

VM200-2 Media Criticism & Theory



Department of Visual & Media Arts

Emerson College

Summer 2025

Wed 2 July—Wed 20 August (7 weeks) Online/asynchronous

Dr. Martin Roberts

Communication plan:

The best way to reach me is by emailing me (martin_roberts@emerson.edu) and I will respond within 12 to 24 hours upon receiving your email message.

I am also available for zoom meetings. Please email me with your meeting requests and available windows.

Zoom Office Hours: By appointment

zoom personal meeting ID: 342 985 0038

zoom meeting invitation link: <https://emerson.zoom.us/my/shujen?pwd=MkRkOHRTZWxlQXpuTFppY1FFQUFXdz09>

Course Description

This online, asynchronous course examines approaches to the analysis and criticism of contemporary media. You will learn how to become critical of the media messages you use *and* create, and how to think and write with agency.

There are two components of this course:

- (1) survey of such critical approaches/methods as semiotics, psychoanalysis, genre studies, feminist theories, cultural studies and postmodernism;
- (2) application of these approaches to examining and critiquing various media forms and contents. We will spend a major part of this semester building up theoretical/methodological foundation while devoting the remaining to the critique and analysis of specific media texts and contexts.

Through extensive reading, writing, class discussion and screening, you will begin to develop the ability to analyze and critique popular media messages and images, as well as develop a critical worldview.

Student Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

1. Identify a variety of critical and theoretical approaches to the media
2. Develop and refine critical reading strategies, both in terms of the media and writings about the media
3. Cultivate a suitable academic vocabulary and the ability to write, think and create from a critical perspective
4. Appreciate an ethically-based and de-centered global perspective on media form and function, sensitive to the work of minority critics and theorists under-represented in the canons of media criticism
5. Apply theory to practice, and engage with contemporary media production and consumption as critically aware media artists

Required Texts

Mark Fisher, **Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?** (Winchester, UK, and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2009).

Allissa V. Richardson, **Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Supplementary readings, available on Canvas (see bibliography).

Course Structure and Requirements

Video Lectures

Each week I will post video lectures on Canvas. The number of video lectures per week varies depending on each week's topics.

Assigned Readings

Plan on reading every assignment as listed on the course calendar. Since the reading will both inform and enhance material covered during class, please complete the reading assignments *prior to* watching the lecture videos.

Attendance and Participation

Full participation in class discussions and timely submission of all assignments constitutes evidence of class attendance. Students are expected to allocate sufficient time to complete all the requirements for each module: reading, viewing, responding to discussion questions, submitting replies to classmates, and completing other assignments on time. Failure to keep up with the pace of the course may result in lower grades or the failure of the class.

Weekly Assignment & Discussion

Post-lecture discussions: Each week you are required to respond to questions or discussion prompts pertaining to that week's course material, or to find a media example to illustrate a concept. The purpose of this assignment is for you to reflect on video lectures, reading assignments or media clips and to pose questions. Posts should be around 200 words. Along with your initial post, you are also required to respond to at least two (2) of your peers' comments. This assignment is due at 5pm on most Sundays (responses to your peers' posts are due by 5pm Monday). Other assignment details and prompts will be posted on canvas.

Individual Papers

Each of you will write two analytical papers, which are due on June 9 and July 7 respectively. For the second paper assignment, you have the option to do a creative project (instead of a paper) using either BCS or Postmodernism concepts. Detailed instructions of the assignments are posted on Canvas. Feel free to consult with me if you have questions about an assignment or think you need extra help.

Response Papers

You will write two response papers responding to *Gone Girl* and *Paris Is Burning* in the contexts of the assigned readings. Each response paper is one single spaced page long (roughly 500-600 words). Your grade depends on how well you analyze and critique the film and how well you incorporate the readings into your critique/analysis.

The grading scale for papers is as follows:

A	This is excellent scholarly work that could be published in a student film or media studies journal. It displays good <i>structure</i> (i.e., a strong original thesis statement and a logical development of points to follow), <i>content</i> (sound analysis and good research when applicable), and <i>presentational skills</i> (i.e., excellence in verbal, logical, and grammatical expression, as well as care in mechanical details such as spelling, typing, bibliography and footnote preparation, etc.). It also follows style and formatting rules. (A=95)
B	This is good scholarly work that could be published in a student journal with some adjustments. It has minor problems in a couple of the aforementioned areas. (B=85)
C	This work exhibits problems in several of the aforementioned areas or a major problem in one. (C=75)
D	This work exhibits little understanding of the subject matter or paper requirements. It fails to follow rudimentary formatting and displays sloppiness in spelling, grammar and sourcing. (D=65)
F	This work exhibits no understanding of the subject matter or paper requirements. It fails to follow rudimentary formatting and displays sloppiness in spelling, grammar and sourcing. (F=55)

Late Assignments

All late papers automatically lose one letter grade*! After two (calendar) days, loss of two letter grades. After three days, no credit. Exceptions, unless truly serious, will not be made.

