

# FILM 302: Digital and New Media Theory

**Instructor: Dr. Tanine Allison (she/her/hers), Film and Media Department**

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I will respond to student emails within 24 hours (or less frequently over the weekend).

## COURSE OVERVIEW

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### Course Description

This course serves as an introduction to theories of media, focusing specifically on digital media and its predecessors. Our readings will examine the origins and development of *technoculture*, which is a term that refers to the influence technology has on culture, politics, and aesthetic forms. More specifically, we will study the impact of *computation* on the ways that we communicate, conceptualize the world around us, make art, tell stories, and understand issues like embodiment, difference, and identity. A key focus for this class will be how digital forms mediate ideas of race and gender within the broader context of society and culture. We will also be looking at the applicability of theory and how to use it to further your analysis of media objects or texts.

### Course Objectives

- Gain an appreciation for the wide range of theory that deals with media
- Examine the relationship(s) between technology and culture, particularly in regards to computation
- Identify ways that gender and race inform our uses and understandings of media
- Learn how to use theory in relation to specific media objects or texts
- Express your understanding of media theory in written and/or creative works

## READING AND MEDIA ASSIGNMENTS

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### Reading and Viewing Requirements

There are no required textbooks for this class. All readings will be provided for you in electronic form, usually as a PDF on Canvas or a link to a website.

The weekly screenings are required and will be made available to you online, usually through Canvas. You are responsible for completing the screenings on your own time before we discuss them on Thursdays. Some media assignments may involve a small fee for access (such as a movie rental or game download).

### Objectionable Material

The films and other media we will look at and play for this class may contain material you find objectionable. Some of these media will include violence and sexual material. It is important for us to look at this material critically and analytically to get a full understanding of media, particularly online media. If you do not feel comfortable with particular material, or have specific triggers, please talk to me ahead of time so that I can assess whether a different assignment is appropriate. Otherwise, content warnings will not always occur.

## **ASSESSMENT AND GRADES**

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### **Attendance and Participation (worth 10% of course grade)**

Attendance and participation in our in-person classes are required and should involve consistent and substantive contributions. You are allowed 2 unexcused absences from the in-person class without penalty. If there are reasons why you need to miss more classes or need to take a break from schoolwork (for instance, if you or a loved one is ill), please be in touch with me as soon as possible. There will be ways to make up missed sessions or assignments for those who have legitimate reasons to be absent. Excessive, unexcused absences from the live sessions may result in failure for the course.

If you are sick, not feeling well, or unable to come to class for another reason, please reach out to me and let me know the situation. Do not come to class if you have any symptoms of illness. Any absences due to illness (or potential illness) will be counted as excused.

As an integral part of a small, upper-level class, I expect you to come to class prepared to discuss the week's material and actively engage with the class. If you are naturally quiet, uncomfortable speaking in class, or otherwise prefer other engagement options, please talk to me and we can find other ways for you to participate or to feel comfortable participating in class.

Because we are a discussion-based class addressing issues relating to identity and contemporary culture, it is incredibly important that we establish a supportive environment in which all students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. Give others the kind of curious attention, generosity, compassion, and benefit of the doubt you yourself would like to receive. If you feel alienated or uncomfortable in class for any reason, please reach out to me to discuss possible remedies.

### **Expert Reader (each worth 5% of course grade, for a total of 10%)**

You will sign up for two weeks to be an "expert reader" of the course material. As an expert reader, you will pay especially close attention to the readings and screenings for the week, be ready to ask questions and talk about them in class, and submit some topics for discussion before Tuesday's class. The grading will be based primarily on completion.

### **Weekly Writing (worth 20% of course grade)**

You will complete a weekly writing assignment of at least 300 words, due on Thursdays by noon. The assignment will be submitted via a discussion board and will relate the week's readings to the screening. You must use at least one quotation from the reading. The grading

will be based primarily on completion. You will have the opportunity to submit this assignment in any of the 11 content weeks on the syllabus, but I will only count the top 8 grades.

### **Two Short Papers (averaged together for 25% of the course grade)**

You will write two papers of at least 1,000 words each. Instructions will be provided later in the course, but these essays will mostly involve explaining, evaluating, and/or applying the theory that you have read in the course. The grading will be based on your understanding of the theory and the quality of writing.

