VM303-01 Studies in Digital Media & Culture

Department of Visual & Media Arts, Emerson College Spring Semester 2023
Class meetings: Tues/Thur 17 January—4 May 2023 6:00-7:45 p.m.
Class location: Ansin Building 605
Instructor: Dr. Martin Roberts
Office hours: Thur 3:00-5:00 p.m.
Office location: Ansin Building, TBA
Email: martin_roberts@emerson.edu

YouTube playlist | Syllabus (outside Canvas) | GitHub repository

Description

This course considers the nature and contemporary forms of digital culture. Broadly speaking, this can be defined as the diverse range of symbolic practices through which communities affirm and maintain their cultural identities using digital media devices and interfaces in a globally networked society. While these practices are structured by deeply unequal power relations, are contradictory, and often come into conflict with one another, collectively they constitute what may be considered a global digital culture.

A key component of the course is the automation of various forms of creative production, from writing to the visual arts, by natural-language processing computational systems (generally referred to as "artificial intelligence" or "AI"). The course addresses some of the many issues raised by such systems, with a particular focus on questions of aesthetics and the increasingly contested relationship between artists and algorithms. While such systems now demonstrably pass the Turing Test (i.e. pass as human or their products as human-produced), they also compel us to reconsider what we mean by "art," or "intelligence" itself.

A major theme of the course is the changing status of the **future** as a social imaginary. It has been suggested that while we live today in the futures imagined by writers and filmmakers since George Orwell's novel *1984* (1949) and films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Blade Runner* (1982, set in 2019 and later 2049), or *Soylent Green* (1973, set in 2022), postmodern society has become so absorbed in commemorating its own past that it has become incapable of imagining its own future, dystopian or otherwise. As the course shows, historical projections of the future (often referred to as "retrofutures") have paradoxically themselves become objects of postmodernist nostalgia.

Format

This is primarily a critical-thinking course, although it includes a practical and production component. This means that it encourages you to think reflexively and analytically about the digitally-mediated cultural practices that the course considers, as well as to participate in them; for example, you will be invited to experiment with image-synthesis and text-generating software and analyze the results using key concepts and theoretical frameworks.

Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will:

- have a acquired a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of digital technologies and networked communication;

- be able to apply critical thinking to contemporary developments in digital culture using relevant analytical concepts and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies such as cultural analytics;

- understand basic principles of algorithmic image synthesis on a variety of platforms;

- have reflected upon and discussed the larger significance of machine learning systems within global networked societies.

Texts

Selected chapters from the texts below will be made available as PDFs; you are nevertheless encouraged to purchase at least several of texts that are of interest and read more of them.

Note on formats: A number of texts listed in the bibliography are available as e-books and/or audiobooks. You are encouraged to make use not only of print media but also of these screen-based and audio formats.

Adrian Hon, *You've Been Played: How Corporations, Governments, and Schools Use Games to Control Us All.* New York: Basic Books, 2022.

Lev Manovich and Emanuele Arielli. *Artificial Aesthetics: A Critical Guide to AI, Media and Design.* 2019-22.

Joanne McNeil. *Lurking: How A Person Became A User.* New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2020. ISBN: 978-1250785756.

Media

The Shining The African Desperate Dragonfly Eyes The Tinder Swindler The Hunger Games Squid Game

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Schedule of Classes

Week 1

I. Histories of the Future

2023-01-17_Tues

Terminal Lucidity
Fisher, " 'The Slow Cancellation of the Future' "

Film: *The Shining*
Everywhere at the End of Time (The Caretaker)

2023-01-19_Thur

Internet Über Alles
Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is The Internet Dead?" [download PDF]

Week 2

2023-01-24_Tues

Lurking
McNeil, *Lurking*: Introduction, ch. 2 (Anonymity)

2023-01-26_Thur

McNeil, *Lurking*, ch. 4 (Sharing)

Week 3

Alternate Timelines

2023-01-31_Tues

Tiffany, "You Probably Don't Remember The Internet"

Choose and read **one** of these texts by instar books (you will have to purchase either the print or ebook edition): - Ana Valens, *Tumblr Porn* - Megan Milks, *Tori Amos Bootleg Webring* - Quinn Myers, *Google Glass*

2023-02-02_Thur

Parham, "A People's History of Black Twitter"

Baraka, "Technnology & Ethos" (1970)

