

Updating Cyberspace

(Revised syllabus for a seminar taught in the Global Cultural Studies major at Duke University in Spring 2015.)

Instructor: David Rambo

Course Description

“Cyberspace,” coined in the 1980s by science-fiction author William Gibson, refers to the representation of the dimensions through which computers and their users communicate. Since then, not only have other artists iterated on the idea, cyberspace has itself been realized in a variety of ways. This course investigates the tensions and inspirations between the sci-fi imaginary of cyberspace and the actual development of networked computers. Rather than frame cyberspace in terms of a virtual world contrasted with a real world, we will consider to what extent cyberspace exists part and parcel with our everyday experience. From machines that augment human perception to systems composing financial markets dominated by high-frequency trading, the “cyber” extends well beyond the confines of *The Matrix*. Science-fiction author Bruce Sterling contends that cyberspace came into existence with networks of telephones. This take on cyberspace foregrounds a human element, the voice, without which the communal, networked space would disintegrate, nothing but poles and cables remaining. How far does the human extend into that science (fictional) realm of cyberspace? But with ubiquitous computing and the subperceptual speeds of contemporary capitalism’s technological infrastructures, the question changes to: “How far *can* the human extend into cyberspace?”

With the figure of cyberspace as its focus, the class serves as an introduction to media theory and several subfields within media studies including human-machine interfaces and media phenomenology, infrastructure studies, feminist and queer-theoretical approaches to new media, and game studies. We will interrogate the basic assumptions about technological development and about humanity’s various relations to that technology. How does the body engage with technical networks, and what does it mean to live, think, and define oneself through technology? What roles do gender and sexuality play in the aesthetic conceptualization of cyberspace? How have the standards of human experience impacted the cultural imaginary of technoscience, and how have computational devices and procedures transformed human life in fantasy and in fact? What do we take for granted or treat as natural when we participate in technical systems, whether they be the internet, language, bureaucracy, or “virtual” reality?

We shall pay close attention to the ethical valuation of networking technologies in terms of human intimacy, intellectual labor, community formation, surveillance and privacy, and technological determinism. In what ways and in which contexts do computational networks either undermine or complement communal lifestyles? How has the concrete development of the Internet—from the industries that shape and exploit it to the communities that inhabit it—extended patriarchal values and racist perspectives? We will engage with these themes through novels, theoretical texts, historical documents, and films, all of which exemplify the technical mediation of human life on both an experiential and a social level.

Assignments

A total of six 300-word expository posts on the Sakai course website about the reading material one day ahead of our class meeting. Responses to other students’ posts can fulfill this

assignment so long as the responses present original thinking. (20% of grade)

Two 1,000-word papers will be assigned with a preliminary draft of one to two pages to be peer-reviewed in class. Because the goal is to improve your writing and the integrity of your critical thinking, these papers will be open to revision for a new grade. (40% of grade)

The final assignment begins with a one-page, single-spaced prospectus for a final project. This may be either a traditional paper of six to eight pages (2,500 words) or a multimodal project with a written component. (25% of grade)

Participation in class discussions and in the writing workshops amounts for 15% of your class grade. As a seminar and not a lecture course, our class meetings are intended to be a dialogue that will prepare and extend your writing practice. I encourage students who are at ease with speaking in class to practice listening so that their less gregarious peers may have more opportunities to participate.

Required Texts

- Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends* (1994)
- Daniel Suarez, *Daemon* (2007)
- Robert Harris, *The Fear Index* (2012)

Other texts and films will be made available through campus resources. I do, however, recommend acquiring the following texts, should you be interested in reading beyond what is selected for class readings:

- William Gibson, *Burning Chrome* (1986).
- Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming* (University of Minnesota Press 2017).
- *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, edited by Gill Kirkup and Linda Janes (Routledge 1999).
- Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press 1994, orig. 1964).
- Judy Wajcman, *TechnoFeminism* (Polity 2004).
- Carlen Lavigne, *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction* (2013).
- Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (University Press of Kansas 2007).
- Safiya U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018).
- N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (University of Chicago Press 2017).
- Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (MIT Press 2016).

Schedule

1/8

Introduction to course. Overview of requirements and assignments.
Excerpt from Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*.

Week 1

1/13

William Gibson, “The Winter Market” and “Burning Chrome,” in *Burning Chrome*.

1/15

Marshall McLuhan, from Part 1 of *Understanding Media* (pp.3–21, 41–47, 56–73)

Week 2

1/20

Selections from *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*: Ch.7: Norbert Weiner, “Cybernetics in History,” Ch.8: J.C.R. Licklider, “Man-Computer Symbiosis,” Ch.13: Alan Kay, “User Interface: A Personal View”

1/22

N. Katherine Hayles, “Prologue” (xi-xiv) and “2. Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers” (25-49), in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999).

