

Media and Materiality from Marx to Barad
CSPT 500/600 | Jentery Sayers | University of Victoria
Tuesdays, 1:30-4:20pm | jentery.github.io/cspt500/

In recent years, artists as well as theorists have engaged in a form of “new materialism,” whereby agency is understood as an entanglement of matter, media, and meaning. One effect is a refusal to reduce matter or media to a static state. Like language, materiality is dynamic, even if it is rarely perceived or described as such. Another effect is to rethink where we locate intent or how we think about causality in the first place. Informed by new materialism, this seminar surveys critical theory from Karl Marx to Karen Barad to identify historical stress points in the articulation of media and materiality since the 1850s. Our survey will account for how these two terms have been situated in various theories of agency, from historical materialism, semiotics, and symptomatic reading to media archaeology and agential realism.

Aims

Our approach to this seminar will assume no consensus about what, exactly, “media” and “materiality” are. Instead, we will start with a conversation about the relevance of the two terms today. What are their settings and politics? How are they intertwined with creative and critical practice? How do they operate in relation to other terms, such as ephemerality, pleasure, object, subject, interaction, justice, art, and agency? To what effects on our lived, social realities? Following this conversation, we will survey numerous publications (from Marx forward) to give the present some texture. Each week, we will discuss work by pairs of authors articulated around two keywords. This approach will not follow a strict chronology (e.g., reading the oldest works first); however, history will matter. We will not treat the readings as ideas somehow detached from the particulars of situation or experience. Instead, we will interpret the texts at hand with attention to the conditions in which they were written. When time permits, we may also ground our studies in examples from areas such as experimental media, art, and design (i.e., areas where approaches to media and materiality do not manifest as essays or monographs). To this end, each week of the schedule includes a case study for discussion.

As we proceed, you will write seven response papers, which will comprise a portfolio that you will revise at the term’s end. By that end, you should have a

granular sense of how media and materiality have changed over time (especially with respect to questions of agency), and along the way you should gain experience with writing and talking about critical theory. I also hope that seminar discussions and research will translate across a spectrum of scholarly work, from writing, teaching, and archival research to policy, ethnography, and media production (depending on your own methodologies and motivations).

Extensive experience with critical theory is not required for this seminar. I encourage you to ask for context, definitions, or explanations whenever the seminar feels as if it's moving too quickly (or too slowly). Such gestures are especially important in courses, such as this one, that are anchored in interdisciplinary methods. We should be honest and open about what we don't know, and we should learn from the knowledge others bring to the seminar. We should also account for what we assume or take for granted, including our biases and privileges. If you're curious about additional material corresponding with the seminar, then feel free to contact me with requests for related reading and the like. I'm happy to chat more and point you in directions of potential interest. I'm also happy to hear recommendations, so please send them my way.

Assignments

This seminar is based on a portfolio model of research, where you write throughout the term and revise your work at the end. It also includes a brief presentation and a facilitation of seminar discussion. Below is a description of the assignments and how they will be assessed. Please note that the requirements are subject to minor changes as the seminar progresses. If I do make a change to any of the assignments, then I will notify you in writing and well in advance.

The portfolio is essential for passing the course. Failure to submit at least five response papers will result in a failing N grade (calculated as a 0 for your GPA). Please also note: I do not post marks outside my office, and I do not use plagiarism detection software.

Portfolio (three marks, each 25% of final grade)

I am asking you to develop a portfolio of seven response papers over the course of the seminar. Each response paper should:

- Be somewhere between 450- and 500-words-long,
- Use a citation style of your choice (MLA, APA, Chicago/Turabian, Harvard),

- Engage with two works by different authors,
- Be polished and focused, with concise treatments of critical theory,
- Avoid frequent quotation and instead use clearly deliberate selections of textual evidence,
- Briefly explain the relevance of the two works in your own words (including a short summary of key arguments, where necessary),
- Refrain from much comparison between the two selected works (e.g., “While X argues, Y asserts...”),
- Instead of comparison, stress why the differences or overlaps between the two selected works matter (e.g., the social or cultural implications of their differences, the common assumptions motivating their arguments, the effects of shared logics or definitions, or the tendencies of similar styles and methodologies),
- Where applicable, articulate the two assigned works with a keyword, which allows you to concentrate on particular dimensions of the authors’ writing,
- Not make an original argument or claim, but rather stage a conversation between the two works and, where helpful, include some important questions that emerge from their dialogue (consider these questions futures lines of inquiry for you or others),
- Be submitted electronically, *prior* to the seminar meeting dedicated to the two texts at hand (only one paper may be submitted each week), and
- Be revised at least once, with track changes (or the like) enabled for our mutual reference.

Six of these seven response papers should be about assigned texts. I will assess three of them during the middle of term (between *18 October* and *25 October*; 25% of your final grade) and three more during the last week of classes (between *29 November* and *2 December*; 25% of your final grade).

