Entertainment Media 019:169:EXW

MW, 6-7:15

Professor: Don McLeese

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Office hours: Tuesday 4:30-5:30, 8-9

Online Monday, Wednesday 5-6

Or by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).

The above office hour information reflects my classroom teaching assignment this semester (and beyond) in Des Moines. I’ll send you an APB any time my schedule has me in Iowa City, and I’ll be happy to meet with students then. (I’ll have to be there at least once a month for faculty meetings and will likely be there more often for other commitments.) I’ll also be happy to meet with any of you who happen to be in Des Moines, for whatever reason, at whatever time and day (other than when I’m teaching).

Or we can meet halfway—lunch in Grinnell?

Over the course of the semester, I hope to have at least one face-to-face meeting with each one of you, and I’ll be doing my best to schedule those.

THE COURSE
As resistant as I am to set-in-stone syllabi (preferring to keep you in a state of suspended animation and edgy anticipation that is the journalist’s natural habitat), I feel that it is even less appropriate for this course than others. Not only are we attempting a new method of instruction, one that fits the cyber-technology of the world in which we live (or at least you do; I’m preserved in amber), but we are focusing on a subject where revolution continues unabated and radical change appears to be the only constant.

Within the current flux of entertainment media, principles that hold true today—and have for decades, even centuries—might be anachronisms by the end of the semester. Or the end of next week. I can’t predict what might dominate next month’s discussion the way Spotify has become such a dominant topic of discussion in music circles. Because a month or two ago, I had never heard of Spotify (and still don’t use it—I’ve accumulated enough music—vinyl, digital, download-- to last me several lifetimes. Though if anyone has an invitation to share, let me know).

I have former students who have real jobs with “social networking” in their titles, and earn real paychecks in that field, who started their educations before that term was widespread. I have seen blogs go from introductory puzzlement (“short for web log,” as if that says anything) to near ubiquity to borderline anachronism—killed by Twitter and Tumblr, both of which arrived (and departed?) in an eye’s blink.

Believe it or not, I remember a world before Youtube. I remember when Facebook was the exclusive province of young people. Now it is dominated by old people (much to the embarrassment of their offspring who have yet to close their accounts). I still send emails when everybody else texts (though, for all I know, you all now communicate telepathically). I remember when phones were used not just primarily, but exclusively, for phone calls.

(And I remember when porn cost money, not that I expect this to become a dominant topic of conversation this semester.)

Enough. I don’t need to convince you that I am old. And I don’t need to convince you that things are changing—continually, rapidly, dramatically. For my generation and some codgers even a generation or two younger, such constant, dramatic change induces cultural whiplash. For many of you, constant change is the way of the world; it is all you’ve ever known. I may get nervous if the entire digital landscape seems to transform itself every couple of months; you may get nervous if it doesn’t. You’re already anticipating the next big thing, while I fear that it will make obsolete something that just cost me a few hundred backs.

Together, we will analyze what has been and anticipate what is coming. There is no discrete body of knowledge that I expect you to master over the course of the semester. I will be pleased if we know less at the end than we think we do at the start, and if we leave this course with more questions than answers (as long as they are the right questions).
Yet, in my usual spirit of self-contradiction, let’s start with one postulate, which this course may well reaffirm (or refute as anachronistic): The emergence of new media always threatens old media, which then have two options—change or die. And as we scattershoot our way through the semester, we will see that every new medium has been widely perceived as the murderer of the old. Yet the old have generally adapted and survived.

Consider: Movies were supposed to kill live theater. Radio was supposed to kill commercial music, both live and recorded. TV was supposed to kill both radio and movies. And now digital technology is supposed to obliterate western culture as we know it, littering the media landscape with the corpses of the newspaper, music, film, publishing and other industries. Will print on paper somehow adapt? Is there any value in paying for the cow of recorded music when you can get the milk of mp3 files for free?

Collectively, we will progress toward individual responses to such pressing issues of entertainment media.

ATTENDANCE, ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Because of both the experimental nature of the course and the volatility of the subject matter, attendance within this virtual classroom at the appointed time is MANDATORY. Every course I offer is primarily interactive, though the form that interaction might best take will reveal itself over the course of the semester. We will plainly have plenty of audio discussion. You also have a chat function on the desktop, where you can type among each other, for the class at large or at me. IF YOU’RE TRYING TO GET MY ATTENTION BY SHOUTING AT ME WITH CAPITAL LETTERS, it won’t bother me. (I’ve been married for 26 years and have two semi-adult daughters, so I’m used to being yelled at.)

I’ll have all sorts of other tricks at my disposal to help hook and keep your attention—power points, polls, quizzes, etc.—but discussion remains the lifeblood of my educational method (or madness?).

Assignments will often be given in class and occasionally completed in class. There is no assigned textbook, for reasons that this class should make clear (if this syllabus hasn’t already). As things change faster and faster, books are too slow to keep pace. I have submitted my most recent book manuscript to a publisher that insists production takes a full year—so that anything that I wrote last March will need to remain as true as possible until next March. (Good luck with that.)

I will be sharing articles (and would hope that you’ll do the same). And we’ll be monitoring websites, blogs, social-networking chatter and anything else that has bearing on the topic at hand.
(which, in chicken-or-the-egg fashion, might be largely dependent on developments that we can’t predict and topics in the news).