### **Final Paper or Creative Project (drafts worth 10%, paper/project worth 25%, for a total of 35%)**

You have an option to write a final paper of 2,500-3,000 words that uses the readings of the course to help explain a media text or phenomenon, or to complete a creative project with an accompanying 1,000+ word paper that explains how the project relates to course material. Deadlines are provided for a proposal and rough drafts; the grading for the drafts will be based primarily on completion and will account for 10% of the course grade. The grading for the paper/project accounts for 25% of your course grade will be based on your understanding and application of the theory, creativity, insight into the material, and quality of writing and expression. Since this is not a production class, creative projects will be graded on effort, creativity, and relation to course material, not skill or technique.

### **Grading Scale**

Here is how I classify each letter grade when I calculate the final grade for the course. I also round up anything .5 or higher.

A = 94 or higher  
A- = 90-93  
B+ = 87-89  
B = 84-86  
B- = 80-83  
C+ = 77-79  
C = 74-76  
C- = 70-73  
D+ = 67-69  
D = 64-66  
D- = 60-63  
F = 59 or lower

## **OTHER POLICIES AND RESOURCES**

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### **Plagiarism / Academic Honesty Policy**

You are expected to follow the Emory College of Arts and Sciences [Honor Code](#). The honor code is in effect throughout this semester, and relates to all aspects of the work you do in this course. By taking this course, you affirm that it is a violation of the code to cheat on

exams, to plagiarize, or to deviate from the teacher's instructions about collaboration, on all work that is submitted for grades. You agree that the teacher is entitled to move you to another seat during examinations, without explanation. You also affirm that if you witness others violating the code you have a duty to report them to the honor council. Any violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Emory Honor Council for adjudication.

All assignments turned in for this class and completed for the Honors Thesis must be the student's own writing or creative work. Any quotations must be properly attributed to the original source with proper citations. Please consult your instructor if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or how to properly cite material.

### **Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

I am personally committed to diversity in relation to race, gender identity and expression, class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexuality, and other aspects of identity and background. I value diverse perspectives in the classroom because this enhances our ability to learn and generate new ideas. I am also committed to social justice and equity in the effort to make reparations for past injustices. This takes the shape of elevating the work (both written and audiovisual) of scholars/artists and students of color, honoring and supporting students from all backgrounds, and trying to be as explicit and clear about my expectations for all students. My commitments to social justice and equity infuse both my research and how I teach topics relating to media. Issues of identity and equality are not incidental to the field of film and media, but are essential to it. As such, these topics will be part of our weekly discussions.

I am always working to improve myself and my courses, and I always welcome suggestions from students, particularly in how I can better serve underrepresented students, diversify my syllabus, and address important issues of justice, equity, and inclusion. Please come talk to me if you have concerns about any of these topics.

### **Land Acknowledgement**

Emory University acknowledges the Muscogee (Creek) people who lived, worked, produced knowledge on, and nurtured the land where Emory's Oxford and Atlanta campuses are now located. In 1821, fifteen years before Emory's founding, the Muscogee were forced to relinquish this land. We recognize the sustained oppression, land dispossession, and involuntary removals of the Muscogee and Cherokee peoples from Georgia and the Southeast. Emory seeks to honor the Muscogee Nation and other Indigenous caretakers of this land by humbly seeking knowledge of their histories and committing to respectful stewardship of the land.

## **SCHEDULE**

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### **Course Structure**

Our class will be mostly discussion-based. On Tuesdays, we will discuss the week's assigned readings, so you should complete the readings before Tuesday and come to class ready to discuss them. On Thursdays, we will continue to discuss the week's readings, but will do so in relation to the weekly screening. Before class on Thursday, you should complete the

online screening and finish any of the readings that you didn't complete before Tuesday. Your weekly writing will also be due every week by noon, and I will be using that to call on students in class to discuss the readings and screenings for the week.

