Currents in Media Theory (Spring 2018)

FILMSTUD 252/452: Currents in Media Theory

Seminar: Prof. Shane Denson
Tue 10:30am-1:20pm   Office: McMurtry 318
Room: McMurtry 370   Office Hours: TBD
                                                      shane.denson@stanford.edu

Course Description:

This seminar explores a set of currents in media theory (and related fields), which we will seek to navigate together as a group. We will focus on approaches, discourses, conversations, and paradigms that seek to explain the mediations, modulations, and triangulations of our experience within a changing landscape of technological, social, political, and other forces. Special attention will be given to contemporary works of theory and/or works that are enjoying a renewed contemporary reception.

The course seeks to illuminate forms and phenomena of media and mediation that are central to our experience of the world. We will engage with these topics through an intensive reading program; each class session will be devoted to the close reading and discussion of a book of cutting-edge media theory.

Students will be responsible for presenting the work in connection with outside materials of their own choosing (pairing the text with artifacts, images, interfaces, artworks, etc.) that help to illuminate the theory and enrich our discussion. The final two weeks will be devoted to formal presentations of the original research conducted for students' final papers.

Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas. Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.

Required Textbooks:

Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

Shannon Mattern, *Code + Clay, Data + Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Wolfgang Ernst, *Chronopoetics: The Temporal Being and Operativity of Technological Media*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Carolyn L. Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art, and Aesthetics after Code*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Mark B. N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Shane Denson, *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014.

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Course Requirements:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.

2. Presentation (20-30 minutes) of readings and relevant media materials, followed by moderation of discussion. Your presentation should summarize readings, highlight particularly interesting or controversial aspects, and connect them to other relevant materials (texts, films, videos, artworks, etc.) and contexts, as well as formulating questions that will help focus class discussion. Your task is essentially to frame and guide our discussion of a text, and to insert that text into our larger ongoing discussion.

3. Formal presentation of original research conducted for final project. These conference-style presentations will be held in the final two weeks of class.

4. Final written project (details below).

Grading:

Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

15% Class participation and preparation

20% Presentation and Discussion of Reading

30% Formal Presentation

35% Final Paper

Final Assignment:

Term papers (5000 words) are to be submitted by **Monday, June 11, 2018 (no later than 3:15pm)**. As a prerequisite for the final paper, a 1-2 page proposal will be due in class on **May 8, 2018**; an updated proposal and outline of the project will be due along with your formal presentation of research, in the final two weeks of class (**May 29 and June 5, 2018**). In your proposal, you should outline the focus or object of your analysis, explain the specific method(s) of analysis, state your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and formulate a tentative thesis statement. The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.

2. A short description of the theoretical positions to be controverted and/or artworks, films, media, and other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not read the books or seen the films (or other media) being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis and argumentation that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as "a difference which makes a difference," and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn't make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn't belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.

3. An in-depth engagement with the texts and media objects under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. For example, in analyzing a film it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it's probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a "reading" of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn't make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis *sufficiently*. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.

4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other theoretical texts and/or other media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about media, about a given medium, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be only one or two paragraphs in length.

5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA style.

Students with Documented Disabilities:

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: **http://oae.stanford.edu**).

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Course Schedule:

04.03. Media and/as Cultural Techniques
Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real.*

04.10. Media Archaeology 1: Urban Media
Shannon Mattern, *Code + Clay, Data + Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media.*

04.17. Media Archaeology 2: Technical Time(s)
Wolfgang Ernst, *Chronopoetics: The Temporal Being and Operativity of Technological Media.*

04.24. Media Aesthetics 1: Data and Vision
Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945.*

05.01. Media Aesthetics 2: Network Forms
Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics.*

05.08. Media Aesthetics 3: Color and Code (Research Proposals Due!)
Carolyn L. Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art, and Aesthetics after Code.*

05.15. Media Out-of-Mind 1: Worldly Sensibility
Mark B. N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media.*

05.22. Media Out-of-Mind 2: The Cognitive Nonconscious
N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious.*

05.29. Presentations
Formal presentations of research.

06.05. Media as Mediators of Cosmos and Culture
Shane Denson, *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface* (Part 2).

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06.11. Final Papers Due! (by 3:15pm)