

EN 375

Critical Digital Studies

Spring 2019

Tuesday/Thursday 2:10-3:30 pm, Palamountain 302
Professor Paul Benzon
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Office: Tisch 327

Office Hours: Tuesday 4:00-5:30pm,
Wednesday 12:30-1:30pm, and by appointment

Course Description

Since its initial release just over a decade ago, the Apple iPhone has become arguably both the fastest-selling and the best-selling object in history. As this rapid, pervasive dissemination suggests, we are currently living through a moment in which social transformation is intimately bound up with technological transformation. The ubiquity of digital media in our daily lives raises a range of far-reaching questions: What does it mean to live, consume, create, and connect in a society saturated by the digital? Who (if anyone) owns “the digital” in its different contexts, and what are the stakes of that ownership? How do we understand the bodies and identities on the other side of the screen? Where exactly *is* the internet—what is “the cloud,” and what does its ubiquity mean for how we exist within global space and time?

In this course, we’ll take up these and other questions as we explore how authors, filmmakers, game designers, artists, and activists reckon with the profound aesthetic, social, political, and historical transformations currently taking place around and through digital technology. We’ll study key theorists of digital culture in order to consider the role that digital media plays in reshaping how we understand questions of agency, community, race, gender, sexuality, nationhood, privacy, ethics, labor, materiality, space, power, literature, and art. And we’ll explore how cultural practitioners represent and respond to these issues across a range of media and genres. Students will pursue their own interests within our course material through extended research projects that we will workshop and revise during the latter portion of the semester.

Course Goals

In addition to becoming conversant with major concerns, issues, and ways of thinking in the field of critical digital studies, students will be expected to meet the following goals, as determined by the English Department:

- Take the initiative to plan and organize your research project
- Produce a major project that synthesizes and reflects upon the work you have already completed in the major
- Work independently to sustain the development of that project through its various stages
- Demonstrate awareness of the wider critical or artistic context that informs your project
- Participate in an intellectual community of other writers whose work you will be expected to critique in an engaged and constructive way

Required Texts

Dennis Cooper, *The Sluts* (978-0786716746)

All other print texts will be available in our course packet

In addition to these print texts, we will also study and discuss texts in a range of other formats, which will be accessible online as indicated below in the syllabus.

Grading

You must complete all of the following course assignments in order to pass the course:

Class Participation	20%
Critical Engagements	15%
Topic Proposal and Annotated Bibliography	10%
Five-Page Draft	5%
Fifteen-Page Draft	10%
Final Paper	40%

Late work will be marked down one grade level for each class period after the due date (for example, from a B+ to a B for one late day). Extensions will only be granted in the case of an emergency documented by a college dean.

Preparation, Participation, and Class Structure

As the culminating experience of your English major, this four-credit capstone seminar should be unlike any other course you have taken. I expect you to play a committed role as a member of our intellectual community, engaging with each other, me, and the course material rigorously and intensively. Given the intimate seminar format of this course, it is essential that you come to class each day having reflected carefully and critically on the day's material and ready to participate energetically and independently in our discussions. You should have interpretations, questions, and responses to share with the class, and you should be prepared both to offer these on your own and to be called on in our conversation during each class. Strong class participation includes contributing regularly to class discussion, listening respectfully and attentively to others, responding thoughtfully to their comments, and working diligently during in-class work both on your own and with others—in order to do well in the participation element of the course, you should expect to do each of these each day. The more each of you brings your own thinking to the discussion, the more all of us will get out of class—I encourage you to offer perspectives, ideas, examples, oppositions, questions, and other contributions as much as possible.

As part of your participation, you will be responsible for starting discussion twice over the semester by raising two specific analytical questions for us to take up. These questions are due to me via email by 9:00am on the day you are scheduled to start discussion. I will circulate guidelines and a sign-up sheet for this work early in the semester.

In order to facilitate a productive experience for everyone in class, please be in your seat and ready to start at the beginning of class time. Unless I indicate otherwise or there is an emergency, please remain in your seat during class—this will allow us all to remain focused on our work at hand (this means using the restroom, getting water, etc., before or after class rather than during class).

