

Media, Culture, & Society

MSCR 1220: 20501 | Prof. Jake Cowan | M/W/R 3:00–4:05pm

Where: Education Department 101

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Office Hours: M/W 1:30–2:30 & by appointment

"We shape our tools, & thereafter our tools shape us."

— Marshall McLuhan

People today are simultaneously surrounded & permeated by multifarious modes of media, yet we frequently are so close to our symbolic machinery that we hardly recognize how they work & how they work upon us. In this fast-moving & far-ranging survey course, we will critically & carefully scrutinize the development, evolution, structural essence, & teleology of media writ large, from more conventional forms like film to those less obvious like roads. In thinking about the dynamic relationship between a people & its modes of communication, we will explore how everyday engagements with media are influenced & structured by broader industrial, political, ideological, & aesthetic contexts. To accomplish this, we will examine how creative artifacts are part & parcel with media industries & how technological change impacts these developments, the influence of media on ideological reification & social organization, how people interpret, ignore, & interact with media content, as well as how media influence cultural practices & the imagined horizons of daily life. The task at hand will be to probe beneath the apparent uses of media to unearth the network of meanings embedded within, asking how media in turn use us.

Learning Aims:

- Understand the nature of & relationship between media, culture, & society
- Articulate the basic questions, terminology, & methods of media studies
- Develop more than just basic media literacy ideas & skills
- Hone & demonstrate critical thinking skills by identifying & interpreting significant details in a text & then developing an argument about its meaning
- Evince an ability to read, understand, deconstruct, & practically apply the arguments presented in scholarly works

Schedule

Date	Topic	Homework
W 9/7	Introductions	// // // // // // // // // // // // // //
Th 9/8	Definitions	Read syllabus, have questions
M 9/12	The Medium is the Mæssage	McLuhan, Ch. 1
W 9/14	Hot & Cool	McLuhan, Ch. 2
Th 9/15	The New Flesh <i>[no class]</i>	<i>Videodrome</i> & Responses
M 9/19	Promethean Prostheses	McLuhan, Chs. 3–5
W 9/21	Our World, The Global Village	McLuhan, Chs. 6–7
Th 9/22	Misunderstanding Media	Baudrillard Debray
M 9/26	Addressing Media	Mitchell (a)
W 9/28	Discourse Networks	Kittler (a), Preface & Intro
Th 9/29	Every Sound There Is	Ross
M 10/3	Recording the Real	Kittler (b)
W 10/5	Cinematic Apparatus	Baudry
Th 10/6	Act Naturally	<i>A Hard Day's Night</i> & Responses
M 10/10	Indigenous Peoples Day <i>[no class]</i>	// // // // // // // // // // // // // //
W 10/12	Just My Type	Brown & Rivers
Th 10/13	Looking At, Looking With	Lanham
M 10/17	Asynchronous Media <i>[no class]</i>	– Personal Media Journal Due –
W 10/19	Asynchronous Media <i>[no class]</i>	– One-Pager One Due –
Th 10/21	Asynchronous Media <i>[no class]</i>	– Media in the Flesh Report Due –

Schedule (cont.)

Date	Topic	Homework
M 10/24	Mechanical Reproducibility	Benjamin
W 10/26	Age of the World Picture	Heidegger
Th 10/27	Welcome to the Machine	<i>Modern Times</i> & Responses
M 10/31	Social Media	Williams Winner
W 11/2	WMDs	O'Neil Wachter-Boettcher
Th 11/3	Life out of Balance	<i>Koyaanisqatsi</i> & Responses
M 11/7	Cybersexism	Penny
W 11/9	Bamboozled	Parham Howard
Th 11/10	#Revolution	Barlowe Gladwell Mirani
M 11/14	Amusing Ourselves: Part I	Postman, Chs. 1–5
W 11/16	Amusing Ourselves: Part II	Postman, Chs. 6–11
Th 11/17	Mad as Hell	<i>Network</i> & Responses
M 11/21	Post-Citizenship	Cowan
W 11/23	Thanksgiving [no class]	// // // // // // // // // // // // // //
Th 11/24	Thanksgiving [no class]	// // // // // // // // // // // // // //
M 11/28	I, Cyborg	Haraway
W 11/30	Biocybernetic Reproduction	Mitchell (b)
Th 12/1	The New Flesh, Revisited	<i>eXistenZ</i> & Responses
M 12/5	Escape Velocity	Virilio
W 12/7	Wrapping Up	- One-Pager Two Due -

Assignments at a Glance

Participation (5%) — Whether online or in-person, students are expected to fully, responsibly, & intelligently participate in class discussions, & will be assessed based on their ability to demonstrate meaningful familiarity with the course readings, placing new concepts & terminology within the broader thematic arc of the class.

