DIGITAL MEDIA AND CULTURE

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the influence of digital technologies on the way we understand and interact with one another, and asks how digital media can determine the structure of artistic genres. We’ll consider communication from an interdisciplinary perspective, interrogating the limits and potential of a global digital milieu that establishes contemporary social, economic, and political boundaries. We will try to understand individual and collective identity markers like nationality, ethnicity, or gender in light of digital culture’s supposed facilitation of connection and community, and ask how engagement with new media has determined recent instances of political activism in the U.S.

We will also analyze diverse fictional texts, primarily in order to examine the ways in which the concept of the digital affects the form of traditional and non-traditional creative genres, like literature, film, gaming, and blogging. Each of the fictional texts we explore will directly address one or more of the course’s central themes. After defining digital culture with the help of theoretical and fictional readings, we will focus on four distinct aspects of digital cultures: Economies, conceptions of individual identity, community organization and political action, and art. Questioning the feasibility and relevance of a coherent, discrete theory of digital aesthetics will guide many of our explorations of the boundaries and possibilities of 21st-century narrative representation.

COURSE GOALS

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

• Define aspects of digital cultures using a variety of theoretical approaches
• Articulate the connection between economic production and artistic/cultural production
• Question the relationship between new media and conceptions of individualism
• Understand the way digital cultures have (re)shaped recent instances of political activism
• Discuss the effect of digital media on traditional and non-traditional creative forms

REQUIRED READINGS

Books Available at the Brandeis Bookstore
Vincent Miller, Understanding Digital Culture
Tiziana Terranova, Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age (also available online)
Gary Shteyngart Super Sad True Love Story
Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*
Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

**Excerpts, Articles, and Films Available on Latte**
Eduardo Kac, “Aspects of the Aesthetics of Telecommunications”
Richard Powers, “Being and Seeming: The Technology of Representation”
Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message” and “Media Hot and Cold”
Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “Introduction: The Anxiety of Obsolescence”
Susan Schriebman, “Digital Representation and the Hyper Real”
James Bridle, “The New Aesthetic: Waving at the Machines”
Caren Irr, “From Routes to Routers: The Digital Migrant Novel”
Adrienne Shaw, “Talking to Gaymers: Questioning Identity, Community and Media Representation”
Bruce Sterling, “An Essay on the New Aesthetic”
Mark Z. Danielewski, from *House of Leaves*
Robert Kolker, “Digital Media and the Analysis of Film”
Nardi, Schiano, Grumbrecht, “Blogging as Social Activity”
J Donath and d boyd, “Public displays of connection”
Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”
MG Chen, “Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft”
Tom Boellstorff, “Personhood”
Sherry Turkle, “Aspects of the Self”
Peter Dahlgren, “Internet and Civic Potential”
*Nightcrawler* (Gilroy, 2014)
*Her* (Jonze, 2013)

**SUGGESTED READINGS**
Jay Caspian King, “‘Our Demand is Simple: Stop Killing Us.’”
Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”
Ed Finn, “Revenge of the Nerd: Junot Diaz and the Networks of American Literary Imagination”

**ASSIGNMENTS**

**Grade Breakdown:**
Participation 10%
Latte Postings 15%
Response Essay 1 20%
Response Essay 2 20%
Final Project 25%

**Participation (10%)**
In addition to attending class and completing assignments on time, your participation in classroom discussions is key to making this a successful course. Your participation grade is comprised of your attendance and your regular contributions to class discussion.

**Latte Postings (15%)**
Throughout the semester, you’ll complete six ~300 word, informal responses to class readings. You can post responses at any time, and the lowest-graded post won’t count toward your final grade.

**Response Essay 1 (5-7 pages, 20%)**
This essay will respond directly to a single critical reading. Explain why the text is important, how it fits into the class’s recurring questions and themes, and why you did or did not find the author’s argument convincing.

**Response Essay 2 (5-7 pages, 20%)**
Using one of the techniques for digital analysis we’ve discussed in class, you’ll explore one of the creative/fictional texts on the syllabus, making an original argument about its relationship to digital culture, or about the way it employs digital media. This paper will have at least two sources: Your primary text (Shteyngart, Egan, one of our films, etc.), and a scholarly essay you use to help you critique the way the fictional text engages with one or more aspects of digital culture.

**Final Project (25%)**
You will either write a traditional research essay (10-12 pages in length), or complete a video essay (10-20 minutes in length) on one of the following broad topics:

A) the relationship between digital technology and artistic forms; or
B) one aspect of digital culture(s) that we’ve explored throughout the semester (privacy, personhood, online communities, political activism, etc).

