
CYBORG DEMOCRACY

English 556B/Humanities 596A
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Fall 2006

Required texts

Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things*
Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*
Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, *Rhythm Science* (book and CD)
Charles Stross, *Accelerando*
Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*
Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*
Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth, eds., *Reload: Rethinking Women + Technoculture*
Michael Chorost, *Rebuilt: My Journey Back to the Hearing World*
Short stories and critical essays on electronic reserve

Recommended text: Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx : Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism*

Course Description

The overall goal of this course is to assess the political claims made for new media and new technologies and to define possible points of articulation and/or critique between Marxist traditions and new theories of radical democracy, on the one hand, and new technocultural formations, on the other hand. To that end, the course will weave together three strands of inquiry, all of which will combine readings in popular culture, understood as a site of critical reflection on and speculation about technocultural developments, and an examination of movements organized around new technologies. First, we will consider the ongoing structural transformation of the democratic public sphere and the mass mediation of social relations through new communications and computer interface technologies, as these changes affect models of citizenship and collective forms of belonging or “imagined community.” This section of the course will focus on the discourse around cyberspace and the question of its relation to “real life” or the physical world, as well as more recent material on ubiquitous computing, mobile interface technologies, and the social relations (“smart mobs”) they make possible, which seem to blur the distinction between the virtual and the physical. We will also consider the relation of new technologies to concepts of the public sphere, as it has been transformed by the shift from print culture to highly mass-mediated forms of consumer society, especially the shift from rational self-transcendence to embodied self-production. Second, we will discuss possible new models of collectivity emerging out of intellectual property debates, such as the copyleft movement, the creative commons licensing system associated with Lawrence Lessig, and attempts to elaborate such movements into a general open source culture, in the work of writers and musicians like Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky. In this section of the course we will also read Marxist theories of information technologies, as well as feminist and African-American responses to those theories. We are likely to spend some time examining examples of this kind of collective culture, including mash-ups and wikis. Third, we will discuss claims for the progressive potential residing in new forms of technological self-transformation, of trans- or post-humanism, with a particular focus on their relation to social and liberation movements organized around more familiar categories, such as feminism or civil rights; in other words, this final section of the course will focus on technological modes of self-fashioning and cyborg embodiment.

Assignments

You will be asked to write either a final 10-12 page paper, or two 5-6 page papers. First-year students, or students who are unfamiliar with or uncertain about the material, are strongly encouraged to write two shorter papers. In addition, throughout the course, students will be asked to informally prepare questions about one of the assigned readings for each course meeting.

Schedule of readings

Week 1.

Sept. 27 Introduction to the course

Week 2.

October 2 Ernesto LaClau and Chantal Mouffe, excerpt from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*

Manuel Castells handout and excerpts from *The Rise of the Network Society*
Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things*

Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, ch. 4

October 4: Sterling, *Shaping Things*

Bruce Sterling, "Maneki Neko"

Bruce Sterling, "Ivory Tower"

Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, pages 47-61, ch. 3, and ch. 7

Recommended link: www.wikocracy.com

Week 3.

October 9 Bruce Sterling, "I Saw the Best Minds of My Generation Destroyed By Google"

Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, ch. 8

Mary Rosenblum, "Search Engine"

Cory Doctorow, "Human Readable"

October 11 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

Bill Nichols, "The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems"

Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject"

John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace"

Week 4.

October 16 Donna Haraway. "A Cyborg Manifesto"

Nick Dyer-Witheford, chs. 1-3, *Cyber-Marx*

Recommended: Alison Adam, "The Ethical Dimension of Cyberfeminism," in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*

October 18 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, ch. 3.4

Alexander Galloway, *Protocol*

Week 5.

October 23 Alexander Galloway, *Protocol*

October 25 Talk by Bruce Sterling at 2 p.m.

Week 6.

- October 30 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Why Cyberspace?" and "Scenes of Empowerment"
November 1 Veronica Hollinger, "(Re)Reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender," in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*
Mary Flanagan, "Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge: Women in Games, Women in Cyberpunk, and Strategies of Resistance," in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*
C.L. Moore, "No Woman Born," in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*
Shariann Lewitt, "A Real Girl," in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*

Week 7.

