

Media Aesthetics

Media and fiction since 1900

A graduate seminar

English 506 + CSPT 500 | UVic

Spring 2020 | R 1:30-4:20pm

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jentery.github.io/506/ (PDF)

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Description

Media are frequently treated as means in the business of making records. They help to verify communication occurred. *Did you get my message?* They also help to confirm meaning. *Do you understand it?* Such treatments tend to economize experience. Media should, for instance, facilitate the seizure and extraction of information. *Take a video. Capture some audio. Grab an image before it's gone.* They should function as proof. *I saw this. I heard that. I was there.* They should be efficient. *Give me the tl;dr.* They should secure consensus. *Don't you agree?* And they should accumulate and produce value. *Am I on brand?*

This seminar accounts for the records business to move beyond it. That move is called "media aesthetics." Step one is speculation, and step two is attending to an apparatus—from economical communication to possible communications to how we even communicate. If economical communication verifies occurrence and confirms understanding, then speculation operates in the subjunctive. *What if communication were something else?* Here, resistance, refusal, storytelling, and figurative language become potential alternatives to economized experience, as each may brush against the desire for efficiency. An apparatus prompts us to consider why and how. It joins the economical with the subjunctive by producing relations between them. An apparatus is not some underlying structure or ideal form. It's an agent for content and design, and it's often right in front us, like an interface—there, yet impossible to grasp. During seminar, I'll suggest that the key

ingredients of an apparatus are *measurement, movement, sense, and making sense*, and we'll assess how apparatuses discipline and standardize experience while affording experimentation and speculation. We'll examine five apparatuses in particular (grids, editors, networks, stacks, and engines), though we'll need something to ground us and all our abstractions.

What else but fiction to put us on the same page? We'll study media through discussions of radio dramas, fantasy, science fiction, comics, games, and experimental literature from the 20th and 21st centuries. Call it escapism, if you wish; however, these fictions will be quite useful for understanding apparatuses and the economization of experience today. For one, they will nudge us to listen, watch, see, and play as well as read. They will also position audio, image, and text as *congealed labour*: processes and techniques rather than objects and instruments. From this position, we'll approach aesthetics as a question of embodied perception and sensation, and we'll talk about how some experiences of fiction are singular and others are shared. Fiction will also be a site for speculation and worldbuilding, and for stressing why both the content and design of the subjunctive matter. We'll ask what audio, image, and text mean and verify in fiction, but also what they do and, if you're so inclined, what they want. Perhaps most important, we'll consider aesthetics and politics together. How and under what assumptions are media and fiction categorized? How do media encourage and even rationalize particular ways of engaging fiction? How do we compose with, against, and even beyond the apparatuses that dominate cultural production?

This is not a technical course. The assignments are open to media practice (such as the composition of audio and video) without requiring it. The seminar does not involve any quantitative or computational methods, either. By "media," I mean "audio, image, and text," not "the media" or mass communications and their outlets. And by "media aesthetics," I mean the practice of evaluating how design and content are apprehended, comprehended, synthesized, and reproduced. In this case, we'll evaluate the design and content of fiction.

Aims

This seminar is an opportunity for us to attend to how:

- Media are things and processes rather than "withdrawn" objects, resources on reserve, instruments of control, or purely subjective experiences.
- Media are entwined with discipline and experimentation and therefore prompt important questions about the viability of not only critical distance but also romantic (or individualist) creativity.
- Media and fiction are embodied social relations, not causes, effects, means, or autonomous works or structures.
- Content and context have agency; fiction and history are not messages merely contained or transmitted by media.
- Materials and experience have agency, too, hence the relevance of design to media and fiction.
- Dichotomies such as analogue/digital, print/electronic, and static/interactive tend to be problematic categorizations of media and fiction.

- Media and fiction morph together over time, with effects on how we define periods (modernism and postmodernism, for example).
- We communicate and speculate both with and through media and fiction.

The seminar contributes to your graduate education in English and/or Cultural, Social, and Political Thought by asking you to:

- Watch, see, read, play, and listen to assigned materials. Here, my aim is to create a space for you to practice multimodal and comparative approaches to media and fiction.
- Design a seminar project or essay with feedback from your peers and me. Here, my aim is to create a space for you to practice planning, drafting, and revising short- and long-form communications.
- Compose a seminar project or essay, supported by an annotated bibliography and genealogy, on a topic relevant to media aesthetics. Here, my aim is to create a space for you to practice making, supporting, expressing, and refining a long-form argument with a particular audience in mind.
- Present a seminar project or essay on a topic relevant to media aesthetics. Here, my aim is to create a space for you to practice giving talks and participating in question-and-answer sessions.
- Co-facilitate (with your peers and me) seminar discussions about assigned topics and materials. Here, my aim here is to create a space for you to practice sparking and sustaining conversations about media and fiction.