Regardless of which media you choose to work with, your project should present an original argument that draws on original research. In class, we’ll go over what tools are available to you if you choose to produce a video essay. All students are strongly encouraged to meet with me at least once during office hours to discuss the final project.
PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

Introduction

August 28
• Course guidelines and expectations

I. Defining Digital Cultures

Discussion Questions:
• What can we identify as elements of a digital culture?
• How is our contemporary digital culture different from or similar to earlier socio-economic frameworks, such as Fordism or the post-industrialism of the 1980s?
• What is the relationship between digital culture and globalization?
• How does digital culture determine artistic production?
• Does Jonze’s imagined society in Her reflect the elements of a digital culture that Miller, Terranova, and McLuhan describe? If so, in what ways? If not, how does Jonze’s vision differ from those of the theorists?

September 1
• Miller, “Introduction” and Chapter 1: “Key Elements of Digital Media”

September 4
• Terranova, Three Propositions on Informational Cultures

September 8
• McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message”

September 11
• McLuhan, “Media Hot and Cold”

September 15
NO CLASS

September 18
II. Digital Economies

Discussion Questions:
• What is a creative economy?
• What is ‘an information society,’ and how is it distinct from previous economies rooted in labor, industry, and production?
• How might events in recent American history – the Citizens United decision, for example, or the recent civil rights movements in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere – be facilitated or complicated not only by the prevalence of digital technology and media, but by the economies that produce such technologies?
• How does Jennifer Egan represent digital economies in A Visit from the Goon Squad?

September 25
• Miller, Chapter 2: “The Economic Foundations of the Information Age”

September 29: NO CLASS (Brandeis Monday)

October 2
• Miller, Chapter 2: “The Economic Foundations of the Information Age,” continued
• Terranova, “Free Labour”
• Terranova, “Knowledge Class and Immaterial Labour”

October 6
• Terranova, “Collective Minds”
• Egan, A Visit From the Goon Squad

October 9
• Terranova, “Ephemeral Commodities and Free Labour”
• Miller, Chapter 4: “Digital Inequality: Social, Political, and Infrastructural Contexts”
• Egan, A Visit From the Goon Squad (continued)

III. Personhood and Digital Identity

Discussion Questions:
• How can digital technology determine personal identity?
• How have cultural definitions of individualism and personhood shifted in response to digital culture?
• What is the relationship between on- and offline identities or self-conceptions?
• How does Egan’s novel present individual identity as it relates to new media or technology?
• How does *Black Mirror* represent digitally determined identities?

October 13
• Boellstorff, “Personhood”
• Miller, Chapter 7: “Digital Identity”
• Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (continued)

October 16
• Turkle, “Aspects of the Self”
• Adrienne Shaw, “Talking to Gaymers”
• Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (continued)

October 20
• Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (finish)
• “The Entire History of You.”

IV. Community and Political Engagement

Discussion Questions:
• How might digital technologies constitute new communities of a kind that weren’t possible before?
• What is the relationship between online communities (of any kind) and mainstream political movement?
• Is it possible and/or desirable to maintain boundaries between on- and offline communities?
• How can new media facilitate communities that unite art and politics?
• How does Diaz’s novel represent digitally engaged or constructed communities?

October 23
• Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”
• Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

October 27
• J Donath and d boyd, “Public displays of connection”
• Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

October 30
• Nardi, Schiano, Grumbrecht, “Blogging as Social Activity”
• Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
November 3
• MG Chen, “Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft”
• Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

November 6
• Peter Dahlgren, “Internet and Civic Potential”
• Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

November 10
• Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (finish)
• Miller, Chapter 6: “Information Politics, Subversion, and Warfare”

V. Digital Aesthetics

Discussion Questions:
• How can digital technology either reinforce or weaken the traditional boundaries between artistic genres like literature and film?
• How does a work’s medium affect its content?
• Does Super Sad True Love Story constitute an example of digitally determined art? Why or why not?
• What would a coherent statement of digital aesthetics look like?

November 13
• Gary Shteyngart, Super Sad True Love Story
• Miller, Chapter 3: “Convergence and the Contemporary Media Experience”

November 17
• Gary Shteyngart, Super Sad True Love Story (continued)
• Eduardo Kac, “Aspects of the Aesthetics of Telecommunications”

November 20
• Richard Powers, “Being and Seeming: The Technology of Representation”
• Gary Shteyngart, Super Sad True Love Story (continued)

November 24:
• Susan Schriebman, “Digital Representation and the Hyper Real”
• Johanna Drucker and Bethany Nowvieske, “Speculative Computing: Aesthetic Provocations in Humanities Computing”
• Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (finish)

November 27: NO CLASS

December 1
• Robert Kolker, “Digital Media and the Analysis of Film”
• Mark Z. Danielewski, from *House of Leaves*

December 4
• *Nightcrawler*
• James Bridle, “The New Aesthetic: Waving at the Machines”

December 8
• *Nightcrawler*
• Bruce Sterling, “An Essay on the New Aesthetic”