

Philosophy and New Media

The Course Syllabus
House Course – Spring 2009

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Tuesday, 7:00 – 8:30 pm
Belltower Media Room

Synopsis:

Philosophy and New Media are constantly shaping human paradigms. As these methods of thinking shift, there is a radical transformation of literature. As the ideologies grow and develop, so to does their mode of expression. While the ancient Greeks would look to plays and poetry as alternate expressions, we look to new media. New media takes up the role of emergent literary format, and presents and disseminates new ideas. Thus, we are here to reevaluate, discuss, and familiarize ourselves with traditional philosophies in an unprecedented new media.

Philosophy is often thought of as a particularly esoteric field, or as one that requires a significant amount of background knowledge and intense study. We will argue that philosophy is pervasive amongst all aspects of culture, as we feel is especially apparent when observing new media. The goal of this course is to examine new media and see how contemporary forms of communication are able to convey traditional philosophical principles in novel and exciting ways. From comics, video arts, generative games, synthetic worlds, and medical services, media helps introduce new ideologies and philosophies on a daily basis.

Academic Goals

Through analyzing, reevaluating, and discussing roles, impact, and meaning of new media theories and practice, ancient and modern philosophies are presented and acquired, resulting in formation of new perspectives. Critical thinking, qualitative analysis, and alternative perspectives are strongly emphasized.

Reading assignments and response essays will help students learn about philosophy and the practice of new media and how they interconnect. The midterm multimedia presentation will allow students to work with new media forms to share and introduce eminent new concepts, philosophical interpretations, and alternative ideologies. Finally the final thesis will ask deep and broad inquiries in the vicinity of philosophy and new media.

Through the “Personal Identity” unit, students should gain a sense of how we inhabit multiple aspects of self and the symbiotic relationship between media and our selves. As

we explore new ways to express our selves, we gain new ways of understanding, and students will be familiarized with these modes.

In the unit “Simulacra, Simulation and Synthetic,” we will be learning about the similarities between synthetic worlds and the actual world. Through a study of the simulated nature of the actual world, combined with a study of the essential features that makes a simulated world seem real, students should walk away with the ability to think critically about their assumptions concerning “reality.”

During the “Self-Referentiality” weeks, students should tie together the themes covered in the “Personal Identity” and “Simulacra, Simulation and Synthetic” units and gain the perspective of what it is be like to inhabit a simulated world. This should come with the ability to carefully look at one’s body, and how a change in perspective of self is accompanied by a change in understanding.

After “Free Will,” students should know about different ways in which we conceive of free will, and different ways the concept of will is expressed in relation to the media structures. The characters presented, the audience watching, and the computer creating all have different wills, and students will be able to analyze how these work together.

In this emergent environment, students will grasp a good understanding of critical philosophical concepts. Interesting topics will be explored further as a hands-on experience and experiment of new media. Students will be engaged in a participatory learning experience and be presented with an opportunity to modify and add layers of new perspectives. This multi-aspect approach will liberate students to seek their interests and think outside of the box. As an introductory class, students would be prepared to take a variety of courses in new media, philosophy, and visual arts. Simultaneously this experience will assist students in any formal inquiry, especially regarding ethics, society, technology, and arts.

Requirements:

This class will be a seminar style, discussion based class. A large portion of the learning will come from the students themselves. Because of this, informed class participation and presentations are essential for this course. No formal philosophy or new media background is required.

Weekly

There will be a one-page assignment reacting to that week’s reading assignments. It should be an in-depth look at the ideas presented in one of the texts and how it relates to the themes of the unit. For example, how does Descartes’ method of doubt connect to simulacra?

Midterm - Presentation

All students will be required to participate in at least one class presentation. (More is always better!) The presentations should incorporate the fundamentals of new media

expression, and use the new media to present a philosophy. They should contain a detailed understanding of one of the four main topics of the course, and show how a particular new media form is well suited for that idea. The presentations will be graded on contents (30%), clarity (10%), depth of material (20%), originality (10%), and media implementation (20%).

