

FOUNDATIONS OF MEDIA THEORY

Shannon Mattern, Ph.D.
matterns@newschool.edu

Class: Thursdays, 6:00 – 7:50pm
2 W 13th St., Room 1204

Office Hours: Mondays: 12-6
 Tuesdays: 10-2
 Wednesdays: 12-6
 Thursdays: 2-6

TA: Benjamin Godsill

And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality. – Plato, Phaedrus

We tend to assume that ours is an exceptional era – one unprecedented in its mediatization, unique in its digitality, its information- and image-centricity. But even if the conditions of our media environment are unprecedented, these claims of exceptionality are not new – nor are the practices of thinking about and theorizing media and communication. In this course we will focus on the schools of thought that have shaped the study of media throughout the 20th century, and the theories that have laid the foundation for media studies in the 21st century. We will discover that media studies, as it has come, and continues to come, into its own as an academic discipline, has borrowed from a variety of other fields, including literary theory, art history, anthropology, sociology, and history, to name just a few. And as we appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of media studies, we will also have to consider what distinguishes our field from others: What constitutes a *medium*? What is *communication*? And, furthermore, what is “theory” – and what good is it to theorize the media, or any cultural practice or product, for that matter?

We have time this semester only to survey the field – to see modeled for us the way others have approached the study of media – and, in the process, to acquire a vocabulary of theory and establish a set of questions we can apply to the study of media. Ideally, this course will build the foundation upon which you base your own critical investigations into the role of media in our culture, a foundation that informs your own media production practices.

Your Contributions to the Class:

Class Attendance and Participation: 15%. “Just showing up” just doesn’t cut it in graduate school. You are expected to have thoroughly and thoughtfully read the assigned texts and to have prepared yourself to contribute meaningfully to the class discussions. For some people, that preparation requires taking copious notes on or abstracting the assigned readings; for others, it entails supplementing the assigned readings with explanatory texts found in survey textbooks or in online sources; and for others still, it involves reading the texts, ruminating on them afterwards, then discussing those readings with classmates before the class meeting. Whatever method best suits you, I hope you arrive at class ready and willing to make yourself a valued contributor to the discussion, and eager to share your own relevant media experiences and interests. You will be permitted two excused absences; any subsequent absences – and any unexcused absences – will adversely affect your grade. Your participation will be evaluated in terms of both quantity *and* quality.

Group Presentations: 2 @ 10% each. Collectively, the members of this class have seen millions of television shows, movies, and live music concerts; played millions of records, CDs, tapes, video games, and education CD-ROMs; and read millions of newspapers, magazines, books, and websites. What a shame it would be for us to fail to take advantage of our diverse experiences and share our diverse tastes! In groups of 2 (or 3, should there be an odd number of participants in the class), students will prepare two 30- to 45-minute presentations, scheduled for the beginning of each class, in which they apply the concepts discussed in the *previous* class to a media text of their choice. This week-long delay in presentation will allow the members of the presenting group to ensure that they understand the theories they’ll be discussing – and to consult with the instructor to clear up any confusion – and to make sure they’ve chosen a text that will allow them to meaningfully illustrate those theories. This presentation should include a brief (roughly 5 minute) review of the pertinent concepts and theories, a visual and verbal presentation of the media text (clips should be no longer than 15 minutes), an application of those theories in analyzing that text, and, finally, a discussion or question-and-answer period. You’re encouraged to be as creative and entertaining as you like – as long as the content of your presentation is sound and your case is effectively argued. In other words: have fun, but be professional. Please be sure to obtain my approval for your selected media text by noon on the Tuesday before class.

Presentation Papers: 2 @ 10% each. You will be expected to submit a five- to seven-page paper related to your group’s presentation topic *within one week* of your presentation.

Take-Home Mid-Term Exam: 20%. You will receive a take-home mid-term exam, consisting of several essay questions from which you must choose three or four, at the end of class on Thursday, November 18. You will have until *Tuesday, November 23, at noon* to place your exams in my mailbox. You are encouraged to use your texts and your classmates as resources – but I will be vigilantly monitoring for plagiarism or uncanny similarities between students’ submissions.