So, if you’re not attending, you’ll have trouble keeping pace and participating on the level that this course demands.

You’ll have shorter written responses assigned in class as well, with a longer one at midterm (expect 1000 or so words) and an even longer one (1500 or so) at the end. I expect minimum lengths of at least 33% more from masters students enrolled in this course, and they will have some additional discussion requirements as well as the course progresses. Undergraduates, have no fear about sharing virtual classroom space with such learned graduate scholars. It has been my experience that sharp undergrads can give grad students all they can handle.

All writing assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Those late will be docked a letter grade per day. (A paper due Monday that deserves an A will receive a B if I don’t get it until Tuesday, etc.)

**Final grades will be determined as follows:**

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION 30%

SHORTER RESPONSES 20%

MIDTERM WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT: 20%

FINAL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT: 30%

There will be no final exam.
Administrative Home
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall, or see the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

Electronic Communication
University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences. (Operations Manual, III.15.2. Scroll down to k.11.)

Accommodations for Disabilities
A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Academic Honesty
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences expects all students to do their own work, as stated in the CLAS Code of Academic Honesty. Instructors fail any assignment that shows evidence of plagiarism or other forms of cheating, also reporting the student's name to the College. A student reported to the College for cheating is placed on disciplinary probation; a student reported twice is suspended or expelled.
CLAS Final Examination Policies
Final exams may be offered only during finals week. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. Students should not ask their instructor to reschedule a final exam since the College does not permit rescheduling of a final exam once the semester has begun. Questions should be addressed to the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Curriculum.

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint
Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit the instructor, then the course supervisor, and then the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident. See the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

Understanding Sexual Harassment
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather
In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Public Safety web site.

*These CLAS policy and procedural statements have been summarized from the web pages of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and The University of Iowa Operations Manual.

CALENDAR

Week one:

Aug 22 and 24: Technological troubleshooting, syllabus, getting to know you, lay of the land.

Novels to videogames: http://www.mcsweeney's.net/articles/notes-on-the-video-game-version-of-my-next-novel

Week two:

Aug 29 and 31: Course origins, media parallels and paradigm shifts. Read McLeese PMS pdf.
We’ll discuss how prescient (or how wrong) this article written two years ago (and published a year ago) might be, and what we can draw from how the parallels illuminated within the pop music industry and print journalism might extend to other entertainment media.
Week three:

Sept 5 (Labor Day, no class) and 7: Top down culture, grass roots culture and gatekeepers--the good, the bad and the ugly (not necessarily in that order of correspondence).

Week four:

Sept 12 and 14: Blurring the boundaries among creation, promotion, distribution and consumption. Determining value, discovering revenue streams and deciding just what commerce has to do with art, anyway. Start brainstorming midterm writing assignment.

Week five:

Sept 19 and 21: Establishing—and/or demolishing—the artistic hierarchy. How decides what is high art and what is pop art? Or that opera is intrinsically better than detective novels or comic books. On what basis? Are such distinctions fixed or fluid?

Week six:

Sept 26 and 28: Popular music—Who is consuming what, where, why? The place of music is popular culture—the more pervasive, the increasingly irrelevant?

Week seven:

Oct 3 and 5: Drafts due for midterm writing assignment workshopping (due on Monday though workshopping could well continue into Wednesday)

Week eight:

Oct 10 and 12: Midterm writing assignments due (Monday) and discussed (perhaps continuing into Wednesday).

Week nine:

Oct 17 and 19: Radio and network TV: How the latter failed to kill the former (as widely predicted), and how the former has continued to change with the times. Can this precedent apply to the digital age, or are we now in the midst of a brand new media ballgame?

Week ten:

Oct 24 and 26: Cable, a whole new level of investment (in money as well as time) in an age of narrowcasting. Will satellite radio ever duplicate cable’s success? Or is radio something that consumers will never pay for? (as TV once was, and water). Start brainstorming final writing assignment.

Week eleven:
Oct 31 and Nov 2: Happy Halloween Monday! (we’ll have to figure out a way to virtual(ly) trick or treat. Movies and how they survived the advent of TV, got bigger, then got smaller, and have since experienced such seismic shifts in consumption, rental, streaming, etc. Parallels with the music industry?

Week twelve:

Nov 7 and 9: The publishing industry. Will books survive? (Has vinyl?) How has the digital age effected creation, consumption, distribution, promotion. Is the indie bookstore on the verge of becoming the blacksmith shop? Is book criticism less significant than ever or more significant? Does it pay? Should it? Start brainstorming final writing assignment.

Week thirteen:

Nov 14 and 16: Entertainment journalism and criticism. Magazines in the age of iPad. Is it possible to have a career as, say, a rock critic?

Week fourteen:

Nov 21 and 23: Thanksgiving break!

Week fifteen:

Nov 28 and 30: Drafts of final paper due (on Mon) for workshopping (that may continue through Wed).

Week sixteen:

Dec 5 and 7: Final writing assignments due (on Mon) for discussion (that may continue into Wed). Final words and questions as we face an uncertain future.

Have a great break!