

Syllabus

Media, Culture, and Critique

(Elective course, 4th year, program “Media Communications”)

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INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

a. Pre-requisites

The basic requirement for course is a working level of English language (especially ability to read academic texts of media, analyze them and write essays and papers in English). We also require advanced knowledge in such fields as theory of mass communications, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, history of art. Attendance is required. Students should demonstrate the interest to research, read academic texts in multi-disciplinary field of study and apply them to interpret the contemporary problems of the culture and media. This course can suit well students of journalism, politics, sociology, arts, history, and literature, and all those that wish to broaden their perspectives with a theoretical input.

b. Abstract

Critique is an essential feature of social, political and individual life across time in human history. The idea of critique has long established and enduring philosophical foundations. For instance, in the “Apology”, Plato notes Socrates’ dictum that “an unexamined life is a life not worth living”. This idea marked Socrates’ quest of truth seeking, along with the criteria to establish truth and what constitutes “the good life”. In the contemporary context of modern societies, critique is vital for a society’s well-being as it allows the assessing of the developments and the central features that characterize a given society and its trajectory. The theoretical tradition of critical theory advanced in the context of mass, modern societies, shaped by mass media and the industrial mode of production. Scholars like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1989) sought to develop what they framed as a critical way of thinking, to equip people with the appropriate conceptual tools to examine and to reflect upon their life circumstances, so as to shield societies from their possible regression into a high-tech –yet barbaric– state of affairs. Such scholars understood that technological progress –a central feature of modern societies- alone, cannot count for civilization progress. Mediated by economic or political imperatives, technology becomes a tool of coercion and

domination. The example of their native Germany and the rise of Nazism to power there through high popular support, proved their hypothesis well enough. Critique thus aimed at assessing social developments from a universal humanitarian and a democratic perspective, which seemed to form a genuine sense of human development.

In the media context, critique emerges through the advance of normative frameworks of thought and practice that allow the assessing and the evaluation of media practices. This way, one can judge how participatory social media actually are (e.g. Jenkins, 2007), by grasping the corporate side of Facebook or Google, and by understanding how they profit through users' online participation and the proprialization of their data (Fuchs, 2017). One can also understand the ways that racist, sexist and classist discourses are reproduced in today's media environment, and how consumer culture reproduces such biases, despite proclamations that deem such phenomena as "dated" (Hall, 2003). Along that, one can view the ways that derogatory stereotypes advance along with broader socio-cultural trends and changes. A critical media approach also allows the understanding of the media's influence in the development of the phenomenon of globalization and its culture, today's center and periphery relations, the power asymmetries of globalization, as they are maintained through the effective dissemination of Western media through the globalized, so-called "free market" framework (Lule, 2018). Furthermore, present day ways of propaganda and political influence will also be discussed while approaching the media through the lens of public sphere theories (Habermas, 1992; Soules, 2015).

Drawing on sociology, cultural and political theory and economics, and with the uses of examples drawn from today's digital media context in particular, the course will discuss how the media industries develop in a globalized and competitive world, and what their political, cultural and economic effects are. In this process, important critical questions will emerge with regards to the ways that technology is developed and distributed in an oligopolistic global media framework, the ways that particular ideological contents are reproduced in various public spheres, along with the symbolic reproduction of geopolitical relations and asymmetries.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course aims at familiarizing students with main contemporary contributions of critical media and cultural studies. While mainstream media studies focus on rather positivist approaches on media industries, media production and media culture that often function in a rather celebratory manner, critical approaches offer a broad and in-depth view that assesses how the media work and develop as institutions that are situated in specific historical, economic, political and social contexts.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- The course will equip students with concepts and knowledge to understand media-related phenomena in a systemic, historical and socially embedded sense, as part of a broader socio-political and economic context
- Students will acquire a better understanding of the forces that shape the development of media as industries and as cultural and socio-political institutions.
- The students will get a better sense of the ways that the media influence society and individuals: the ways that our opinions, preferences, and biases –all connected with a broad range of issues that we deal with daily– are shaped by the media and our uses of them.

COURSE PLAN

Topic 1. Introduction: media and critical studies

The critical approach to media studies is an interdisciplinary one, bringing sociology, political science, semiology and psychology to examine the influence of the media in society. Critical media studies are a branch of a broader intellectual tradition of critical social studies with its own philosophy and history that developed in a critical opposition to the “positivist” studies paradigm.