Academic Honesty

Do not plagiarize. Plagiarism is using someone else's work without giving them fair credit. Plagiarism and cheating will result in an "F" for the assignment.

Disability Statement

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Emerson is committed to providing equal access and support to all qualified students through the provision of reasonable accommodations, so that each student may fully

participate in the Emerson experience. Student Accessibility Services (SAS) staff will be working remotely for the fall of 2020. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please contact them at SAS@emerson.edu or at (617)824-8592 to make an appointment with an SAS staff member.

Students are encouraged to contact SAS early in the semester. Please be aware that accommodations are not applied retroactively.

Plagiarism Statement

It is the responsibility of all Emerson students to know and adhere to the College's policy on plagiarism, which can be found at: <http://www.emerson.edu/policy/plagiarism>*. If you have any question concerning the Emerson plagiarism policy or about documentation of sources in work you produce in this course, speak to your instructor.

Diversity Statement

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 diversityinclusion@emerson.edu*

Grading

Paper #1 25%

Paper #2/Creative Project 30%

Discussion Posts 35%

Response papers (2) 10%

Class Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1: Mon 5/12—Sun 5/18

Introduction: Sites of Struggle

Introduction to the course (Contemporary Criticism + Discourse); Semiotics (signs, denotation, connotation, paradigm & syntagm)

To read:

- David Welch, "The Conquest of the Masses" (from **The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda** (19993)
- Umberto Eco, "Semiological Guerrilla Warfare"

Week 2: Mon 5/19—Sun 25

Obey: Ideology and the Orwellian

To read:

- Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"
- Mark Fisher, Introduction to **Capitalist Realism**
- Mark Fisher, "Lecture 1", **Postcapitalist Desire**

To watch (if you haven't already!): **Squid Game**

Week 3: Mon 5/26—Sun 6/1

Simulation and Pastiche: Postmodernism

To read:

- [Amalia Ulman](#) (website); [Instagram](#)
- Alastair Sooke, "[Is This The First Instagram Masterpiece?](#)" ([The Telegraph](#), 18 January 2016)
- "[Amalia Ulman: Meme Come True](#)" ([Daze](#))
- Emilie Friedlander, "[Social Anxiety: Why Amalia Ulman's Fake 'Middlebrow' Instagram Is No Different From Yours,](#)" ([Fader](#), 7 November 2014)

To watch:

- **El Planeta** (Amalia Ulman, 2020)
- **Inventing Anna**, episode 6 (Netflix, 2022)s

Due 6/1: Paper 1

Week 4: Mon 6/2—Sun 6/8

Feminism/Postfeminism

- Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, "Introduction", **Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007)
- Martin Roberts, "The Fashion Police: Governing the Self in **What Not To Wear**" (in Negra and Tasker, eds., **Interrogating Postfeminism**: 227-248)

Week 5: Mon 6/9—Sun 6/15

Witnessing

Allissa Richardson, **Bearing Witness While Black**

- "Looking As Rebellion: The Concept of Black Witnessing" (ch. 1)
- "The New Protest #Journalism: Black Witnessing as Counternarrative" (ch. 3)

Response Paper 1 (El Planeta) due 6/15

Week 6: Mon 6/16—Sun 6/22

Tribes: Subcultures, Lifestyles, Aesthetics

- Guilherme Giolo and Michaël Berghman, "The Aesthetics of the Self: The Meaning-Making of Internet Aesthetics"
- See also: [Aesthetics Wiki](#) (read all articles in the section called "What Are Aesthetics?" and explore the site)

Week 7: Mon 6/23—Sun 6/29

Fandom

- Nancy Baym, "Social Media and the Struggle for Society"
- Nancy Baym, Daniel Cavicchi, Norma Coates, "Music Fandom in the Digital Age: A Conversation" (in Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, eds., **The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom** (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2018: 141-52))

Bibliography

Fisher, Mark, **Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?** (Winchester, UK, and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2009).

Richardson, Allissa V., **Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Strittmatter, Kai, **We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State** (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).