Meeting Minutes (5%) — Using a shared Google Doc to collaborate on a record of our discussions—topics raised, homework assigned, examples given, &c.—every student at one point must volunteer to take meeting minutes for that particular lecture, reciting a short pre-written summary at the beginning of the following class period..

Reading Responses (15%) — For each reading, (at least) one student will sign up to lead class discussion by posting (at least) three thought-provoking questions or substantial comments in response to the text. Individual responses should be (at least) 250 words, incorporating quotes from the reading, & must be submitted online (at least) 24 hours before the relevant meeting period.

Response Responses (5%) — For (no less than) five of the aforementioned reading response posts, students will reply in kind to the questions or comments raised by their peers, writing (no less than) 100 words & directly relating to the original text.

Box Office Returns (15%) — Throughout the semester, there are a handful of films relating to various topics under discussion that students will watch & then submit 300 to 500-word analyses of, explicitly relating aspects of the movie—story, score, cinematography, &c.—to that week's corresponding topic.

Personal Media Journal (5%) — During the asynchronous week in the middle of the term, students will keep a concise but thorough log reflecting on any media (as defined by McLuhan) used & consumed for one 48-hour period.

One-Pagers (20% x2) — Twice during the semester, once as a midterm & again as a final, students will submit fastidiously composed, tightly edited, & creatively analytical one-page, single-spaced papers. In the first, students will pick a chapter from the long second part of McLuhan's *Understanding Media*—such as the sections on TV, radio, or clothing—carefully identifying the given definition of the technology, its affordances, & its limitations in the paper's initial half, then illustrating those concepts with an original example in the latter half. In the final paper, students will similarly summarize a text from the second part of the semester, elucidating its key ideas with a different original example, giving equal weight to both requirements.

Media in the Flesh (10%) – Utilizing the extra time opened up by the asynchronous week, students will venture beyond campus to explore media in the broader Bay, writing a one-page, single-spaced reflection relating the experience to previous readings. Covid permitting, activities might include attending a sports event, going to a concert, visiting an art museum, or tabletop gaming in public.

Grade Breakdown

★★★★★	A	94–100	<i>exceeds expectations; creative approach; flawless execution; grasps purpose beyond just the prompt</i>
★★★★☆	A-	90–93	
★★★★	B+	87–89	<i>meets most to all expectations; minimal mechanical mistakes; demonstrates grasp of assignment nuances; practical albeit unoriginal approach to the prompt; factually & philosophically accurate</i>
★★★☆☆	B	84–86	
★★★	B-	80–83	
★★★☆☆	C+	77–79	<i>meets many to most expectations; sloppy usage & mechanical errors mar understanding or fluidity; factually or philosophically off the mark; fails to demonstrate grasp of assignment aim or detail</i>
★★★	C	74–76	
★★☆☆	C-	70–73	
★★	D	65–69	<i>meets few expectations; major mechanical errors; merely rote attempt to complete assignment</i>
★☆☆	D-	60–64	
🧨	F	0–59	<i>little to no attempt at meeting basic expectations</i>

Requirements

Textbooks – Readings in this course will range from the theoretical to the practical, the classical to the (post)modern, the traditionally printed word to cutting-edge multimodal publications. Throughout, in the name of parity & accessibility, I will do my best to provide selected PDFs, ebooks, hyperlinks, & scans of various texts, broadly construed, with the minor exception of the following, which I have not yet found a workable copy of online:

- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Penguin, 2005. (ISBN: 014303653X)

Other potential readings will be made available via Moodle at the earliest opportunity, although you may consider getting your grubby paws on your own used copies in particular of the following:

- Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology, & Other Essays*. Harper, 2013. (ISBN: 0062290703)
- Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford, 1999. (ISBN: 0804732337)
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. Critical Ed. Gingko, 2003. (ISBN: 1584230738)

Technology — While students by no means need to be in advance expert users of Twitter, habitual viewers of YouTube, or chronic listeners of Chapo Trap House—nor should they be, for the sake of their mental health—a digital native’s inchoate familiarity with such platforms is expected. In addition, you should be comfortable using Google Docs (& the related software suite) to compose, collaborate, & submit your work throughout the semester. Finally, you are expected to check your email inbox everyday & respond professionally to any messages within a typical timeframe (weekends excepted) of one business day.