The importance of developing critical approaches in the study of the media has to do with:

- The ubiquitous presence of the media today. Our ways of knowing and accessing and perceiving reality, our sociality patterns, our identities are mediated by media technologies and media content.
- In the globalized world, our access to information is almost always filtered through the media; we learn through mediated forms of knowledge and this makes the media a very powerful structure at every level.

To use some broad categories, critical media studies approach the media according to the following three levels:

1. Media as organizations and industries, related to the organizational, strategic and economic structure of the mass media today and how this effects media production and media work.
2. Media as texts and messages, with regards to the kind of messages do they form and what ideological underpinnings do these entail.
3. Media reception and audiences, concerning the ways that the media are consumed by individuals and social groups today, and the kind of stances and identities are created in this process and what sort of social relations emerge through this process.

The kind of media that the course will be referring to are contemporary mass media. Essentially all media, old and new are part of a digital media framework which has radically affected the ways of production, distribution and consumption of media content, and has radically altered the way media practitioners work. In principle, the main forms of media are the following:

1. Print media
2. Motion Picture and sound recording

3. Broadcast media
4. New media

Whatever the media we are looking at, we can view specific common trends to be cutting through their organizational and production modes. These are the following:

- **Convergence:** where old and new media, a variety of media genres collide and diffuse; technological affordances enable the creative mixing of different previously segregated forms and practices into new ones that combine a variety of features
- **Mobility:** historically, the media have not been really portable. The advent of digital technologies and the broader digitalization trend made things portable. Anything can be nowadays accessible online and through a variety of popular devices such as smartphones.
- **Fragmentation:** the mass character of the media is also rapidly being transformed. Mass concerns a broad and undifferentiated crowd of people, an audience that is largely passive that is addressed by popular media formats, TV, cinema, newspapers. Fragmentation is about the rise of more diverse audiences with specialized tastes.
- **Globalization:** As we know it, globalization is largely driven by economic factors and the free market institutions. The impact of globalization on the media is tremendous as it is connected to the conglomeration and monopolization of media businesses across the world. Important questions concern the development of culture in this process.
- **Simulation:** this is a rather complex idea, connected to the writings of the French postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard. It is about the rise of a hyperreal culture, the rise of a reality that does not refer to something actual. The implosion of the image is what simulates the reality. Many of the images that the media reproduce do not have much relation to actual events and the external reality, and often images have no original.
- The historical context where these developments occur is that which is broadly referred to as post-modernity. This is a conventional historical periodization of our times which relates to specific features and changes, primarily economic ones. Often this time is also described as the information age, or the network society or the post industrial society, the digital era etc. post-modernity or even late modernity is a more inclusive term that also highlights cultural aspects that characterize our times.

Topic 2. Culture and ideology

Culture according to R. Williams a founder of the British cultural studies, is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.

- Culture is a whole way of living of a given community as it can entail all aspects of it, from food habits, to customs to language.

- Culture is collective, symbolic and historical; culture is a symbolic entity that has a historical continuity and it is about preserving as well as about changing things too; culture is evolving and is subjected to social changes.
- Culture is ideological and a site of contestation; this is an important element here that is often forgotten, which the cultural studies pay attention.
- Institutions such as mass media are central in the reproduction of culture and are caught in the ideological debates inherent in the culture; the media are part of today's culture, mediating key trends that characterize our times. The media are also a site where different social conflicts are reflected in symbolic terms.

The study of culture that concerns the media relates to a broad discipline that is nowadays known as cultural studies. This discipline has produced a great number of studies over the last decades since the 1960's with regards to cultural production and consumption, popular culture, lifestyles, identities, and processes of social assimilation, exclusion, accessed through the study of cultural forms and mediated communication practices.

Cultural studies emerged in the 1950's from:

1. Literature critique
2. Sociology

The prime objective of cultural studies was the study of the phenomenon of mass popular culture and the changes in culture as a whole (in Britain and elsewhere). Stuart Hall, as the director of the Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the UK, has been a very influential scholar in the study of media as he dealt with ideological questions related to media representations and addressed questions connected to ethnicity and race, as well as gender and class. Hall's approach to culture was through the lens of ideology and social reproduction. Simultaneously, Hall also saw that dominant social meanings are often contested by the audiences and not taken for granted. Hall's model of "encoding and decoding" is central in the study of both ideology in media production and audience reception of media messages.

Topic 3. Representing ethnicity and race

Textual analysis is central in the studies produced by the CCCS; this was further influenced by R. Barthes and his own take on the popular culture forms of contemporary France. Barthes too discussed ideological issues through the analysis of semiotic constructions of media images using ideas of structural linguistics, that Hall and others also made use of.