Week 4

2023-02-07_Tues

The Angel of History: Afrofuturism
Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994

Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" (*The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 287-302)

Film (excerpt shown in class): *The Last Angel of History* (John Akomfrah/Black Audio Film Collective, 1995)

Jason Farago, "How Klee's 'Angel of History' Took Flight" (BBC Culture, 6 April 2016)

2023-02-09_Thur

"The Futurist Digital Collages of Manzel Bowman" (African Digital Art website)

Recommended: *The African Desperate* (Martine Syms, 2022). Currently streaming on MUBI and Apple TV

Week 5

II. Digital Imageworlds

2023-02-14_Tues

#digitalcamera: Lo-fi Photography and Retro-Aesthetics
Huang, Kalley. "The Hottest Gen Z Gadget Is a 20-Year-Old Digital Camera"

"Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination"

2023-02-16_Thur

Soft Images: From Photograph to Database
Horning, "The Expanded Field"

Hoelzl and Marie, "Expanded Photography (The Desire for Endlessness)" in *Softimage*)

"DALL-E: Introducing Outpainting"

Week 6

2023-02-21_Tues NO CLASS (Monday schedule)

2023-02-23_Thur

Object Detection
Film: *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017)

Hatis Noit, "Aura" (music video)

Week 7

III. Algorithmic Aesthetics

2023-02-28_Tues

The Sorcerer's Apprentice: AI Art
Manovich, "Who is an Artist in AI Era?" (*Artificial Aesthetics*, ch. 2)

Workshop: Midjourney
Midjourney: AI image synthesis

Guy Parsons, "Everything you wanted to know about Midjourney" (5 August 2022)
Midjourney documentation

2023-03-02_Thur

Magic Spells Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image"

Workshop: DALL-E 2 Prompt Book, Lexica, promptcraft

Week 8

2023-03-07_Tues

Lev Manovich, "AI and Myths of Creativity" (*Artificial Aesthetics*, ch. 4)

Workshop: DALL-E 2
DALL-E 2
dall-ery gall-ery

2023-03-09_Thur

Workshop: Stable Diffusion
Stable Diffusion

2023-03-13-17 **Spring Break**

Week 9

IV. Gamification

2023-03-21_Tues

Gaming The System
Hon, *You've Been Played*: Introduction, chapter 1

2023-03-23_Thur

The Gamified Self
Hon, *You've Been Played*: chapter 2

Week 10

2023-03-28_Tues

Gamified Relationships: Ghosting
Narr and Luong, "Bored ghosts in the dating app assemblage: How dating app algorithms couple ghosting behaviors with a mood of boredom"

Film: *The Tinder Swindler* (Netflix)

2023-03-30_Thur

Non-Player Characters: Gamifying the Workplace
Hon, *You've Been Played*: chapter 3

Week 11

2023-04-04_Tues

The Gamified Society
Hon, *You've Been Played*: chapter 6 (Intro, The Myth and Reality of the Social Credit Score, "It Can't Happen Here," Propaganda, Wargames)

2023-04-06_Thur

Hon, *You've Been Played*: chapter 6 (Elections, Civic Engagement, Education)

Week 12

2023-04-11_Tues

Hon, *You've Been Played*: chapters 7-8

2023-04-13_Thur

Hon, *You've Been Played*: chapters 9-10

Week 13

2023-04-18_Tues

Gamified Media Film: *The Hunger Games*
TV: *Squid Game*

2023-04-20_Thur (Official make-up day, if necessary)

Week 14

2023-04-25_Tues

Gamification Project Presentations

2023-04-27_Thur

Gamification Project Presentations

Week 15

2023-05-02_Tues

Gamification Project Presentations

2023-05-04_Thur **Last day of classes**

Gamification Project Presentations

Assignments & Evaluation

1. Open Topic Analysis (2 x 15%)

Individual. Two short analytical essays 1,000 words in length (4 pages double-spaced, excluding bibliography) in response to course readings. Topics will be provided, although alternative topics may be arranged in consultation with the instructor. Submission deadlines: open.

2. Commentary (15%)

Individual. Participation in weekly discussions of reading assignments. Each week, 2-3 students will be designated as discussion hosts for the week. Discussion hosting involves posting an initial reflective response on the reading assignments and then acting as moderators to the ensuing discussion.