I hope this approach to the seminar offers you room to experiment with your own take on media aesthetics. If you find that it does not, then please let me know, and I'll adjust my approach accordingly.

Background

My name is Jentery Sayers. I'm an associate professor of English and Cultural, Social, and Political Thought (CSPT), and I direct the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies. I've been at UVic since 2011, and I did my PhD at the University of Washington. Most of my work is in comparative media studies. I teach American fiction, cultural studies, media, materialism, and prototyping at UVic.

I designed this course to correspond with similar research and teaching efforts in UVic's Department of English, including work in literary studies, but also textual studies, book history, and film studies, where questions of mediation are central to scholarly analysis. As part of the CSPT concentration, this course is also an attempt to enact theory, such as posthumanist and (new) materialist theories, in studies of media and fiction. One result of this attempt is less emphasis on distinct media and formats (such as books and film) and more attention to how media work across genres, experiments, and categories, hence the use of "media aesthetics" in the title instead of, say, "electronic literature," "interactive fiction," "audio fiction," "games," or "graphic novels," each of which admittedly warrants a course unto itself. Finally, this seminar builds on previous "prototyping" seminars I've taught at UVic and is meant to serve a rather practical function by offering opportunities

for you to approach material across modes (listening, seeing, playing, watching, and reading) and to iteratively develop a project or essay that aligns with your own interests in media aesthetics. This project or essay may speak primarily to academic audiences, or it may have a non- or para-academic context in mind.

Whatever your ultimate approach, the location of this seminar at UVic is key. The Department of English includes options for graduate students to complete MA essays or MA projects, and the university as a whole has a rich history of engaging media, broadly understood. From Special Collections to the Digital Scholarship Commons, you should have a chance to integrate your work with what's happening elsewhere on campus. This seminar and its background aim to prepare you for such integration by presenting you with *a framework for media praxis* as it pertains to fiction in particular and communication in general. Perhaps, for you, praxis leans toward theory, technique, narrative, history, design, or . . . I'm thus excited to see what you do with the framework and how you change and redirect it.

Structure

The first week of this seminar is intended mostly for introductions. We'll meet each other, and I'll review the syllabus and speak to the point of the course. Then we'll talk about media aesthetics and survey what we're studying this term. I'll conclude by sharing with you some relevant methods for approaching media and fiction.

After Week 1, most weeks will include one or two modules organized around key issues in media aesthetics and communication. I'll express those issues through questions or remarks that we might often hear or read. For example:

- "Did You Get My Message?" (a module on messengers, curation, and relating with others)
- "Who's Calling?" (a module on broadcasting, decoding, and colonial dissemination)
- "Is Anyone Listening?" (a module on acousmatic voices, gaslighting, and shouting into the abyss)
- "You Already Said That." (a module on memory, playback, and emotional rapport with machines)
- "Property of . . ." (a module on graphic diaries, cross-hatching, and true stories that never happened)
- "Click Here." (a module on links, forks, and portals)
- "I'd Prefer Not To." (a module on menus, refusal, and the design of encounters)

Each module corresponds with a particular work of fiction that will serve as a case study or "tutor text," if you will.

The middle of the term (immediately after reading break) is dedicated to composing (or arguing) with and through media as a form of scholarship. I'll detail some approaches, and we'll look at some examples by scholars of media and fiction.

The end of the term is dedicated to your presentations (penultimate meeting) and workshopping your projects (last meeting). We'll also recap the seminar and our discussions of media aesthetics during the last meeting. Somewhere between the middle and the end, I'll ask you to meet with me to discuss your final project or essay. I'll give you two weeks after our last meeting to finalize and submit your project or essay.

Materials

I'm asking you to access most materials online via their URLs or a passcode-protected reader I've compiled. (See me for the ID and passcode.) Links are provided in the [schedule](#).