Text analysis in the cultural studies approach concerns the study of media representations. Representation is the practice of speaking on behalf of someone and also concerns the state of being represented. To re-present is also to make present again through the use of signification systems and mediums –intermediates. In that sense, the media stand between reality and their audience. Representation is constitutive of communication/signification processes: we need

representational systems to access reality and produce meaning. In this lecture we will be looking upon how things are represented by the media, under which perspectives and what are the implications for them highlighting issues of media biases, particularly when different social identities are concerned. The lecture focuses on the analysis of representations of cultural otherness, regarding the construction of foreigners by the media. Scholarship notes that the media regularly reproduce negative stereotypes of Otherness which often augment existing prejudices in society and fuels racism. As media scholar Teun Van Dijk (2011) notes “Racism is a system of ethnic/racial inequality, reproduced by discriminatory social practices, including discourse, at the local (micro) level, and by institutions, organizations and overall group relations on the global (macro) level, and cognitively supported by racist ideologies.”

Topic 4. Representing gender and class

The specific lecture continues on the topic of media representations and focuses on the analysis of media representations of gender and social class. Cultural studies note that the media reproduce sexist depictions of women for commercial purposes which often dehumanize and reduce women and their role in society. On similar grounds, the media reproduce middle and upper class positions and values while often ridiculing the working class and the poor of a society. The lecture will focus on the theory of the “male gaze” as developed by the film critic Laura Mulvey. For Mulvey, a gaze (that is, a dominant way of seeing) is built into cinema, which can be that of the actors but is also part of the medium itself. The man’s role in the film, Mulvey says, is “the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen.” She adds that the man in the story “controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator.”

The lecture will also discuss the culture of social class from the point of view of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu stressed the importance of social and cultural capital, which besides economic capital, are decisive dimensions in achieving advantageous position in the social world, because social networks, education, tastes, and lifestyles, sustain and create opportunities. Bourdieu’s analysis further involves the concepts of:

1. Field, which concerns the rules, relations and norms of conduct/socialization.
2. Habitus, which is about the internalized norms entailed in one’s upbringing/experiences of his/her field and social background.
3. Doxa, which signifies the social and cultural facts and values that are taken for granted by individuals and groups and are seldom questioned.

The issues of stereotyping by the media is in these cases also important to be noticed, while the possibilities of challenging such stereotypes and producing more sophisticated and balanced images of class, ethnicity, race and gender will also be discussed.

Topic 5. The media and the public sphere

This lecture will be discussing Habermas' known "public sphere" theory and the discussion around it, especially in the context of new media. The public sphere is a highly normative framework to discuss the civic potentials of media to create informed and critical publics and to advance form of citizenship. The media are in this sense to foster and to mediate the formation of public opinion, by stimulating and informing public debate and by functioning as an inclusive public forum that can nurture public belonging and community, while enhancing democratic values, common identity and fraternity among citizens. The normative framework of the public sphere is to allow citizens to develop civic skills (such as the ability to listen and to debate), rational thinking, and civic knowledge. The lecture will also discuss the challenges that the public sphere model faces today in contemporary societies. Scholars note a distortion of the public sphere's critical potential. This is due to the operation of media as commercial businesses, and the commercialization of media content and information, with their emphasis on entertainment. Broader problems concern the development of public opinion techniques and strategic communication, as well as with issues related to the phenomena of globalization and audience fragmentation.

Topic 6. The public sphere theory, new media and participation

Participation is a term lately used in many disciplines (political science, media studies, urban studies, development). It is generally viewed as a central possibility for democracy, and for the development of the modern individual. In media studies it concerns the changes in the identity of the media consumer due to technological affordances – a user/producer, a prosumer. The lecture will be focusing on the new, digital media realm and their participatory potential in the context of public sphere theory. Several scholars show an optimistic view of new media's democratic potential (e.g. Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009), while others show pessimism over this possibility (e.g. Fuchs, 2014, 2017). The lecture will discuss both positions by using relevant examples.

Topic 7. The political economy approach: creativity

This lecture will be using the theory of critical political economy to approach the concept of creativity from a critical perspective. Creativity is nowadays celebrated as a social and an economic asset to develop innovation. It is generally seen as an individual potential and skill that requires to be developed. The Canadian urban theorist Richard Florida's work on the creative class and the creative cities has gained popularity and has been used as a policy making guide to cities across the world so as to achieve economic growth and social development allowing them the ability to foster talents. Florida's model of creative growth will be discussed, through the categories that he outlines as crucial for the flourishing of creativity at a city level:

- Technology
- Talent

- Toleration

The idea of participatory media and the user producer will also be discussed in this context.