Furthermore, ensuring accessibility is a core value of this class, which means that all assignments, initiatives, & discussions aspire to fully accommodate each student beginning with the very first day of class. If any technology is challenging for you to use, no matter how large or small the issue, please communicate this however you feel comfortable & I will make every effort to ensure your success.

Policies

Late Work

All assignments, without exception, should be submitted as asked by the beginning of class the day they are due on the syllabus in order to receive credit. That said, emergencies do arise, & I am merely human, so should you message me with ample time well before the morning of class (e.g., at least by the prior midnight), we might just come to an understanding; but if you get & then forget an extension, you will not receive another after that.

Tardiness & Absences

Please show your peers & professor respect by arriving to class or (if necessary) logging into Zoom on time, at least a minute before we are set to begin, taking note of any music or other audio that is playing, which is meant to set the mood & theme

for the day. If you need to miss a meeting period for whatever reason, please send a professional email to let me know just the same as if you were to miss a shift at work.

Attitude & Afterwardsness

While there are of course a number of different reasons for earning a bachelor's degree—perhaps you just want a piece of arbitrary paper to help advance your career prospects, or maybe you're unsure about your future path & merely felt social or familial pressure to attend college—many of your professors (including the one writing this) believe that academic success at a tertiary level ultimately depends on an attitude of intellectual humility, curiosity, & openness that characterizes a willingness to ask questions to which you do not already presume to know the answer. (Jacques Lacan, a thinker who, if you're lucky, you won't hear about again during the next four years, once quipped that *you can't ask a question if you already know the answer.*) The assumption of many teachers, then, is that you're taking classes in order to learn what you did not already know before, & that includes pedagogical decisions professors make about the direction, pace, style, & content of the course. If, however, you act as though you understand already what a subject should entail, then there is necessarily no reason for you to be there & you might justifiably lose participation points.

A Word of Warning

Take note now: *This class is rated NC-17 for themes of sex, drugs, & rock 'n roll.* That means you can curse an idea or embellish an expression, but you may not curse your fellow classmates. While all kinds of commendable questions & questionable comments are invited, this ultimately is not a debate class centered on back-&-forth squabbling. The readings & lectures in this course will ask you to consider radically counterintuitive & sometimes provocative theories that may challenge many of your preconceived notions about technology, writing, or life itself, & approaching novel ideas by merely reciting talking points or repeating rigid sloganeering is less a respectable sign of someone's prior learning than a signal that they aren't presently engaging in learning whatsoever. Should anyone make the mistake of attempting to goad their peers or professor into a virulent debate at the expense of dialogue, upon a first offense I will ask them to remain silent, but thereafter removed from class, for the remainder of the semester if deemed necessary.

Because your work will be evaluated on how well you can reflect an understanding of class concepts in what you produce rather than how much you personally agree with them, or with your instructor, our aim at bottom should be to have amiable conversations instead of contentious arguments. As such, we will aspire to create a hospitable safe space for all sorts of divergent thoughts, bodies, thoughts about

bodies, & bodies of thought, as freedom of expression does not include the freedom to limit another's expression. We will strive to encourage an open exchange of opinions & information without prejudging them; likewise, we will welcome honest & good-natured criticism, remaining open to new ideas. There will be no place for the spreading of willful ignorance, of malicious conspiracy, of small-hearted vitriol, or of small-minded falsehoods, & we will instead adopt as our motto the Augustinian maxim: *Dilige et quod vis fac* (or as the Fab Four put it: *All you need is love*).

The Novel Coronavirus aka COVID-19 aka the 'rona

These are strange days, indeed—as Lennon once put it—& yet during such trying times, for one reason or another, you decided to enroll in this course, perhaps in order to improve your writing & thinking in preparation for a future career, or maybe just to meet the crazy professor who tells all the bad jokes. Whatever the reason, what you certainly did not sign up for is an ongoing, never-ending, uncaring global pandemic. If you are facing extraordinary circumstances in your life at any point this semester, within or beyond this course & within or beyond covid, please reach out to me. Adjustments can always be made, & I will make every effort to be flexible. If you face a challenge, problem, or difficulty of whatever kind during the duration of this course, & if you think I can help in some way, please communicate this to me, & I will try to institute changes that work for all parties involved. Keep in mind, though, that while I will do all I can to accommodate your needs, whether due to the pandemic or some other reason like a disability, it is ultimately your responsibility to raise the issue in a timely & clear manner.