Here's a list of what we're studying this term (in the order of when we're studying them):

- Nalo Hopkinson's "Message in a Bottle" (2005)
- N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015) (selections)
- Colin Grant's BBC documentary, *Caribbean Voices* (2009)
- Lucile Fletcher's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1943)
- Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1911/1925; recorded in 1935) (selections)
- Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958)
- Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006)
- Emil Ferris's *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* (2017) (selections)
- Marina Kittaka's *Secrets Agent* (2014)
- Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop's *Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Digital Literature* (2015)
- Amanda Strong and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes)* (2019)
- micha cárdenas and Bobby Bray's *Redshift & Portalmetal* (2014)
- Avery Alder's *Simple World* (2013)
- Porpentine Charity Heartscape and Brenda Neotenie's *With Those We Love Alive* (2014)
- Fulbright's *Gone Home* (2013)
- Toby Fox and Temmie Chang's *Undertale* (2015)
- Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *MOOD OF THE MOMENT* (2007)

Please purchase Alison Bechdel's [Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic](#). It should be at the UVic Bookstore.

I recommend purchasing the following:

- Emil Ferris's [My Favorite Thing Is Monsters](#) (also at the UVic Bookstore)
- N.K. Jemisin's [The Fifth Season](#)
- Toby Fox and Temmie Chang's [Undertale](#)
- Fulbright's [Gone Home](#)

Of note, you can play *Gone Home* and *Undertale* with friends and watch gameplay videos of them online.

Alongside these materials, I've dedicated a section of this syllabus to [notes](#). I'll populate that section as the term unfolds. I don't plan to use slides during seminar; however, I will include in our discussions various snippets of audio, image, and text from assigned fictions. As you study them, I recommend doing the same: consider screengrabs, sound clips, photographs, video, and whatnot for your own records and reference. If you'd like advice on archiving and annotating media, then let me know.

You'll notice that most of the assigned materials are from the 21st century. I made these selections in part because I think (or hope) they will spark some engaging, if not pressing, seminar discussions about speculation and the apparatuses of media and fiction; however, we'll still account for history in this course. For instance, during most modules I'll provide overviews of where the assigned materials "fit," and how, in media, fiction, and theory since 1900. I should also mention that my selections reflect an investment in narrative and storytelling. I did not include, for example, any artist's books or poetry, both of which are obviously relevant to studies of media and literature.

Schedule

Here's the schedule for the term. I will notify you during seminar at least two weeks in advance of any changes. When materials are not open access or in the public domain, I abide by fair dealing guidelines. I also contributed to the artists' Patreon accounts, where applicable.

To keep us on schedule, expect an email from me to everyone in the seminar once (and only once) per week. That weekly email should also encourage transparency and help us all plan ahead.

January 9th

What's This All About?: on the point of this seminar

Did You Just Say "Aesthetics"?: on sense and making sense, including some methods for media aesthetics

Please select the date and assigned material(s) for your first co-facilitation. I'll circulate a sign-up sheet.

January 16th

Did You Get My Message?: on messengers, curation, and relating with others (media: text; apparatus: network)

Please read Nalo Hopkinson's ["Message in a Bottle"](#) (2005).

Dear You: on worldbuilding, structural oppression, and being addressed (media: text; apparatus: engine)

Please read selections from N.K. Jemisin's [The Fifth Season](#) (2015), which is the first book in Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy.

January 23rd

Who's Calling?: on broadcasting, decoding, and colonial dissemination (media: audio, text; apparatus: editor, network)

Please listen to part one of Colin Grant's BBC documentary, *Caribbean Voices* (2009), about Una Marson, *Calling the West Indies*, and the *Caribbean Voices* radio program (1943-58).

Is Anyone Listening?: on acousmatic voices, gaslighting, and shouting into the abyss (media: audio, text; apparatus: editor, network)

Please listen to Lucile Fletcher's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1943).

January 30th

You Already Said That: on texture, snapshots, and novels that aren't novels (media: audio, text; apparatus: editor)

Please listen to all 14 selections / fragments from Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1911/1925; recorded at Columbia University's Speech Lab in 1935; care of PennSound).

You Already Said That: on memory, playback, and emotional rapport with machines (media: audio, text; apparatus: editor)

Please watch a video of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1958, with Patrick Magee as Krapp and Donald McWhinnie directing).

Please select the date and assigned material(s) for your second co-facilitation. I'll circulate a sign-up sheet.

February 6th

What Are You Reading Next?: on archives, allusions, method cartooning, and entwining the personal with the political (media: text, image; apparatus: grid, editor)

Please read Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006).

February 13th

Property of . . . : on graphic diaries, cross-hatching, and true stories that never happened (media: image, text; apparatus: grid)

Please read selections of Emil Ferris's *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* (2017).

In a World . . . : on voice-over, wayward guides, puzzles, and presence (media: image, audio; apparatus: stack, editor)

Please play Marina Kittaka's *Secrets Agent* (2014) for at least 30 minutes.