Students are encouraged to use:

Duke Digital Initiative for digital equipment

<http://dukedigitalinitiative.duke.edu/tools>

The Link for computing resources

<http://link.duke.edu/>

The Multimedia Project Studio for editing assistance

<http://www.oit.duke.edu/comp-print/labs/mps/>

Final - Paper

There will also be a 5-7 page paper at the end of the course. This thesis should be an original scholarly inquiry and analysis in philosophy and new media. While four main topics and subunits of the class serve as a foundation from which students can form their thesis, students are highly encouraged to merge multiple concepts and applications. Students are advised to evaluate, rethink, and polish their ideas in an eloquent manner. Specifically this joint analytical study of philosophy and new media can take two approaches;

- 1) Philosophical analysis of a new media practice presented over the course of the class
- 2) Examination of a new media source depicting how it conveys a philosophical expression.

As a multidisciplinary course, the final paper should contain aspects of philosophy, visual studies, anthropology, science, sociology, and/or more. The final thesis will be required to contain 10 references, a half of which has to come from the course readings. Each student must give a short presentation on the last day of the class. Students are strongly encouraged to develop their ideas through midterm presentation and weekly essays and seek revision assistances from instructors and Writing Studio. The final paper will be graded on originality (30%), depth of contents (20%), significance of topic (20%), eloquence and clarity (15%), multidisciplinary initiative (10%), short presentation (5%).

Grading

A passing grade in this course requires satisfactory completion of all assignments of this course including written assignments (30%), an oral presentation (15%), class participation (20%) as well as the final paper (35%). Specific grading schemes for midterm presentation and final paper are outlined in respective sections.

Attendance

Attendance is required at a minimum of eleven class sessions for a passing grade, each of which will be one and a half hours long.

Required Material

The majority of class materials are available free online through educational websites, authors, or Google Books. Please see the course website for online distribution of media and links to reading assignments. All other materials will be handouts provided in class.

Schedule

Personal Identity (3 Weeks)

In this section we will be exploring the nature of self and identity. Through network theories and the ability to extend oneself, there is a redefinition of the nature of self. Instead of asking, “Who Am I?” we are asking “Who are all my selves?” We are able to take on many different roles, very often simultaneously, and yet we still maintain a strong sense of self. During these weeks we will be exploring who that self is, as well as different ways it can be manifested, changing the way it is expressed and influenced.

- **Extension of Self (63 pages)** **January 13, 2009**
 - *Artificial Reality II* by Myron W. Krueger
 - “5. Artificial Reality: A New Aesthetic Medium” (pg. 83-100)
 - *How We Became Post-human* by N. Katherine Hayles
 - “2. Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers” (pg. 25-49)
 - *Self Expressions* by Owen Flanagan
 - “Multiple Identity, Character Transformation, and Self-Reclamation” (pg. 65-87)
 - **Becoming Another (54 pages)** **January 20, 2009**
 - *The Ideal Elf* by Katherine Bessiere, A. Fleming Seay, Sara Kiesler.
 - *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Volume 10, Number 4, 2007 (pg. 530-535)
- EITHER
- *Poetics* by Aristotle
 - Body Text (pg. 1-48)
- OR
- *Metamorphoses* by Franz Kafka
 - Chapter 1, 2, 3 (pg. 1-48)
- **Transforming Identity (56 pages)** **January 27, 2009**
 - *Archeology of Knowledge* by Michel Foucault
 - “2.4 The Formation of Enunciative Modalities” (pg. 55-61)
 - “2.5 The Formation of Concepts” (pg. 62-70)
 - *New Genetics, New Identities* ed. Paul Atkinson, Peter Glasner, Helen Greenslade
 - “Genomics, social formations and subjectivity” by Priya Venkatesan (pg. 177-190)
 - *How We Became Post-human* by Katerine Hayles
 - 8. The Materiality of Informatics (pg. 192-221)