Final Paper/Project: 25%. I hope that by the end of the semester you will have encountered at least one theorist to whom you have pledged your devotion, one school of thought to which you have pledged your allegiance, one theory that has proven particularly world-rocking. You’re encouraged, now, to follow that fascination in the creation of a final 10- to 12-page paper or a creative project with a short accompanying explanatory text. The form and content of the project are yours to determine, yet you must be certain that your final submission exhibits rigor and elegance, and that it is the product of a great deal of effort. Please submit a one-paragraph proposal – in which you identify your “research question,” theoretical framework, methodology, and cases of study – by December 9. Final projects are due by 6pm on Monday, December 20.

Text:

Course reader available at **East Side Copy**, 15 E 13th Street.

Thursday, September 9 FOUNDATIONS

Thursday, September 16 NO CLASS: Rosh Hashanah

Thursday, September 23 THEORY MATTERS

What is theory – and what good is it?

- Jonathan Culler, "What Is Theory?" In Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 1 – 17.
- M.H. Abrams, "The Orientation of Critical Theories" In The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953): 3 – 29.

Although Culler and Abrams are writing about literary theory and aesthetics, respectively, their arguments are very much pertinent to media theory, in large part because media theory draws so heavily from theory in other fields – these two (literature and art) in particular. If you substitute the word "media" where Abrams uses "art," the relevance will become apparent.

- Neil Postman, "Social Science as Moral Theology" In Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology, and Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1988): 3 – 19.

What is a "science," and a "social science"? Does science work with facts or theories, or both; what kinds of "knowing" does it permit and promote? Is communication studies a "social science"? What can we "know" or think we know through media and communication studies?

How has theory evolved throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, and why?

- Vincent B. Leitch, "Preface," "Assessing Reading Practices: From New Criticism to Poststructuralism to Cultural Studies," and "Theory Fashion" In Theory Matters (New York: Routledge, 2003): vii – x, 9 – 15, 29 – 33.
- Terry Eagleton, "The Rise and Fall of Theory" and "The Path to Postmodernism" In After Theory (New York: Basic Books, 2003): 23 – 73.

What about media theory, specifically?

- Denis McQuail, "First Approaches" In McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000): 4 – 15.
- Kevin Williams, "Introduction: Unraveling Media Theory" and "Section 1: Developing the Field: A History of Media Theory" In Understanding Media Theory (London: Arnold, 2003): 1 – 70.

- Denis McQuail, "The State of the Art" In McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000): 477 - 489.

THEORIZING THE MEDIUM ITSELF: FORM AND CONTENT

Thursday, September 30 **MEANING IN THE MEDIUM: MEDIUM THEORY**

- Oxford English Dictionary entries for "medium," "media," "mediation"

What do the etymology and varied definitions of these terms tell us about our field of study and our own assumptions about what constitutes "the media"?

- Exodus 20: The Ten Commandments

Did you know that three of the Ten Commandments are regulations of communication and "media" use?

- Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 129 - 39.
- Marshall McLuhan, "Television: The Timid Giant" In Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964): 308 - 37.
- Raymond Williams, "From Medium to Social Practice" In Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- Joshua Meyrowitz, "Media and Behavior: A Missing Link" In No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 13 - 34.
- See www.chicagoschoolmediatheory.net

Thursday, October 7
CONVERGENCE

MEDIUM THEORY IN AN AGE OF

- Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, "Introduction: The Double Logic of Remediation," "Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and Remediation," "Mediation and Remediation," and "Networks of Remediation" In Remediation: Understanding New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001): 2 - 84.

What has become of the specificity of media in our multimedia age? How are we to understand the distinctive characteristics of particular media when the all seem to be blending together?

- Lawrence Lessig, "Code Is Law" and "Four Puzzles from Cyberspace" In Code, and Other Laws of Cyberspace (New York: Basic Books, 1999): 3 - 23.

How do the symbolic and architectural forms of a medium influence what content it can carry and "bias" that medium intellectually, temporally, spatially, politically, socially, epistemologically, etc. (refer to Harold Innis's concept of "media bias":

<http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwpress/jrls/cjc/BackIssues/23.1/guested.html>)

Thursday, October 14
MYTHOLOGY

MEANING IN THE TEXT: SEMIOTICS AND

- Marc Leverette, "Towards an Ecology of Understanding: Semiotics, Medium Theory, and the Uses of Meaning" Image and Narrative 6: <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/mediumtheory/marclleverette.htm>.'
- Daniel Chandler, excerpt from "Models of the Sign" in Semiotics: The Basics (London: Routledge, 2002): 17 - 42.
- Ellen Seiter, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television" In Robert C. Allen, Ed., Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992): 31 - 66.
- Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 122-8.
- Roland Barthes, "Ornamental Cookery" and "Photography and Electoral Appeal" In Mythologies, Annette Lavers, Trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957): 78 - 80, 91 - 3.