## WEEK 1

Introduction to the class

## WEEK 2: What Are New Media?

Readings: Carolyn Marvin, "Annihilating Space, Time, and Difference," from *When Old Technologies Were New* (1988); Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964); Janet Murray, "Affordances of the Digital Medium," from *Inventing the Medium* (2011)

Screening: *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* (Terence Nance, 2012)

## WEEK 3: Cinema Then and Now

Readings: André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1960); Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions" (1986); Lev Manovich, "Digital Cinema and the History of a Moving Image," from *The Language of New Media* (2001) and excerpts from the Introduction to *Software Takes Command* (2013)

Screening: *Speed Racer* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 2008)

## WEEK 4: A Brief History of Computation

Readings: Betty Toole, "Ada Byron, Lady Lovelace, An Analyst and Metaphysician" (1996); Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think" (1945); Clive Thompson, "The Secret History of Women in Coding" (2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/magazine/women-coding-computer-programming.html>

Recommended Readings: Charles Babbage, "Difference Engine #1" (1864), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/57532/57532-h/57532-h.htm#p041>  
"Darwin Among the Machines" (1863), <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-ButFir-t1-g1-t1-g1-t4-body.html>

Screening: *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014)

Recommended Screenings: *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016)

## WEEK 5: Machines, Computers, and Culture

Readings: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935); Bill Nichols, "The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems" (1988)

Screenings:

Weird Digital Culture: *17776*; *I Love Alaska*; "Hafiz," by Teju Cole; games by Anna Anthropy; and submit your own

## WEEK 6: Bodies

Readings: Mischa Peters, "Exit Meat: Digital Bodies in a Virtual World" (2003); Armond R. Towns, "Toward a Black Media Philosophy" (2020); Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" (1952)

Screening: *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018)

**Due: Short Paper #1**

## WEEK 7: Race and Technology

Readings: Lisa Nakamura, "Cybertyping and the Work of Race in the Age of Digital Reproduction" (2002); Ruha Benjamin, "The New Jim Code," from *Race After Technology* (2019)

Recommended Readings: Jason Parham, "A People's History of Black Twitter, Parts 1-3," <https://www.wired.com/story/black-twitter-oral-history-part-i-coming-together/>

Screening: *Coded Bias* (Shalini Kantayya, 2020) on Netflix

## WEEK 8

No class on Tuesday for Fall Break; Thursday is a catch-up day

## WEEK 9: Modeling Theory/Practice

Readings: Nicholas Sammond, "Race, Resistance and Violence in Cartoons" (2015); Richard Dyer, "The Matter of Whiteness," from *White* (1997); Dr. Allison's essays: "Blackface, Happy Feet: The Politics of Race in Motion Capture and Animation" (2015), and "Race and the Digital Face: Facial (Mis)recognition in *Gemini Man*" (2021)

Screenings: Selections from the history of animation; *The Irishman* (Martin Scorsese, 2019)

**Due: Proposal for final paper/project**

WEEK 10: Orientalism/Globality

Readings: Hye Jean Chung, "Heterotopic Monstrosity," from *Media Heterotopias* (2017); Bhaskar Sarkar, "Plasticity and the Global" (2015); Edward Said, Ch. 1 of *Orientalism* (1978)

Screening: *The Host* (Bong Joon Ho, 2006)

WEEK 11: Media Feminisms

Readings: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975); bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship" (1992); Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, "Why Data Science Needs Feminism," from *Data Feminism* (2020), <https://data-feminism.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/frfa9szd/release/4>

Screening: Instagram TBA

**Due: Short Paper #2**

WEEK 12: Encoding/Decoding

Readings: Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding the Television Discourse" (1973); Cathy O'Neil, "Bomb Parts," from *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016)

Screening: TikTok TBA

**Due: Final Paper/Project Rough Draft #1**

WEEK 13: Interactivity/Story

Readings: Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2004); Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" (2003)

Screenings: Video Games TBA

WEEK 14—Thanksgiving Week

We will not have class this week, but there may be other individual (online) meetings, assignments, or other requirements.

WEEK 15: Catch-up Week

Readings and Screenings: TBA

**Due: Final Paper/Project Rough Draft #2**

WEEK 16

Conclusion to the course

**Due: Final Paper/Project**

There is no final exam.