- *New Genetics, New Identities* ed. Paul Atkinson, Peter Glasner, Helen Greenslade (**Optional**)
 - “Fashioning flesh: inclusion, exclusivity and the potential of genomics” by Fiona K. O’Neill (pg. 61-76)

Simulacra, Simulation and Synthetic (3 Weeks)

As we look at the world around us, one unavoidable aspect is our participation in its creation, representation, and ontology. Not only is it possible that our image of the world could be a simulation caused by an external agent (Evil Genie, Super Scientist, Matrix, etc.), but it seems that our representation of the external world may actually be a representation or simulation caused by an agent, us. This can lead one to lose faith in the previously “external” world, or gain faith in the new “virtual” worlds. We will be looking at different types of world constructs that we interact with, whether they are the real, the virtual, or the abstract.

- **Defining a Virtual World (100 pages)** **February 3, 2009**
 - *Synthetic Worlds* by Edward Castronova
 - “2. The User” (pg. 51-78)
 - “3. The Mechanics of World-Making” (pg. 79-99)
 - *Database Aesthetics* ed. Victoria Vesna
 - Chapter 1. “Seeing the World in a Grant of Sand: The Database Aesthetics of Everything” by Victoria Vesna (pg. 3-38)
 - *Funding a Revolution: Government Support for Computing Research*
 - “Virtual Reality Comes of Age” by Timothy Lenoir (pg. 226-249)
 - *Synthetic Worlds* by Edward Castronova (**Optional**)
 - “Introduction” (pg. 1 – 28)
 - “1. Daily Life on a Synthetic Earth” (pg. 29-50)
 - “4. Emergent Culture: Institutions within Synthetic Reality” (pg. 100-125)
 - *Database Aesthetics* ed. Victoria Vesna (**Optional**)
 - “Introduction” by Victoria Vesna (pg. IX-XX)
- **Philosophical Expressions of Simulation (60 pages)** **February 10, 2009**
 - *Selected Writings* by Jean Baudrillard ed. Mark Poster
 - “Simulacra and Simulations” (pg. 166-184)
 - *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* by George Berkeley
 - Treatise (pg. 1-22)
 - *Meditations on First Philosophy* by Rene Descartes
 - Second Meditation (pg. 16-24)
 - *Brainstorms* by Daniel Dennett
 - “Where Am I?” by Daniel Dennett (pg. 310 – 323)

- *Simulacra and Simulations* by Jean Baudrillard (**Optional**)
 - “The Precession of Simulacra” (pg. 1-42)
 - “The Implosion of Meaning in Media” (pg. 79-86)
 - “Simulacra and Science Fiction” (pg. 121-128)
- **Digital Simulation and Practice (74 Pages) February 17, 2009**
 - *New Philosophy for New Media* by Mark B.N. Hansen
 - “What’s Virtual about VR: Reality as Body-Brain Achievement” by Mark B.N. Hansen (pg. 161-197)
 - *Database Aesthetics* ed. Victoria Vesna
 - “Database as Symbolic Form” by Lev Manovich (pg. 39-60)
 - *All But War Is Simulation: The Military Entertainment Complex* by Timothy Lenoir
 - Configurations, Vol 8, 2000 (pg. 289-398)
 - Configurations, Vol 8, 2000 (pg. 333-335)
 - *Semiotic Flesh: Information and the Human Body* ed. Phillip Thurtle (**Optional**)
 - “The Virtual Surgeon” by Timothy Lenoir (pg. 28-51)
 - *Networked Narrative Environments as Imaginary Spaces of Being* ed. Andrea Zapp (**Optional**)
 - “The Actual and the Imagined” by Susan Collins (pg. 45-61)
 - ““A Fracture in Reality’: Networked Narratives as Imaginary Fields of Action” by Andrea Zapp (pg. 62-81)

Self-Referentiality (2 Weeks)

A trend common to both philosophy and new media is its self-referential aspect, its ability to not only study something, but also to be aware of itself studying it. We see this time and again when a character is told they are in a novel or when computer code is told to reference itself. This unit will follow up our previous exploration of simulation (how do we understand the world through ourselves) by asking how do we understand ourselves by looking at our place in the world.

