FOUNDATIONS OF MEDIA THEORY

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Class: Wednesdays, 6:00 – 7:50pm
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> 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 lain 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.

<u>Your Contributions to the Class:</u>

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 Presentation: 15%. Collectively, the members of this class have seen tens – maybe hundreds – of thousands of television shows, movies, and live music concerts; played thousands of records, CDs, tapes, video games, and education CD-ROMs; and read thousands 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. Either by yourself or in groups of two or three (depending on whether you prefer to work alone or in a group), you will prepare one presentation – no more than 15 minutes per person (Seriously! We'll be timing you!) – scheduled for the beginning of each class, in which you apply the concepts discussed in the *previous* class to **a single media text** (in *any* format – in fact, I encourage you to go beyond film and tv) of your choice. This week-long delay in presentation will allow you to ensure that you understand the theories you'll be discussing; to consult with the instructor or TA to clear up any confusion; to make sure you've chosen a text that will allow you to meaningfully illustrate those theories; and, if applicable, to establish a division of labor among the group members. This presentation should include a brief review of the pertinent concepts and theories, a visual and verbal presentation of the media text (clips should be no longer than seven or eight minutes), an application of those theories in analyzing that text, and, finally, if time permits, 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 inform Michael of your selected media text by noon on the Tuesday before class.

Presentation Papers 15%. You will be expected to submit, via email, a five- to seven-page paper related to your group's presentation topic. The paper is due before the start of class on your scheduled presentation day.

Take-Home Mid-Term Exam: 25%. You will receive a take-home mid-term exam, consisting of several essay questions from which you must choose three or four, sometime in mid-August. You will have until *Wednesday, April 13, at noon* to email me your paper. 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: 30%. 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 four- to five-page 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 case(s) of study – or, in the case of creative project, in which you explain what theoretical issues you'll be dealing with, in which medium, why, and how – by April 27. Final projects are due by noon on Monday, May 16.

Text:

Course reader (#42 & #43) available at **East Side Copy**, 15 E 13th Street.

Useful Resources:
W.J.T. Mitchell's U Chicago Media Theory Class's Media Theory Glossary:
http://www.chicagoschoolmediatheory.net/projectsglossary.htm

Dominic Strinati, An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 1995)

Wednesday, January 26
FOUNDATIONS

Wednesday, February 2
THEORY MATTERS
What is theory – and what good is it?
- Jonathan Culler, "What Is Theory?" In <u>Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 1 – 17.
- M.H. Abrams, "The Orientation of Critical Theories" In <u>The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition</u> (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.

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 <u>Theory Matters</u> (New York: Routledge, 2003): vii – x, 9 – 15, 29 – 33.
- Terry Eagleton, "The Rise and Fall of Theory" and "The Path to Postmodernism" In <u>After Theory</u> (New York: Basic Books, 2003): 23 – 73.

Wednesday, February 9
THEORY MATTERS, Cont.
What about *media* theory, specifically?
- Denis McQuail, "First Approaches" In <u>McQuail's Mass Communication Theory</u>, 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 <u>Understanding Media Theory</u> (London: Arnold, 2003): 1 – 70.

THEORIZING THE MEDIUM ITSELF: FORM AND CONTENT

Wednesday, February 16
MEANING IN THE MEDIUM: MEDIUM THEORY
- Oxford English Dictionary entries for "medium," "media," "mediation"

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

- Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave"

What messages are embedded in, embodied in specific media? What do the **forms** *of specific media denote and connote? How do the properties of a medium* **bias** *that medium?*

- Plato, Part V of <u>Phaedrus</u>
- Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," "Media Hot and Cold," "The Print," "Television: The Timid Giant" In <u>Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man</u> (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964): 7 – 32, 157 – 163, 308 – 37.
- Harold Innis, "The Bias of Communication" In <u>The Bias of Communication</u> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press): 33 – 60.
- Joshua Meyrowitz, "Media and Behavior: A Missing Link" In <u>No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 13 – 34.

Wednesday, February 23
MEDIUM THEORY IN AN AGE OF CONVERGENCE

What has become of the specificity of media in our multimedia age? How are we to understand the distinctive characteristics of particular media when they all seem to be blending together? What does "media literacy" mean in an age of "hypermediation"?

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

Wednesday, March 2
MEANING IN THE TEXT: SEMIOTICS AND MYTHOLOGY

How do we find meaning in the text? What methods enable us to systematically, rigorously identify and examine the multiple levels of meaning in any media text? What deep-level ideology underlies the signs composing a media text?

- Marc Leverette, "Towards an Ecology of Understanding: Semiotics, Medium Theory, and the Uses of Meaning" <u>Image and Narrative</u> 6: http://www.imageandnarrative.be/mediumtheory/marcleverette.htm.'
- Daniel Chandler, excerpt from "Models of the Sign" in <u>Semiotics: The Basics</u> (London: Routledge, 2002): 17 – 42.
- Ellen Seiter, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television" In Robert C. Allen, Ed., <u>Channels of Discourse, Reassembled</u>, 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., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 122-8.
- Roland Barthes, "Ornamental Cookery" and "Photography and Electoral Appeal" In <u>Mythologies</u>, Annette Lavers, Trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957): 78 – 80, 91 – 3.

