the reading for class. These can be clarifications, disputes, ideas you want to expand on or work with, etc.
- Pick out a few specific passages/quotations that seem particularly significant to you and bring those to class.
- Attempt to synthesize one or more conclusions from the text. If possible, create some you think you agree with, and some you think you do not.

Written Exercises

Each student will be expected to complete five (5) written assignments, roughly bi-weekly that address an assigned theme while engaging with the theories in the readings. These assignments will take the form of short critical essays (~1k words, and no more than 1k words.). Rather than respond to the readings directly, students will be expected to synthesize the critical material from the readings and put it to use in the service of analyzing their area of specialization/interest.

In some cases, one approach we cover will be more or less useful to your particular interest than another, thus the bi-weekly assignments, which allow you to hedge based on two weeks worth of material. The one exception is the first assignment. Everyone must write something in response to Marshall McLuhan, partly just because, partly because it'll get us started.

The idea here is not to parrot the thinker like a sage (“As McLuhan suggests, a medium is best understood by its effects on the human sensorium. This in mind...”) but to *perform* the theory by using it as a tool for analysis. This is tough to do well, and it will require practice. Given time, we will also spend some of our meeting times workshopping the writing process.

Grading

50% of the final grade: attendance and participation

50% of the final grade: written exercises

ATTENTION:

Just because you are a graduate student *does not* mean you will automatically receive an “A” in this course. You must do the work, and you must do it well.

Required Texts

These books are available at the Engineers Bookstore, or via your favorite bookseller, or via your

favorite library.

1. Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Reaktion)
2. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford)
3. Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media* (Polity)
4. Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters* (Toronto)
5. Jimmy Maher, *The Future Was Here: The Commodore Amiga* (MIT)
6. Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford)
7. Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (Penguin)
8. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Gingko, or others)
9. Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto)
10. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (MIT)
11. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard)
12. Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Polity)
13. Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Duke)
14. J.P. Telotte, *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology* (Illinois)

Schedule

(The following schedule is tentative and subject to change)

Week 1 – August 18

Introductions - Goals - Etc.

Week 2 – August 25

Media Ecology I

McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

Week 3 – September 1

German Media Theory I

Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*

Written exercise 1 due

Week 4 – September 8

Media Ecology II

McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*

Week 5 – September 15

Science Studies

Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

Week 6 – September 22

Media Archaeology

Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology*

Written exercise 2 due

Week 7 – September 29
Systems Theory
Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*

Week 8 – October 6
Photography and...
Flusser, *Philosophy of Photography*

Week 9 – October 13
No Class – Fall Break
Written exercise 3 due

Week 10 – October 20
Reading/the Book
Manguel, *The History of Reading*
Mak, *How the Page Matters* (selections)

Week 11 – October 27
Visual Media / German Media Theory II
Kittler, *Optical Media*

Week 12 – November 3
Games & Software
Montfort and Bogost, *Racing the Beam*
Written exercise 4 due

Week 13 – November 10
Sound
Sterne, *MP3*

Week 14 – November 17
Film and Animation
Telotte, *The Mouse Machine*

Week 15 – November 24
No Class – Thanksgiving week

Week 16 – December 1
The Microcomputer
Maher, *The Future Was Here*
Kittler, “There is No Software” from *Literature, Media, Information Systems* (handout)
Written exercise 5 due

Content, Debate, Diversity, and Respect

In this class, we will present and discuss a diversity of perspectives, including some on charged topics. Although you may not always agree with others' perspectives, you are required to be

respectful of others' values and beliefs. Repeated inappropriate or abusive comments and/or behavior will be cause for disciplinary action. If you feel that your perspectives are being ignored or slighted, or you in anyway feel uncomfortable in the classroom, please contact me immediately and we will find appropriate remedy.

The Communication Center

The Communication Center is located in Clough Commons, Suite 447. It is an excellent resource for any student (undergraduate or graduate) who wants help with a communication-related project. You can visit the center for help at any stage of the process for any project in any discipline. The knowledgeable and friendly tutors are available to help you develop and revise your projects. They are not available to “fix” your projects. Please do not ask the tutors to proofread or edit your projects.

For information on making an appointment please visit <http://communicationcenter.gatech.edu/content/make-appointment>. If you need assistance with the appointment system, you can call 404-385-3612 or stop by the center. All services are free and confidential.

Students with Disabilities

Students should self-report to the Access Disabled Assistance Program for Tech Students:

220 Student Services Building
Atlanta, GA 30332-0285
404.894.2564 (voice) or 404.894.1664 (voice/TDD)
www.adapts.gatech.edu/guidebook.html

Georgia Tech Honor Code

You are expected to conduct yourself according to the Georgia Tech Code of honor, which can be found here: <http://www.honor.gatech.edu>