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
Canvas site

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

Schedule
The course begins on Wednesday 2 July and ends on Tuesday 19 August. Each week of the course accordingly begins on a **Wednesday** and ends on the following **Tuesday**.

Lectures, Discussion Forums, and Weekly Response Posts
Each week, I will post a lecture, either in textual or video format, usually by **Friday** of the week in question.

In the lecture, I will assume that you have done the reading assignments for the week, so make sure to complete them before reading (or watching) the lecture.

The lecture will typically introduce some relevant examples relating to the readings that we can use as a starting point for the week's discussion. However, you are also very welcome to suggest examples of your own that may come to mind after reading the course materials and the lecture.

Each week, your initial Response post is due no later than the last day of the week in question (i.e. Tuesday in this case). You are then required to post at least 2 follow-up responses to any other group members' posts (or my own) during the subsequent week. The Discussion cycle for each weekly topic therefore extends over two weeks:

- By the end of the first week (Tuesday): initial response post
- By the end of second week (the following Tuesday): min. 2 follow-ups to other people's posts

Don't sweat too much about meeting exact requirements for post length and frequency! The purpose is for us to have a lively, productive discussion of each week's readings so keep that as your main goal. Forums will also stay open beyond the biweekly cycle so you can catch up with posts later if you have time.

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.

Discussion Forums and Weekly Response Posts

Each week you are required to post a response of approximately 100-250 words to the course readings and/or the weekly lecture. The purpose of this assignment is for you to reflect on lectures, reading assignments or media clips and to pose questions. Along with your initial post, you are also required to respond to at least two (2) of your peers' comments. Response posts are usually due by the end of the week in question: in this case, since the course began on a Wednesday, posts will be due by the Tuesday of the following week.

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 *structure* (i.e., a strong original thesis statement and a logical development of points to follow), *content* (sound analysis and good research when applicable), and *presentational skills* (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)

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 *diversity*inclusion@emerson.edu*

Grading

Paper #1 20%

Paper #2/Creative Project 20%

Discussion Posts 30%

Response papers (2) 30%

Class Schedule (provisional)

Week 1: Wed 2 July—Tues 8 July

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** (1993))
- Umberto Eco, "Semiological Guerrilla Warfare"

Week 2: Wed 9 July—Tues 15 July

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: Wed 16 July—Tues 22 July

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 Tuesday 22 July: Paper 1

Week 4: Wed 23 July—Tues 29 July

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: Wed 30 July—Tues 5 August

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)

Due Wed 30 July: Response Paper 1 (El Planeta**)**

Week 6: Wed 6 August—Tues 12 August

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)

Due Tuesday 12 August: Response Papr 2 (film analysis)

Week 7: Wed 13 August—Tues 19 August

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))

Due Tues 19 Aug: Paper 2/Creative Project Due

———————————————————