Topic 8. The internet oligopoly under the prism of political economy

This lecture will include and invited speaker, Nikos Smyrniaios, Associate Professor at the University of Toulouse, France, who will present his work on the advance of digital corporate oligopolies on the internet, using the tools of critical political economy. According to him, “Over the last decade, the digital technologies in everyday life have multiplied. Our lives have been gradually taken over by digital devices, networks, and services. Although useful, they have also become invasive additions to our personal, professional and public lives. This process has occurred in a globalized and deregulated economy and a few US-based start-ups transformed into an oligopoly of multinationals that today govern the informational infrastructure of our societies.”

READING LIST

a. Required

1. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Redwood: Stanford University Press – available online, URL: https://www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~randall/Readings%20W2/Horkheimer_Max_Adorno_Theodor_W_Dialectic_of_Enlightenment_Philosophical_Fragments.pdf
2. McRobbie, Angela. *Be Creative : Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Polity Press, 2016 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4353616> - ЭБС ProQuest Ebook Central.
3. Bulmer, M. & Solomos, J. (Ed.) *Researching Race and Racism*, London: Routledge, 2004 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=200218> - ProQuest Ebook Central.
4. Chouliaraki, L. (ed.) *Soft Power of War*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=623123> – ЭБС ProQuest Ebook Central.
5. Dahlgren, Peter. *Television and the Public Sphere : Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*, SAGE Publications, 1995 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1001330> - ЭБС ProQuest Ebook Central.
6. Fuchs, Christian. 2016. *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press – Accessible online, URL: <https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/books/10.16997/book1/>

7. Jenkins, Henry. Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers : Exploring Participatory Culture, New York University Press, 2006 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865571> - ЭБС ProQuest Ebook Central.

b. Optional

1. Malik, Sarita. Representing Black Britain : Black and Asian Images on Television, London: SAGE Publications, 2001 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=254771> - ЭБС ProQuest Ebook Central.
2. Mirzoeff, Nicholas. Watching Babylon : The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture, London: Routledge, 2005 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1047112> - ProQuest Ebook Central.
3. Skeggs, Beverley. Class, Self, Culture, Routledge, 2003 – URL: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hselibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1543047> - ЭБС ProQuest Ebook Central.

GRADING SYSTEM

Final grade is made on 10 and consists of 3 components: attendance, working during seminars and final essay. Attendance and seminar workload forms a cumulative grade which is calculated according to the formula:

$$CG = SW * 0,8 + A * 0,2$$

Where SW is a note graded as average note for working during all seminars (participating in discussions, preparing presentations etc).

A is a percent of attended courses * 0,1

Final grade is calculated according to the following formula:

$$FG = CG * 0,5 + FE * 0,5$$

Where CG is a cumulative grade and FE is a grade for the final essay.

All grades is rounded up by arithmetic rules.

GUIDELINES FOR KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT

Seminars

The students will be split in groups of 4-5 and asked to present a book on one of the following themes that will be covered by the course:

1. Representations of race
2. Representations of gender and class

3. Public sphere issues
4. Audiences and subcultures
5. Political economy and creativity

They will be offered some books that they need to select in order to present the text in class. Each student is to speak for 10 minutes on the book that his group will be presenting. Students are to use examples and to develop group discussions on the topics that they bring.

Final exam

Final exam will consist one written essay. Essay should develop some particular theoretical approach in field of cultural or creative industry, should refer to scientific literature (more than on industrial reports) and than should try to apply such theoretical approach to particular branch of cultural or creative industry.

Essay should be on 10 pages, font Times New Roman, size 12 with 1,5 spacing.

Criteria of grading:

Criterion	Weight of criterion in essay grade
Theoretical basis and richness of the sources	30%
Ability to apply theories for analysis of the particular branch of industries	30%
Scientific culture (references, notes, citations, style)	20%

METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

The principal methodology of this course is reading texts and analyze them during the seminars by doing also the individual reflection. The professor has to explain main theories to the students and to help them to identify the most clearest and suitable understanding of main theories.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT AND SOFTWARE SUPPORT (IF REQUIRED)

A personal computer with the internet access, the Office suite, a sound system and a monitor for demonstration purposes.