- November 6 DJ Spooky, *Rhythm Science*
Julian Stallabrass, "Digital Commons"
Alexander G. Weheliye, 'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music"
Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, ch. 5
Recommended links: creativecommons.org and www.freeculture.org
November 8 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes*

Week 8.

- November 13 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*
Nalo Hopkinson, "Something to Hitch Meat To"
November 15 Charles Stross, *Accelerando*

Week 9.

- November 20 Stross, *Accelerando*
November 22 Thanksgiving holiday – no class

Week 10.

- November 27 James Hughes, "Democratic Transhumanism"
Andy Clark, "Cyborgs Unplugged"
Greg Egan, "Chaff"
Recommended link: www.cyborgdemocracy.net
November 29 James M. Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*
Amy Thomson, *Virtual Girl* (excerpt), in Flanagan and Booth, *Reload*
Cory Doctorow, "Ownzored"

Week 11.

- December 4 Michael Chorost, *Rebuilt: My Journey Back to the Hearing World*
Ted Chiang, "Understand"
December 6 Chorost, *Rebuilt*

Final papers due Wednesday, December 13, by 4 p.m.

Guest Lectures

>> Monday, October 23, 2006 / 4:00 pm / Communications 120

The Chain of Triumph and the Web of Ruin: A Political Critique of the Network Form

Alexander Galloway (Culture and Communication, New York University)

For the last decade or more, discourse on networks has proliferated with a kind of epidemic intensity: peer-to-peer networks, wireless community networks, terrorist networks, contagion networks of biowarfare agents, political swarming and mass demonstration, and online role-playing games and text messaging are just some of the many examples. The network form is so highly privileged in today's societies that it is becoming more and more difficult to locate places or objects which do not, in some way, fit into a networking rubric.

Additionally, there is also a political and topological dimension to the discourse on networks. Networks are often pitted against hierarchical structures whose modes of organization and control are lambasted as politically dubious, not to mention anachronistic. Thus the rhizome circumvents the tree; the network is the solution to the hierarchy.

Or do they? This lecture, derived from close collaborations with author Eugene Thacker, begins from the assumption that networks are not fetters to power, but that there exists a new mode of organization and control entirely native to the network form. Galloway will aim in this discussion to explore a political critique of the network form of organization, with reference to two tropes of networked power: the "chain of triumph" and the "web of ruin."

>> Wednesday, October 25, 2006 / 2:00 pm

Bruce Sterling

>> Monday, November 13, 2006 / 4:00 pm / Communications 120

Mixedfolks.com: 'E.A.,' Racial Passing, and the Internet

Lisa Nakamura (Speech Communication and Asian American Studies, University of Illinois)

Multicultural or "multiculti" actors have been enjoying a recent vogue. According to a January 2003 New York Times article entitled, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous" racially mixed actors are now "perceived as good, desirable, successful" because they possess "a face whose heritage is hard to pin down." However, while it might seem a blessing to the multitudes of "exotic" mixed-race actors looking for work, it creates an ironic and painful situation, one in which mixed-race actors who succeed in getting cast as "white" may lack the iconic "mixed" look and thus pass all too well, thus failing to be "read" as mixed and to benefit from the trend.

Websites like Mixedfolks.com attempt to resolve this dilemma by listing actors, musicians, and other mixed-race celebrities and connecting them to their "hidden" racial backgrounds, thus "outing" many actors such as comedian Rob Schneider (Asian), Jennifer Beals and Vin Diesel (African American) and Mercedes Ruehl, Madeleine Stowe, and Lynda Carter (Latina) who are thought to be white by many viewers. Rather than exposing the hidden facticity of race in order to shame or embarrass the actors, this site instead identifies them as hidden sources of inspiration and identification who must be made to "represent" on the Internet despite their disavowal of (or failure to acknowledge) a non-white racial identity in film and television. Nakamura will analyze the interplay between the site's construction of a "mixedfolks" identity community within its bulletin boards and areas for user participation, the visual culture of celebrity mixed-race outing, and the intermedial connections between the celebrity website and filmic and televisual media.