Please submit your annotated bibliography today.

February 20th

Buffering . . .: on ellipses and waiting

It's reading break. There's no seminar this week.

February 27th

Composing with Media: on integrating media and design into your scholarship

Please read "Introduction to *Pathfinders*" and "Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*" in Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop's *Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Digital Literature* (2015).

Composing through Media: on treating media and design as your scholarship

Please watch Amanda Strong and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes)* (2019) and read / play micha cárdenas and Bobby Bray's *Redshift & Portalmetal* (2014).

We'll visit the [Obsolete Computing and Media](#) collection in the library.

Please select the date and assigned material(s) for your third co-facilitation. I'll circulate a sign-up sheet.

March 5th

I Followed the Rules: on roleplay, executable language, and protocols for action (media: text; apparatus: engine)

Please prototype a game using Avery Alder's *Simple World* (2013). You may also want to check out games made with the [Powered by the Apocalypse](#) engine.

Please schedule a time to meet with me (20-30 minutes) about your project or essay.

March 12th

Click Here: on links, forks, and portals (media: text, image, audio; apparatus: stack, network)

Please read / play Porpentine Charity Heartscape and Brenda Neoténomie's *With Those We Love Alive* (2014) for at least 45 minutes.

Insert Yourself Here: on simulation and the everyday paranormal (media: text, image, audio; apparatus: engine, grid)

Please play [Fulbright's Gone Home](#) (2013) for at least 90 minutes.

Please submit your genealogy today.

March 19th

I'd Prefer Not To: on menus, refusal, and the design of encounters (media: text, image, audio; apparatus: grid, editor)

Please play [Toby Fox and Temmie Chang's *Undertale*](#) (2015) for at least 90 minutes.

Cannot Open File: on being deprecated (media: text, image, audio; apparatus: stack, editor)

Please read and watch [Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *MOOD OF THE MOMENT*](#) (2007). Try this [URL](#) if the first one doesn't work in your browser.

March 26th

Like and Subscribe: on attention economics in the academy

Please present an overview of your project or essay during seminar. Your presentation will be followed by a Q&A session and feedback.

April 2nd

What Happened?: on productivity and portfolios

We'll review what we did this term and discuss the use of portfolios in media and fiction studies. Then you'll workshop your projects and essays.

Please submit your project or essay by Thursday, April 16th (two weeks from today).

Prompts

I'm asking you to submit the following assignments this term:

- Three co-facilitations of seminar discussion: each 5% of your final mark
- An annotated bibliography of work related to a specific media and fiction technique: 15% of your final mark
- A genealogy of that technique: 20% of your final mark
- A presentation related to your final project or essay: 15% of your final mark
- Final project or essay: 35% of your final mark

I will provide in this section of the syllabus a prompt and rubric for each of these assignments. Please email me your bibliography, genealogy, and final project or essay in PDF, where possible. (I realize that most projects probably won't export to PDF.) If you have materials from your co-facilitations and/or presentation, then please email me those documents, too.

Notes

As the term unfolds, I will share in this section notes, handouts, and reflections from seminar. Expect new content here almost every week of seminar.

Policies

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for this seminar. It is part of the English graduate program (MA and PhD) and Cultural, Social, and Political Thought concentration (MA and PhD). It's a special topics course (English 506, Studies in Literary Theory: Special Topic).

Assessment

The genealogy and final project or essay are required to pass this course. Failure to complete these two assignments will result in a failing N grade (calculated as a 0 for your GPA).

I will use the Faculty of Graduate Studies' [official grading system](#) to produce rubrics for each assignment and assess your work. I do not post marks outside my office, and I do not use plagiarism detection software.

Late Submissions and Extensions

If you need to request an extension or you're concerned about the possibility of a late submission, then please email me. I recommend that you do not fall behind on any assignment, if possible, but I understand that extensions may be necessary for numerous reasons. I will comment on all assigned work I receive from you during the term, regardless of when it's submitted.

Communications

The best way to communicate with me is in person, either by appointment or during my office hours, which are Mondays, 1-3pm, in CLE D334. You are also welcome to email me at jentery@uvic.ca. I respond to work email between 9am and 5pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

I'm asking you to meet with me at least once outside of seminar this term. We'll take 20-30 minutes to discuss your final project or essay.

Feedback

I will provide feedback by email on each assignment. Feedback on your co-facilitations may be bundled with feedback on other assignments, such as the bibliography and genealogy.