Week 3

1/27

Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends*

1/29

Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends*

Week 4

2/3

Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism*, Preface, Ch.1: “Male Designs on Technology,” Ch.3: “Virtual Gender,” and “Towards Technofeminism” in Ch.5 (pp.108-116).

Anne Balsamo, “Reading Cyborgs, Writing Feminism,” in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* (2000), pp.148-58.

Carlen Lavigne, Ch.4: “Gendered Flesh: Embodiment and Virtual Reality,” in *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction* (2013).

2/5

Wendy Chun and Sarah Friedland, “Habits of Leaking: Of Sluts and Network Cards,” *differences* (2015) 26 (2): 1-28.

Caroline Bassett, “Feminism, Expertise, and the Computational Turn,” in *Renewing Feminism*

Week 5

2/10

Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”

Recommended:

Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism*, Ch.4 “The Cyborg Solution,” esp. pp.78-83

Paper 1 Assigned

2/12

Mark Hansen, from *New Philosophy for New Media*, Ch. 5 “What’s Virirtual about VR?”

‘Reality’ as Body-Brain Achievement”

Recommended: Timothy Crick, “The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,” *Games and Culture* 6.3 (2010), pp.259-69.

Week 6

2/17

Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, Ch.3: “Blind Spots: *The Phantom Pain*, *The Hellen Keller Simulator*, and Disability in Games,” from *Metagaming*, pp.121-170.

2/19

Paper 1 Workshop

Week 7

2/24

Adrienne Shaw, “What Is Video Game Culture? Games Studies and Cultural Studies” *Games and Culture* 5(4), 2010, pp.403-424.

Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, Ch. 3: “Machinic Subjects,” in *Games of Empire*, pp.69–94.

Paper 1 Due

2/26

Boluk and LeMieux, Ch.6: “Breaking the Metagame: Feminist Spoilsports and Magic Circle Jerks,” from *Metagaming* (pp.275-289)

Adrienne Massanari, “#gamergate and the Fappening: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures,” *New Media & Society*, 19.3 (2017), pp.329-346.

Week 8

3/3

Film: Spike Jonze, *Her* (2013)

Taina Bucher, Ch.3: “Neither Black nor Box,” from *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (2018).

3/5

Introduction to Parks, L., & Starosielski, N. *Signal traffic: critical studies of media infrastructures* (2015), pp.1-17.

Tung-Hui Hu, “Introduction” and Ch.2: “Time-Sharing and Virtualization,” *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (2015), pp.ix-xxix, 37-71.

Week 9

Spring Break

Week 10

3/17

Daniel Suarez, *Daemon*

Paper 2 Assigned

3/19

Daemon, continued.**Week 11**

3/24

Jane Abbate, Ch.3: "'The Most Neglected Element': Users Transform the ARPANET," *Inventing the Internet* (2000).

Ted Friedman, from *Electric Dreams* (2005): selections from Introduction and Ch.7 "Imagining Cyberspace."

Stalcup, M. (2016). "The Aesthetic Politics of Unfinished Media: New Media Activism in Brazil." *Visual Anthropology Review*, 32(2): 144-156.

3/26

Robert Harris, *The Fear Index*, first half.**Paper 2 Workshop****Week 12**

3/31

The Fear Index, finish.**Paper 2 Due.**

4/2

N. Katherine Hayles, "The Cognitive Nonconscious: Enlarging the Mind of the Humanities," *Critical Inquiry*, 42.4 (2018), pp.783-808.

N. Katherine Hayles, Ch.6 "Temporality and Cognitive Assemblages: Finance Capital, Derivatives, and High-Frequency Trading," *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (2017).

Week 13

4/7

Safiya U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (2018): "Introduction" (pp.1-14), Ch.3 "Searching for People and Communities" and Ch.4 "Searching for Protections from Search Engines" (pp.110-33), and "Epilogue" (pp.183-86).

4/9

Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*, Ch. 1: "Introduction" (pp.1-21) and Ch. 8 "iMonitoring: Keeping Track of One Another" (pp.212-240)
Black Mirror, Series 1, Episode 3, "The Entire History of You" (2011)

Bring in an idea for final project—just a few sentences.**Week 14**

4/14

Anden-Papadopoulos, K. (2014). "Citizen camera-witnessing: Embodied political dissent in the age of 'mediated mass self-communication'." *New Media & Society*, 16(5): 753-769

Debra Stratman's short film, *In Order Not To Be Here* (2002)

4/16

Prospectus for Final Project Due. We will workshop these today.

Week 15

4/21 **Conclusion and discussion of final projects**