F(requently)A(nnoying)Q(uestions)

How would you describe your teaching style?

In my estimation, pedagogy is not a top-down, hierarchical process of knowledge transfer, where the professor is some subject-supposed-to-know (another Lacanian phrase) & students are empty vessels waiting to be filled with new information & rote memorization; rather, I see each of you as co-participants in our classroom, bringing your own knowledge, histories, & interests to bear on this material. That means challenging many of your expectations for not only how a teacher might approach the classroom, but how students should comport themselves, as well. Likewise, I do not believe that learning only happens in the classroom, nor that it stops when class does, but that learning occurs when we aren't looking, often unconsciously & after the fact, when it suddenly dawns later that we are thinking differently than before. To that end, I try to facilitate a classroom that is open to freewheeling, digressive discussions, using everything at my disposal—from humor to music to personal anecdotes to writing prompts—to keep the conversation not only interesting, but to

encourage seeing issues from new perspectives. What you have to say can be as important in that regard as what I do, which is why I rarely come to class with a full lecture, preferring instead to use our shared readings as a means of honing real questions without clear answers to work through together.

How much will we read & write in this course?

While the syllabus may at first seem daunting, especially when you are taking a number of other difficult courses, I can assure you that there is a method to the madness & that the assignments work in a way that, when put together, end up lightening the overall workload. Roughly speaking, you can expect to do about an hour or two of reading for each class & about the same amount of time for writing each week, but as you grow more accustomed to the pace, even as the work intensifies, it will eventually feel easier—which is the point.

Every professor grades writing differently, so how should I write in this class?

That's up to you: Every professor grades writing differently, true, but then again, every person *writes* differently; & as far as I see it, every person should be graded differently, just the same. Throughout the semester, we will work together to set shared expectations as to how you want to grow as a writer & as a thinker, & I will do my best to judge you according to the terms you both implicitly & explicitly set for yourself. The aim is to help you develop your own unique writerly voice, not to get your writing or thinking like mine.

If you want us to think freely, does that mean there are no dumb questions?

There may not be any *dumb* questions, but there are certainly *bad* ones (& honestly, there are dumb ones, too). For instance, *never email me to ask whether you have reading due for the next class*—that just sounds like you're lazily asking whether or not you really need to do the homework. Or if you miss class, *never ask if you missed something important*—everything your peers have to say is important, so *no duh!* Or if you need an extension on a paper, you can absolutely ask for one—but if class starts within the next few hours, the answer will be a resounding *no*. Or if you are feeling uncertain about how to approach a given prompt, while I will readily answer whatever clarifying questions you may have, I will ignore any requests to double check your work (which amounts to me grading twice) before you submit it. Likewise (clearly all this I find irritating), if you miss important details on assignment & receive a lower grade because of it, just take the L & don't ask if you can resubmit for a better score, because you will only end up frustrated & resentful when I decidedly & cruelly respond *what? no, of course not*.

What if I'm utterly inept with tech?

That might sometimes be an advantage: As you will come to learn, being a whiz at tech doesn't mean much without the sort of critical thinking & rhetorical skills we will try to develop throughout this course. Just please extend to me that same flexibility & patience as we navigate the complexities & contingencies of our novel learning environment(s) together.

What if I'm utterly inept as a writer or speaker, how can I pass this course?

Again, that might sometimes be an advantage: What would be the point of taking a course if you were already an expert in the subject matter? (Hence, likewise, have the humility to recognize you likely have something to learn from me, practically & conceptually.) Ultimately, the objective is to try—by that I don't merely mean *try to get an A*, but rather, try to understand the material & issues at hand, because *the only way you'll fail is if you don't try* (but also try to get an A for real, though).

Hold on, I still have questions.

Good, because I have some, too, & generally more questions than answers to boot. The only way to take away something meaningful from this course, something that can help you achieve what you couldn't already, is to let go of conditioned presuppositions & forget previous assumptions so as to discover not just novel answers but, more importantly still, unexpected questions you never would have thought to ask in the first place.