Throughout the term, I'll request feedback (verbal and in writing) from you on how the seminar is going. I'll also ask you to complete Course Experience Surveys at the end of the term (during our last meeting).

Attendance and Participation

Weekly attendance in graduate seminars is expected. If you must miss a meeting, then please notify me ahead of time by email. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence may result in your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions and workshops are part of fulfilling the course requirements. I will notify the Graduate Adviser if you have three or more unwarranted absences.

Laptops and Mobile Devices

Laptops and mobile devices are welcome in (but not required for) this seminar.

Learning Climate

The University of Victoria is committed to promoting, providing, and protecting a positive, supportive, and safe working and learning environment for all its members. You and I are expected to adhere to [UVic's equity and human rights policies](#). You should alert me immediately if you have any questions about these policies and their application, or if you have concerns about course proceedings or participants.

Academic Integrity

You and I are expected to adhere to [UVic's academic integrity policy](#) and be aware of the policies for the evaluation of student course work. Violations of the integrity policy will result in a failing grade for the given assignment and may additionally result in a failing grade for the course. By taking this course, you agree that all submitted assignments may be subject to an originality review. I do not use software to detect plagiarism in essays or any other assignments.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the [Centre for Accessible Learning \(CAL\)](#) as soon as possible. CAL staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Basic Needs

I want you to thrive in this course and everywhere else. Please let me know as early as possible if you have any concerns or if you require any assistance to succeed. I'll do my best to help.

If you need to cover gaps in care, then please don't hesitate to bring your children to seminar. Babies who are nursing are always welcome, as I do not want you to choose between feeding your child and continuing your education.

UVic takes student mental health very seriously, with a [website](#) full of resources. We offer services such as assistance and referral to address students' personal, social, career, and study skills concerns. Services for students also include crisis and emergency mental health consultation and confidential assessment, counselling services (individual and small group), and referrals. Many of these programs are connected with Health Services, which is located at the Petersen Health Centre (Lower Parking Lot #5, off Sinclair Road, behind the residence cafeteria). Many offices have walk-in hours as well as appointments.

The [Student Services website](#) lists several policies that you might want to know about and may make your life at UVic safer and easier. Only some of them are directly related to this seminar, but they're still important.

Acknowledgements

As a faculty member who has the privilege to live and work as a guest on these lands, I acknowledge with respect that the University of Victoria is located on the unceded territory of the Lkwungen peoples and the Songhees, Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ First Nations, whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Daniel Anderson, Erin R. Anderson, Anna Anthropy, Kristin Arola, Moya Bailey, Cheryl Ball, Anne Balsamo, Nina Belojevic, Kathi Inman Berens, Lauren Berlant, Rachel Sagner Buurma, micha cárdenas, Steph Ceraso, Deb Chachra, Ed Chang, Kandice Chuh, Wendy Chun, Hillary Chute, Heidi Rae Cooley, Cathy Davidson, Tracey El Hajj, Lori Emerson, Mary Flanagan, Jacob Gaboury, David Gaertner, Alexander Galloway, Margaret Galvan, Alex Gil, Lisa Gitelman, Dene Grigar, Richard Grusin, Aimi Hamraie, Katherine Hayles, Sara Hendren, Stefan Higgins, Curtis Hisayasu, Patrick Jagoda, Kat Jungnickel, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Lauren Klein, Kim Knight, Kari Kraus, Virginia Kuhn, Elizabeth LaPensée, Alan Liu, Hector Lopez, Elizabeth Losh, Alexis Lothian, Shaun Macpherson, Mark Marino, Shannon Mattern, Ellen McCallum, Tara McPherson, W.J.T. Mitchell, Aimée Morrison, Stuart Moulthrop, Janet Murray, Timothy Murray, Lisa Nakamura, Alondra Nelson, Élika Ortega, Allison Parrish, John Durham Peters, Jessica Rajko, Howard Ramsy II, Rita Raley, Matt Ratto, Margaret Rhee, Roopika Risam, Daniela Rosner, Anastasia Salter, Mark Sample, Alana Sayers, Cynthia Selfe, Steven Shaviro, Karis Shearer, Emily Short, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Nick Sousanis, Jonathan Sterne, Jennifer Lynn Stoecker, Jesse Stommel, Victoria Szabo, Cathy Thomas, Phillip Thurtle, Whitney Trettien, Bill Turkel, Annette Vee, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Jacqueline Wernimont, Kathleen Woodward, Melanie Yergeau, and Gregory Zinman, whose approaches to teaching and research have especially influenced the construction of this syllabus.