Thursday, October 21

MEDIA CODES (CONTINUED) FORMS FOR CONTENT: GENRE

- Andrew Crissell, "Radio Signs" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., Media Studies: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 210 - 9.
- John Fiske, "The Codes of Television" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., Media Studies: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 220 - 30.
- Denis McQuail, "Media Genres and Texts" In McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000): 331 - 355.
- Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television" In Robert C. Allen, Ed., Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992): 138 - 60.
- Niki Strange, "Perform, Educate, Entertain: Ingredients of the Cookery Programme Genre" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., Media Studies: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 252 - 64.

THEORIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND ITS USERS

Thursday, October 28

MEDIA, SOCIETY & POWER

- Denis McQuail, "Concepts and Models" In McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000): 35 – 59.
- Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., Media Studies: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 18-39.
- Kevin Williams, "Effects, What Effects? Power and Influence of the Media" In Understanding Media Theory (London: Arnold, 2003): 168 – 89.
- **Read selectively:** Denis McQuail, "The Effect Research Tradition," "Process of Short-Term Effect" & "Longer-Term and Indirect Effects" In McQuail's Mass Communication Theory, 4th ed.: 415 – 474.

McQuail, like Williams, chronicles the changes in how scholars understood the audience's relationship to the media – but McQuail's discussion goes into more depth. There is bound to be some repetition between the Williams and McQuail excerpts, so feel free to skim over areas the address concepts with which you feel you're already familiar.

Thursday, November 4 **AUDIENCES USING MEDIA**

- Kevin Williams, "The Audience Strikes Back: New Audience and Reception Theory" In Understanding Media Theory (London: Arnold, 2003): 190 – 209.
- Janice Radway, "Reading the Romance" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., Media Studies: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 492 – 502. .
- Robert C. Allen, "Audience-Oriented Criticism and Television" In Robert C. Allen, Ed., Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992): 101 – 37.

THEORIZING THE MEDIA WITHIN THEIR POLITICAL ECONOMIC CONTEXTS

Thursday, November 11 **POLITICAL ECONOMY**

- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 39-42

- Antonio Gramsci, "History of the Subaltern Classes," "The Concept of 'Ideology'," "Cultural Themes," and "Ideological Material" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 43-7.
- Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 48-70.
- Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 71-101.
- Louis Althusser, from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" reprinted in Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan, Eds., A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992): 50 - 8.
- Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 102-7.

Thursday, November 18 **POLITICAL ECONOMY, CONTINUED**

- Kevin Williams, "Inside the Image Factory: Theories of Media Organization and Media Work" and "Living in the Global Village: New Media Theory" In Understanding Media Theory (London: Arnold, 2003): 96 - 120, 213 - 229.
- Siva Vaidhyanathan, "Introduction," "Copyright and American Culture," and "The Digital Moment" In Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 1 - 34, 149 - 184.

Thursday, November 25
NO CLASS: Thanksgiving

A FIELD OF MULTIPLICITY: CULTURAL STUDIES AND POSTMODERNISM

Thursday, December 2 **CULTURAL STUDIES**

- Douglas Kellner, "Theory Wars and Cultural Studies," "For a Cultural Studies that is Critical, Multicultural, and Multiperspectival" In Media Culture: Cultural

Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern (New York: Routledge, 1995): 15 - 54, 93 - 122

Thursday, December 9

REPRESENTATION

- Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, "Introduction to Part IV" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 387-391.
- Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 393-404.
- Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 405-423.
- bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 424-438.
- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 462-487.
- Néstor García Canclini, "Hybrid Cultures, Oblique Powers" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 488-510.

Thursday, December 16 **SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?**

- Terry Eagleton, "Losses and Gains" In After Theory (New York: Basic Books, 2003): 74 - 102.
- Jim Collins, "Television and Postmodernism" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., Media Studies: A Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 375 - 384.
- Lev Manovich, "What Is New Media?" In The Language of New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 23001): 27 - 48.
- Alexander Galloway, "Introduction" In Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004): 3 - 27.

Thursday, December 23

NO CLASS: What? Are you crazy?!