3.ChatGPT (15%)

Individual. Write a prompt for ChatGPT (or a similar language-based model) that generates a 500-word essay on a subject of your choice. (You will likely have to experiment with customizing the prompt in order to generate a satisfactory result.). Then write (do not generate) a 500-word reflection on the output from the prompt.

Remember that this output is the result of pattern matching from very large datasets, not intelligence in the human sense; therefore, avoid vague speculations about whether ChatGPT can be considered as intelligent, or even sentient. Instead, evaluate the output purely **as if** it was written by a human subject. How satisfactory is it as a response to the prompt? What are its strengths, or blind spots? Can it pass for having been written by a human? If not, why not? Is it useful from a conceptual or analytical standpoint? If so, how?

4.Generative Art Gallery (15%)

Individual. Using one of the systems focused on in the course (DALL-E 2, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion), submit one work that was generated using one of these systems. Images may be still or moving (e.g. animations, GIF loops, etc.)

Multiples are acceptable, even encouraged. This work will be reviewed collectively by the group and displayed as a gallery, initally on Canvas, and later (with your permission) on the web.

5. Gamification Project (25%)

Group project (2-3 students).

Drawing on your reading of Adrian Hon's book *You've Been Played*, In consultation with your other group members, develop a gamification strategy for a product, service, organization, or institution of your choice. This may be a real, existing product, etc., or one that does not (yet) exist.

Write a proposal of approximately 1,000-1,500 words in length (4-6 pages, double-spaced) and prepare a presentation outlining the project that you have in mind: primary objectives,

target audience, platforms used, game mechanics (how will people play it?), outcomes (points, rewards, badges, leaderboards, etc). Projects will be presented and discussed with the class during the last four meetings.

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Bibliography

[A] = audiobook (Audible.com)

Barthes, Roland. "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image Music Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: FontanaPress, 1977: 32-51.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" (*The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 287-302)

Fisher, Mark. " 'The Slow Cancellation of the Future,' " in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014.

Hoelzl, Ingrid, and Rémi Marie. "Expanded Photography (The Desire for Endlessness)," in *Softimage: Towards A New Theory of the Digital Image*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2015.

[A] Hon, Adrian. *You've Been Played: How Corporations, Governments, and Schools Use Games to Control Us All*. New York: Basic Books, 2022.

Huang, Kalley. "The Hottest Gen Z Gadget Is a 20-Year-Old Digital Camera." *New York Times*, 7 January 2023.

Manovich, Lev, and Emanuele Arielli. *Artificial Aesthetics: A Critical Guide to AI, Media and Design*. 2019-22.

McNeil, Joanne. *Lurking: How A Person Became A User*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2020. ISBN: 978-1250785756.

Mumford, Lewis. "Authoritarian and Democratic Technics," *Technology and Culture* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1964): 1–8. https://doi.org/10.2307/3101118.

Narr, Greg, and Anh Luong, "Bored ghosts in the dating app assemblage: How dating app algorithms couple ghosting behaviors with a mood of boredom." *The Communication Review*, 5 October. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2022.2129949

"Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination". *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, 18 (10 April 2013).

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Academic Honesty

It is the responsibility of all Emerson students to know and adhere to the College's policy on plagiarism which is available on the Emerson web site. If you have any question concerning the Emerson plagiarism policy or about documentation of sources in work you produce in this course, you should speak to your instructor. Any instance of plagiarism, cheating or academic dishonesty will result in an F on the assignment and potential disciplinary action by the administration.

Diversity

Every student in this class will be honored and respected as an individual with distinct experiences, talents, and backgrounds. Students will be treated fairly regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification, disability, socio-economic status, or national identity. Issues of diversity may be a part of class discussion, assigned material, and projects. The instructor will make every effort to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with the course instructor or to contact the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at 617-824-8528 or by email at diversity_inclusion@emerson.edu.

Disability

If you believe you have a disability that may warrant accommodations in this class, I urge you to register with the disability Services Coordinator, D. Anthony Bashir at 216 Tremont Street, 5th floor (617-824-8415) so that, together, you can work to develop methods of addressing needed accommodations in this class.

Writing & Academic Resource Center

Students are encouraged to visit and utilize the staff and resources of Emerson's Writing Center, particularly if they are struggling with written assignments. The Writing Center is located at 216 Tremont Street on the 5th floor (tel. 617-824-7874).