Even though we will spend the bulk of our time in discussion, that does not mean that you should not take notes on what the class has to say about the material we are discussing, just as you would in a lecture course. Having a record of the class' comments, concerns, debates, etc., will be extremely valuable to you in preparing to develop topics and areas of inquiry for your capstone paper. More broadly, consistently remaining actively engaged in our discussions, even if only as a listener and note-taker at certain moments, will help you to develop as a critical thinker and writer.

During class discussion, I expect you to be attentive to what your classmates have to say and respectful of their ideas and opinions. Thinking critically and openly about complex issues is a crucial part of college education—we all have a responsibility to create a classroom atmosphere where everyone is free to offer his or her opinion, as long as we all do so respectfully and kindly.

Laptops and tablets may be used in class only for class-related work such as note-taking, class writing, and research. Even if you are using such a device for class work, please put it away promptly if and when I ask so that we can turn our attention to specific other things. If inappropriate computer or electronic use becomes a problem for some members of the class, I will revoke permission to use them for the class as a whole. If you have questions about whether a certain use of technology is appropriate or not, please don't hesitate to ask me.

Critical Engagements

Over the course of the semester, you will write three critical engagement papers of 600-900 words each. In each of these, you will engage with one of the critical or theoretical works on our syllabus, pursuing ideas and issues in it that intrigue you. These assignments give you the opportunity to practice working with complex theoretical material in your writing and to begin testing and exploring possible ideas and areas of inquiry for your final paper. At least two of these engagements must be completed before spring break. I will provide guidelines for this work in the first week of class.

Topic Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

Early in the semester, you will submit a topic brainstorm, which we will discuss in an individual conference. Building from that conversation, as the first formal step in your work on the final capstone paper, you will write a proposal of 600-900 words that outlines the issues, texts, and questions you want to pursue in your paper. With this proposal, you will submit a preliminary annotated bibliography of 8-10 potential sources for your paper.

Paper Drafts

You will write intermediary drafts of your final paper of five and fifteen pages, drawing on research and on workshops and conversations with me and your peers in order to produce writing that sustains and develops your project towards a finished version.

Final Paper

At the end of the semester, you will complete a polished, thoroughly revised version of your capstone paper. Your paper should be at least twenty-five pages in length, excluding Works Cited.

Departmental Honors

To qualify for Departmental Honors in English, a senior must complete a capstone paper, project, or thesis of the appropriate length that merits a grade of A or A+. In addition, the student must have a GPA of at least 3.5 in the major and 3.0 overall after no fewer than three semesters at Skidmore. Students who qualify for honors are required to participate in a capstone conference with the instructor and a second faculty reader. The second reader will have no effect on an Honors designation; this decision rests solely with the seminar leader.

Departmental Distinction

Students whose GPAs do not qualify them for Departmental Honors may receive Distinction on their capstone papers.

Attendance

You are permitted a total of **two absences** throughout the semester without penalty. For each subsequent absence, your final course grade will drop one-third of a letter (e.g., from an A- to a B+), and after four absences, you risk failing the course. Repeated or excessive lateness will also count as an absence.

If you miss all or part of a class, it is your responsibility to keep up with the work for the course—make sure to follow the syllabus, stay on track with the reading, turn in any written work that was due for the day, and consult a classmate, check the course website on Blackboard, or come see me during my office hours to talk about what you might have missed in class.

Office Hours

I want each of you to be successful in this class, and to end your work in the English major at Skidmore on a high note. Helping each of you develop as readers, writers, thinkers, and students of digital studies is important to me, and I want to do what I can to help you achieve those goals and succeed in my class. More importantly, I have a great deal of interest in the material we will be working on this semester, and I would love for you to get the same enjoyment and excitement from it that I do. If you have any questions, problems, or things you want to discuss—about the course, the readings, your capstone paper, future academic or career plans, or anything else at all—or if you simply want to talk more about what we're doing in class, please come see me. While we will have several scheduled meetings over the course of your work on your paper, I encourage you to be in close communication with me about your thinking and progress more generally, particularly in person; think of meeting with me not just as a last resort or something to do when you need help, but as an integral part of making your work on your paper and the course overall more productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. My office hours are Tuesdays from 4:00-5:30pm and Wednesdays from 12:30-1:30pm in Tisch Hall 327—this time is set aside for us to talk and for me to help you and work with you. If you aren't free during that time, get in touch with me before or after class or by email and we can set up a time that is more convenient. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are having trouble or feel you need help, or for any other reason at all.