Wednesday, March 9   **Semiotics Presentation**
MEDIA CODES (CONTINUED)
FORMS FOR CONTENT: GENRE
- Andrew Crissell, "Radio Signs" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., <u>Media Studies: A Reader</u>, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 210 – 9.
- John Fiske, "The Codes of Television" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., <u>Media Studies: A Reader</u>, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 220 – 30.
- Denis McQuail, "Media Genres and Texts" In <u>McQuail's Mass Communication Theory</u>, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000): 331 – 355.
- Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television" In Robert C. Allen, Ed., <u>Channels of Discourse, Reassembled</u>, 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., <u>Media Studies: A Reader</u>, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 252 – 64.

THEORIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND THEIR USERS

Wednesday, March 16   **Genre Presentation**
MEDIA, SOCIETY & POWER
- Denis McQuail, "Concepts and Models" In <u>McQuail's Mass Communication Theory</u>, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2000): 35 – 59.
- Kevin Williams, "Effects, What Effects? Power and Influence of the Media" In <u>Understanding Media Theory</u> (London: Arnold, 2003): 168 – 89.
- **Read selectively**: Denis McQuail, "The Effect Research Tradition," "Process of Short-Term Effect" & "Longer-Term and Indirect Effects" In <u>McQuail's Mass Communication Theory</u>, 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.

    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? Much media effects research makes use of scientific methodologies – but what can this research tell us about the "effects" of media on its audiences?

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

Wednesday, March 23
NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK

Wednesday, March 30   **Media Effects Presentation**
AUDIENCES USING MEDIA

How do "audience scholars" and effects researchers think differently about the relationship between media texts and audiences? How do, or can, audiences "read" media texts – and what are the consequences of these readings? Is reading/watching/listening a political activity – and, if so, how?

- 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.
- Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding" reprinted in Simon During, Ed., The Cultural Studies Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993): 507 – 517.
- 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

Wednesday, April 6   **Audience Studies Presentation**
POLITICAL ECONOMY

Why is it important to look at the social context within which media are produced, distributed, and consumed? What do the media have to do with class, power, and ideology – and what is ideology? How is the "political economic" focus different from that of the other theoretical frameworks we've addressed thus far?

- 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, excerpts from "The Study of Philosophy" In Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Eds., and Trans., Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (New York: International Publishers, 1971): 323 – 43, 365 – 6, 375 – 7.
- 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., <u>A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader</u> (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., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 102-7.

Wednesday, April 13
POLITICAL ECONOMY, CONTINUED: FIGURES ON THE FRINGES

How have new media changed the way art – or any cultural production, for that matter – is produced, distributed, and consumed? Is the loss of an artwork's, a text's, a film's "aura" or "authenticity" something to be lamented? How might the increased accessibility of cultural productions be politically significant? How have new media forms contributed to or detracted from the development or maintenance of a public sphere, a "place" for democratic debate?

- Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 48 - 70.
- Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere" reprinted in Simon During, Ed., <u>The Cultural Studies Reader</u>, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993): 518 – 536.

A FIELD OF MULTIPLICITY: CULTURAL STUDIES AND POSTMODERNISM

Wednesday, April 20   **Political Econ Presentation**
CULTURAL STUDIES

What other theoretical frameworks does cultural studies borrow from, and what methodologies does it employ? What new insights can this "multiperspectival" approach yield?

- Douglas Kellner, "Theory Wars and Cultural Studies," "For a Cultural Studies that is Critical, Multicultural, and Multiperspectival" In <u>Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern</u> (New York: Routledge, 1995): 15 – 54, 93 - 122

Wednesday, April 27
REPRESENTATION

Who is, or is not, represented in the media, by whom, how, and why? Why does it matter? What are the political consequences of representation, or the lack thereof?

- Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, "Introduction to Part IV" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 387-391.
- Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (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., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 405-423.
- bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (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., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 462-487.
- Néstor García Canclini, "Hybrid Cultures, Oblique Powers" reprinted in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Eds., <u>Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks</u> (New York: Blackwell, 2001): 488-510.

Wednesday, May 4   **CultStud/Rep. Presentation**
SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?
- Terry Eagleton, "Losses and Gains" In <u>After Theory</u> (New York: Basic Books, 2003): 74 – 102.
- Jim Collins, "Television and Postmodernism" reprinted in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, Eds., <u>Media Studies: A Reader</u>, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1996): 375 – 384.
- Lev Manovich, "What Is New Media?" In <u>The Language of New Media</u> (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 23001): 27 - 48.

Wednesday, May 11
WRAP UP & CLOSING