- **Self-Referentiality in Literature (92 pages) February 24, 2009**
 - *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare
 - Act II, Scene II (pp. 33 – 50) “What’s Hecuba to him”
 - Act III, Scene II (pp. 57 – 68) Play within a play
 - *Sophie’s World* by Jostein Gaarder
 - “Romanticism” (pg. 342-359)
 - “Our Own Time” (pg. 447-470)
 - *Animal Man* by Grant Morrison
 - Issue 25 (pg. 180-204)

- *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder (**Optional**)
 - “Descartes” (pg. 233-246)
- **Artificial Intelligence, Cognitive Computing, and the Neo-Sentient Computer (53 pages)** **March 3, 2009**
 - *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* by N. Katherine Hayles
 - “6. The Second Wave of Cybernetics: From Reflexivity to Self-Organization” (pg. 131-159)
 - *Endophysics and The Thoughtbody Environment – An outline for a Neo-computational Paradigm* by Bill Seaman (pg. 1-26)

Free Will (3 Weeks)

As our notions of self are changing, our understanding of our will changes with it. If we are able to have multiple simultaneous representations of our selves, do we have multiple expressions of will? And if we are able to participate in many different worlds (or have various understandings of the multifaceted representations of this world), does our ability to choose depend on the way we interpret the world? And how does Will differentiate itself from Choice? If Lev Manovich's Soft Cinema chooses what to display on screen, did it do so out of an unconstrained free will? What laws governed the choice, and what laws govern the types of choices we make “of our own free will”?

- **Will of Characters (75 pages)** **March 17, 2009**
 - *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* by N. Katherine Hayles
 - “1. Toward Embodied Virtuality” (pg 1-24)
 - *New Philosophy for New Media* by Mark Hansen
 - “Forward” by Tim Lenoir (pg. XIII - XXV)
 - *Animal Man* by Grant Morrison
 - Issue 26 (pg. 205-229)
 - *Fear and Trembling* by Soren Kierkegaard
 - “Preamble from the Heart” (pg. 57-82)
 - “Problema I: Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical” (pg. 83-96)
 - *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Friedrich Nietzsche
 - “Preface” and “First Treatise: ‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad’ ” (pg. 1-34)
- **Will of Audience (72 pages)** **March 24, 2009**
 - *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* by N. Katherine Hayles
 - “10. The Semiotics of Virtuality: Mapping the Posthuman” (pg. 247-282)
 - “11. Conclusion: What Does It Mean to Be Posthuman?” (pg. 283-291)

- *New Philosophy for New Media* by Mark Hansen
 - “Introduction” by Mark Hansen (pg. 1-15)
- **Will of Computer (50 pages)** **March 31, 2009**
 - *Database Aesthetics* ed. Victoria Vesna
 - “Recombinant Poetics and Related Database Aesthetics” by Bill Seaman (pg. 121-141)
 - *The Problem of the Soul* by Owen Flanagan
 - “Free Will” (pg. 108-123)
 - *Pattern Flows: Notes Toward a Model for an Electrochemical Computer*
— *The Thoughtbody Environment* by Bill Seaman (pg. 1-15)

Wrap Up (1 Week)

April 7, 2009

This week will serve as our final wrap up for the course. New perspectives gained over the course of a semester will be mashed up together. We will learn how different concepts are intertwined and influenced each other. There will be a discussion of future of philosophies in new media and post-human. Each student will also give a short presentation on his or her final paper.