Accessibility

If you anticipate needing accommodations regarding any element of this course, please come talk with me early in the semester so that we can work together to address these issues. You should also visit the Office of Student Academic Services at <http://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/index.php> for more information.

Academic Integrity

Independent thinking and writing are crucial elements of both your work in this course and the intellectual culture of Skidmore more broadly. Violating these principles through plagiarism or other academic dishonesty is a serious offense. Plagiarized work will receive a failing grade for the assignment and may result in more serious consequences as well. If you have any questions about citation, attribution, or plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask me before you hand in your work. For more information about Skidmore's academic integrity policy, visit <http://www.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.php>.

Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct

Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students'

personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available.

More information can be found at <https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/> or by *contacting the Title IX Deputy Coordinator.*

Course Schedule

The schedule below may change over the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class and/or via email. It is your responsibility to keep abreast of these changes by attending class, checking your email and the class blog regularly, and contacting me or coming to my office if you have any questions.

What Is the Digital? What Is Digital Studies?

Tuesday, January 22	Course Introduction Jentery Sayers, “Before You Make a Thing: Some Tips for Approaching Technology and Society” Liz Losh, “FemTechNet Theoretical Touchstones”
Thursday, January 24	Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “The Wonderful Creepiness of New Media,” “Habitual New Media, or, Updating to Remain (Close to) the Same” Lisa Nakamura, “Media” Tara McPherson, “Digital”

Ordinary Media and Always-on Life

Tuesday, January 29	Kris Cohen, “Search Engine Subjectivities” Thomson & Craighead, “Beacon” Erica Scourti, “Life in AdWords” (watch at least four months) Erin Hayden, “Too Much?”
Thursday, January 31	Kristen Roupenian, “Cat Person”
Tuesday, February 5	Patrick Jagoda, “Network Ambivalence” Zach Blas, “Contra-Internet Aesthetics”
Thursday, February 7	Kara Keeling, “QueerOS” Fiona Barnett, Zach Blas, Micha Cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Margaret Rhee, “QueerOS: A User’s Manual” Anna Anthropy, “Queers in Love at the End of the World”
Tuesday, February 12	Dennis Cooper, <i>The Sluts</i> 1-109
Thursday, February 14	Dennis Cooper, <i>The Sluts</i> 110-184
Tuesday, February 19	Dennis Cooper, <i>The Sluts</i> 185-262

Designed in California, Made in China: Labor and Infrastructure

Thursday, February 21	Seth Perlow, “On Production for Digital Culture: iPhone Girl, Electronics Assembly, and the Material Forms of Aspiration”
Monday, February 25	Topic Brainstorm Due—Topic Conferences this Week

Tuesday, February 26	Mike Daisey, “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs” <i>This American Life</i> , “Retraction”
Thursday, February 28	Xu Lizhi, selected poems Molleindustria, <i>Phone Story</i>
Tuesday, March 5	Alex Rivera, <i>Sleep Dealer</i>
Thursday, March 7	Alex Rivera, <i>Sleep Dealer</i> (discussion continued) Lisa Nakamura, “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture”
Friday, March 8	Proposal and Annotated Bibliography Due
Tuesday, March 12	Spring Break
Thursday, March 14	Spring Break

Surveillance, Privacy, and Algorithmic Subjectivities

Tuesday, March 19	Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”
Thursday, March 21	Simone Browne, “Notes on Surveillance Studies” Joy Buolamwini, “AI, Ain’t I a Woman?” Eric Hayot, “Introductions,” “Titles and Subtitles”
Friday, March 22	Five Pages Due
Tuesday, March 26	Safiya Noble, <i>Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism</i> (Chapter One)
Thursday, March 28	Workshop
Tuesday, April 2	Safiya Noble, <i>Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism</i> (Chapter Three)

Capstone Workshop

Wednesday, April 3	Fifteen Pages Due
Thursday, April 4	Conferences
Tuesday, April 9	Conferences
Thursday, April 11	Workshops

Tuesday, April 16	Workshops Eric Hayot, “Ending Well”
Thursday, April 18	Workshops
Tuesday, April 23	Research Symposium FINAL DRAFT DUE THIS DAY
Thursday, April 25	BYOD: Digital Texts and Artifacts Selected by the Class
Tuesday, April 30	Final Class: Conclusions, Reflections, Celebrations