

# Critical Design

## Interface and Imagination

Jordan Kraemer, [jordanhkraemer@gmail.com](mailto:jordanhkraemer@gmail.com)  
The Brooklyn Commons, 388 Atlantic Ave in Boerum Hill

Thursdays, 6:30 - 9:30pm  
February 25 – March 17, 2016

Is design the new core competency? From user experience research to sustainable development, professional labor and productivity is increasingly framed in the language of design, while design fields are growing rapidly in industry and academia alike. This is partly a product of “design thinking,” an alternative approach to interacting with the world through the tools of design. In these contexts, design purports to approach diverse facets of human life in terms of innovative problem-solving, whether it be resource management in the Global South, urban development, home furnishings, or the latest tech gadgets and platforms. But what does it mean to approach the world in terms of design, and who is designing what and for whom? What norms become encoded in interface design, for example, and how does this shape technology-related practices?

This course takes design, especially interface design, as an object of study through empirical and humanistic analyses, primarily ethnographic and literary studies. We will read works by Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and other theorists, in conversation with emerging literature in critical studies of design, such as the work of Lucy Suchman, Paul Dourish, Natasha Dow Schüll, Dawn Nafus, and Keith Murphy. In this class, students will not only explore contemporary critical design literature and key theoretical backgrounds, but will also engage critically with the creation, use, and understanding of user experience, interface, and design aesthetics.

### Readings

All readings are available through a shared Google drive folder for the course. Please contact me if you have not received the link yet.

### Course format and requirements

This course is organized as a discussion-based seminar, with brief lectures as necessary to provide theoretical and historical context for the readings. We may occasionally watch video clips or other media when appropriate. Please prepare each week by identifying one or two main questions or ideas you would like to discuss from the readings.

### Schedule

#### **Session 1 (Feb. 25): Imagination**

Lucy Suchman 2011 Anthropological Relocations and the Limits of Design. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40(1): 1–18.

Natasha Dow Schüll 2005 Digital Gambling: the Coincidence of Desire and Design. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 597(1): 65–81.

George Marcus 1995 Ethnography in/of the World System: the Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 24(1): 95–117.

*Further reading:*

- Marx, Karl. "The Strife Between Workman and Machine." Capital, Vol. 1  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#S5>  
Michel Foucault 1977 "Docile Bodies." In *Discipline and Punish*. Vintage Books. 135-169.  
Natasha Dow Schüll 2012 *Addiction by Design*. Princeton University Press.

**Session 2 (Mar. 3): Interface**

- Eitan Wilf 2013 Toward an Anthropology of Computer-Mediated, Algorithmic Forms of Sociality. *Current Anthropology* 54(6): 716–739.  
Bruno Latour 2005 *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press (selections).  
Cory Knobel and Geoffrey C Bowker 2011 Values in Design. *Communications of the ACM* 54(7): 26.

*Further reading:*

- Jordan Kraemer 2014 Friend or Freund: Social Media and Transnational Connections in Berlin. *Human-Computer Interaction* 29(1). Taylor & Francis: 53–77.  
Dawn Nafus 2012 'Patches Don't Have Gender': What Is Not Open in Open Source Software. *New Media and Society* 14(4): 669–683.

**Session 3 (Mar. 10): Object**

- Gretchen Gano 2015 Starting with Universe: Buckminster Fuller's Design Science Now. *Futures* 70: 56–64.  
Keith Murphy 2012 Transmodality and Temporality in Design Interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 44(14).  
Keith Murphy 2015 *Swedish Design: An Ethnography*. Cornell UP. (selections)

**Session 4 (Mar. 17): Environment**

- Lilly Irani, Janet Vertesi, Paul Dourish, and Kavita Philip 2010 Postcolonial Computing: a Lens on Design and Development.  
Nikhil Anand 2011 Pressure: the PoliTechnics of Water Supply in Mumbai. *Cultural Anthropology* 26(4): 542–564.  
Wijetunga, Dinuka 2014 The Digital Divide Objectified in the Design: Use of the Mobile Telephone by Underprivileged Youth in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19(3): 712–726.  
S R Davies, C Selin, G Gano, and Â G Pereira 2013 Finding Futures: a Spatio-Visual Experiment in Participatory Engagement.

*Further reading:*

- Paul Dourish, Ken Anderson, and Dawn Nafus 2007 Cultural Mobilities: Diversity and Agency in Urban Computing. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*: 1–14.  
Susan Leigh Star 1999 The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(3): 377–391.