FILMSTUD 173: Digital and Interactive Media (Winter 2020)

Lecture:
Mon, Wed: 10:30am-11:50am
Room: McMurtry 102 (Oshman Hall)

Professor: Shane Denson
Pronouns: he/him/his
Office: McMurtry 318
Office Hours: TBD
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Course Description:

This course introduces a variety of ways of thinking about digital and interactive media. As examples, we will think about the impact of algorithmic processes on cinema and other moving-image media; we will consider the relation of narrative to interactivity in videogames and related forms; and we will look carefully at the perceptual and embodied relations of human users to computational systems of various sorts. Engaging with a wide range of historical and contemporary media forms (including those used for entertainment, artistic expression, social interaction, politics, work, play, and other things in between), this course hopes to illuminate the transformative roles that digital and interactive media play in our lives.

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

Required Textbooks:

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer.* [1984]. New York: Ace / Penguin Random House, 2018 (or any available edition).

Denson, Shane, and Julia Leyda, eds. *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film.* Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016. PDF online: https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/POST-CINEMA_LO_RES.pdf

Additional readings (listed in the course schedule) will be made available via Canvas.

Course Requirements and Grading:

For 3 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. 20% of your grade.

2. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 80% of your final grade.

For 4 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. 20% of your grade.

2. Two short written responses (250 words) to a reading or lecture of your choice. These will count for 15% of your final grade.

3. A close reading (750-1000 words) of a movie, game, app, or other digital and/or interactive media object. This will count for 15% of your grade.

4. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 50% of your final grade.

For 5 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. 20% of your grade.

2. Two short written responses (500 words) to a reading or lecture of your choice. These will count for 15% of your final grade.

3. Two close readings (750-1000 words) of a movie, game, app, or other digital and/or interactive media object. These will count for 15% of your grade.

4. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 50% of your final grade.

Guidelines for Final Papers/Projects:

Final papers (8-10 pages, double-spaced) are to be submitted by **March 19, 2020, 6:30 pm (electronic submission)**.

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 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 seen the works 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 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 of a film 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 analysis of the media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, 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 films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, 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 one paragraph in length.

5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA or other major style guidelines.

If, in lieu of one of a paper, you plan to produce a **critical media project** of some sort (e.g. video essay, website, or other type of project that engages critically with the themes and ideas of the course), you will need to outline your idea in writing and receive prior approval from the instructor. The project itself should be accompanied by a short written statement outlining the significance and critical potential of the project with respect to the course and the theories and approaches we have explored.

Writing Help:

In addition to the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking, the Art and Art History Department also has a more local resource for student-writers. The Department's Writing Specialist, Dr. Becky Richardson, is available to our class for workshops and individual consultations over writing and presentation projects. You can bring any stage of the project in for consultation – from brainstorming around a prompt, to outlining your essay's structure, to reviewing a draft, to revising a piece of writing for a journal of undergraduate writing, such as *Manicule*. You can set these appointments up directly by emailing beckyr@stanford.edu.

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**).

Digital and Interactive Media (Winter 2020)

Laptop, Phone, and Media Policy:

The use of laptops, tablets, phones, and other devices, while not forbidden, is not encouraged in lectures, except when they are integral to specific activities and assignments, or in cases where they may be an important documented accommodation that helps you to participate fully. I understand that many of you read or take notes on an electronic device, but these same devices are often a major distraction in class, both for you and your peers. There is literature that supports this claim, including C. B. Fried, "In-Class Laptop Use and Its Effects on Student Learning," *Computers and Education* 50.3 (2008): 906-914. Especially in the context of a class in the theory and study of media, however, I do not expect you to accept this claim uncritically. Rather, I suggest approaching it experimentally: Pay attention to what it feels like to attend to lectures without laptops and other devices. What is lost or gained when you take notes by hand, rather than on an electronic device?

Please note that you do not have permission to record audio or video in class.

Course Schedule:

Week 1

01.06.   Introduction: Digital? Interactive? Media?

01.08.   Imag(in)ing Digital and Interactive Media
READINGS: William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

Week 2

01.13.   Digital Images/Images of the Digital
READINGS: Lev Manovich, "What is Digital Cinema?" (in Denson and Leyda, *Post-Cinema*)

01.15.   Post-Cinema
READINGS: Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, "Perspectives on Post-Cinema" (in Denson and Leyda, *Post-Cinema*)

Week 3

01.20.   No Class – Martin Luther King Jr. Day

01.22.   The Uncertain Place of the Digital Spectator
Steven Shaviro, "Post-Continuity: An Introduction" (in Denson and Leyda, *Post-Cinema*)

Week 4

01.27.   Screen Time(s)
READINGS: Neta Alexander, "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's 'Predictive Personalization' and the Mathematization of Taste" (on Canvas)

01.29.   Screen Time(s) II
READINGS: Adrian Mackenzie, "Codecs" (on Canvas)

Week 5

02.03.   Re-Imagining Animation
READINGS: Deborah Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus*, chapters 1 and 2 (on Canvas)

Digital and Interactive Media (Winter 2020)

02.05. Glitches, Ghosts, and Networked Horror
READINGS: Julia Leyda, "Demon Debt: *Paranormal Activity* as Recessionary Post-Cinematic Allegory" (in Denson and Leyda, *Post-Cinema*)

Week 6

02.10. Post-Cinematic Realism
READINGS: Marwan Kraidy, "The Projectilic Image: Islamic State's Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect" (on Canvas)

02.12. Media at the End of the World
READINGS: Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence'" (in Denson and Leyda, *Post-Cinema*)

Week 7

02.17. No Class – President's Day

02.19. Interactivity, Games, and Narrative
READINGS: Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories?" (on Canvas)

Week 8

02.24. Games, Platforms, and Players
READINGS: Nick Montfort, "Combat in Context" (on Canvas)

02.26. Players, Avatars, and Identifications
READINGS: Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis" (on Canvas)

Week 9

03.02. Games, Gender, and Queer Interactions
READINGS: Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Introduction (on Canvas)

03.04. Games and Art
READINGS: Felan Parker, "Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate" (on Canvas)

Week 10

03.09. Games and Metagames
READINGS: Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming*, Chapter 4: "Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers: Serial Histories of *Super Mario Bros.*" (on Canvas)

03.11. Towards a Critical Theory of Interactive Media
READINGS: Mckenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*, Chapter: "Allegory (On *The Sims*)" (on Canvas)

Finals Week

03.19. Final Paper/Project Due by 6:30pm!