Your seventh response paper is due by *19 December*. It should *address a specific gap in the course outline by identifying two authors who were not included but whose work contributes to our discussions*. For this particular paper, I recommend selecting one publication (or excerpt) by each of your two authors. This way, you don’t tackle too much for a short response. Of course, this particular paper requires research beyond the assigned reading. However, throughout the seminar I will dedicate time to discussing gaps in the course material.

Since we have twelve seminar meetings but only six response papers due between 13 September and 29 November, you do not need to write a paper for each seminar meeting. However, I encourage you to take careful notes as you read and bring these notes with you to meetings.

By 19 December, you should submit revised drafts of your first six response papers, together with your seventh response paper and a brief statement (250-500 words) defining both “media” and “materiality” with parenthetical references to authors we’ve read this term. Together, your brief statement and seven response papers will comprise the final iteration of your portfolio (25% of your final grade). For the brief statement, you may want to read a few entries in Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* as well as entries in projects inspired by Williams.

I will assess your response papers, with feedback, according to this rubric:

- 90-100 = A+: Papers in this range are especially sophisticated and perceptive pieces of work that make an original contribution to scholarly thinking about a particular topic. With elaboration, they could be published in an academic journal.
- 85-89 = A: Papers in this range are perceptive and original, but may require substantial revision for public circulation. They could act as core material for a conference presentation.
- 80-84 = A-: Papers in this range are adequate at the graduate level with regard to the research, presentation, and quality of content.
- 77-79 = B+: Papers in this range have significant flaws in some areas, but they still meet graduate standards.
- 73-76 = B: Papers in this range are marginally acceptable at the graduate level.

Throughout the term, I encourage you to meet with me outside of seminar to discuss your writing and portfolio.

Presentation (15% of final grade)

I am also asking you to give a brief presentation during the term. Your presentation should:

- Provide a brief interpretation (no more than three minutes) of an assigned reading, including how it approaches media and materiality, together with

your response to the reading (e.g., its assumptions, where it's persuasive, and what questions it raises),

- Include one (and only one) question you have for the seminar about the text at hand (we will write this question on the board for reference throughout the seminar), and
- Not include slides (to reduce your workload but also treat the seminar more like a conversation).

The presentations will usually occur at the beginning of seminar meetings. At the start of the term, I'll ask you to sign up for a date and text. Presentations will be assessed according to this rubric:

- 90-100 = A+: Presentations in this range are incredibly compelling and even memorable. They prompt others to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the texts at hand. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.
- 85-89 = A: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned from the reading and provide clear evidence of that learning. They prompt others to ask questions, and they spark conversation about a concrete topic emerging from the seminar. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.
- 80-84 = A-: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned from the reading and provide recognizable evidence of that learning. They prompt others to ask questions. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text. Their structure is tangible and easy to follow.
- 77-79 = B+: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned from the reading and provide recognizable evidence of that learning. They do not visibly rely much (if at all) on reading a prepared text.
- 73-76 = B: Presentations in this range demonstrate what was learned from the reading and provide recognizable evidence of that learning.

You will receive the mark for your presentation, with feedback, during the week you conduct it.

Facilitation (10% of final grade)

Finally, I'm asking you to facilitate a seminar discussion with me. Your facilitation should include:

- Your active role in conversation about all texts at hand, prompting and addressing questions to keep the discussion going,
- Frequent attention to the text at hand, pointing people to specific remarks and arguments in the works we're studying,
- Building upon the presentation(s) given by others during the seminar meeting, and
- Taking notes and the like on the board or via the projector, if you wish.

You should not facilitate on the same day you present. At the start of the seminar, I'll ask you to sign up for a date. Presentations will be assessed according to this rubric:

- 90-100 = A+: Facilitations in this range prompt others to ask questions, and they maintain conversation about concrete topics emerging from the texts at hand. They are anchored in the texts at hand, and they rely as much on listening as they do on speaking. They document the conversation (e.g., on the board) as it emerges.
- 85-89 = A: Facilitations in this range prompt others to ask questions, and they maintain conversation about concrete topics emerging from the texts at hand. They are anchored in the texts at hand, and they rely as much on listening as they do on speaking.
- 80-84 = A-: Facilitations in this range prompt others to ask questions, and they maintain conversation about concrete topics emerging from the texts at hand. They address the texts at hand, and they rely as much on listening as they do on speaking.
- 77-79 = B+: Facilitations in this range prompt others to ask questions, and they maintain conversation about general topics emerging from the texts at hand. They address the texts at hand.
- 73-76 = B: Facilitations in this range prompt others to ask questions. They address the texts at hand.

You will receive the mark for your facilitation, with feedback, during the week you conduct it.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about any aspect of these assignments.

Policies

Below are the policies for the seminar.

Late Submissions

Barring exceptional circumstances, I will not accept your response papers after the due date. Belated papers will negatively influence your final mark. Also, I will not comment on entries submitted after the due date.

Absences

Weekly attendance in graduate courses is expected. If you must be absent from a course for a serious reason, then you should contact me before the missed class. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your grade or your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions and workshops are part of fulfilling the course requirements.

Laptops

Laptops are welcome in (but not required for) the seminar.

Extensions

No extensions will be given except in extreme (and verifiable) circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances, such as death of a family member.

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. Students and faculty members are expected to adhere to the UVic human rights policy. You should alert me immediately if you have any questions about this policy and its application, or if you have concerns about course proceedings or participants.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the UVic academic integrity policy. Violations of this 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

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

Email

With the exception of holidays and weekends, I respond to your emails within twenty-four hours.

Acknowledgments***Territorial Acknowledgment***

We acknowledge and respect the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples on whose traditional territories the University of Victoria stands and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Acknowledgment of Influence

I would like to thank Carolyn Allen, Kate Cummings, and Shannon Mattern, whose pedagogy and courses influenced the design and content of this seminar.

Contact Me

This seminar meets Tuesdays, from 1:30 until 4:20pm. My office is located in CLE D334, and my office hours this term are Tuesdays, 11am until 1pm, or by appointment (Mondays and Fridays are best).

Feel free to email me at jentery@uvic.ca. My office phone is 250-721-7274.

Schedule

Wk 1 | 13 Sept | Motivations for the Seminar

Why a seminar on media and materiality, now?

Read: Benjamin, [“Theses on the Philosophy of History”](#) (1940/74)

Case study: Parker, [Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View](#) (1991)

Wk 2 | 20 Sept | Machines + Fabrication

Where are work, labour, and action?

Read: Marx, from [Notebook M](#) (1857) and the [Fragment on Machines](#) (1858);

Arendt, from [The Human Condition](#) (1958)

Case study: [Molleindustria](#) (2003-)

Wk 3 | 27 Sept | Style + Estrangement

Why rhythms rather than images or artifacts?

Read: Simmel, from [The Philosophy of Money](#) (1900/78); Shklovsky, [“Art as Device”](#) (1917)

Case study: Boym, [16-Second Art](#) (n.d.)

Wk 4 | 4 Oct | Visibility + Textuality

From act to field? From expression to network?

Read: Merleau-Ponty, [“Eye and Mind”](#) (1961/93); Barthes, [“From Work to Text”](#) (1971/77)

Case study: Grigar and Moulthrop, [Pathfinders](#) (2013-)

Wk 5 | 11 Oct | Description + Practice

Whether and how to untie the knots?

Read: Foucault, from [The Archaeology of Knowledge](#) (1971/72); Williams, from [Television](#) (1975)

Case study: Maire, [The Memory Cone](#) (2010)

Wk 6 | 18 Oct | Eros + Power

Suppressed or shared experiences? Through which mechanisms?

Read: Cixous, [“The Laugh of the Medusa”](#) (1975/76); Lorde, [“Uses of the Erotic”](#) (1978/84) and [“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”](#) (1979/81)

Case study: cárdenas, [“Shifting Futures”](#) (2015)

Due: Portfolio (first three response papers)

Wk 7 | 25 Oct | Bodies + Boundaries

Inner and outer worlds, but for whom?

Read: Kristeva, from [Powers of Horror](#) (1982); Butler, from [Gender Trouble](#) (1990)

Case study: Bachzetsis, [Private](#) (2016)

Wk 8 | 1 Nov | Breaks + Textures

What produces a cut or feeling? What does it afford?

Read: Moten, from [In the Break](#) (2003); Sedgwick, from [Touching Feeling](#) (2003)

Case study: Scott, [Untitled](#) (1991)

Wk 9 | 8 Nov | Memory + Indexicality

How does ephemerality endure? How do media point?

Read: Chun, [“Did Somebody Say New Media?”](#) (2006) and [“The Enduring Ephemeral”](#) (2008); Doane, [“The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity”](#) (2007)

Case study: Dean, [As Yet Untitled](#) (1992-95)

Wk 10 | 15 Nov | Things + Things

Is there such a thing as unmediated things?

Read: Grosz, [“The Thing”](#) (2001); Brown, [“Thing Theory”](#) (2001); Appadurai, [“The Thing Itself”](#) (2006)

Case study: Arakawa and Gins, [Procedural Architecture](#) (1994-2008)

Wk 11 | 22 Nov | Systems + Differences

What happens between layers and sequences?

Read: Debray, from [Media Manifestos](#) (1994/96); Krauss, from [A Voyage on the North Sea](#) (1999)

Case study: Lee, [Transformers: The Premake](#) (2014)

Wk 12 | 29 Nov | Situations + Entanglements

How is matter also agency? How is it conjoined with discourse?

Read: Haraway, [“Situated Knowledges”](#) (1988); Barad, [“Posthumanist Performativity”](#) (2003)

Due: Portfolio (three more response papers)