Core Module 2: Key Concepts in Cultural and Critical Studies II (ENHU004S7)

Full-time and Year 2 part-time students take Core 2 on Thursdays 6.00-7.30pm

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Module Code: ENHU004S7
Module Level: 7
Timetable: Thursday 6-7.30pm, Autumn Term

BLOCK C: Technologies, Subjectivities, Culture, and Power
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This wide-ranging block focuses on a series of important topics examining the convergence of technology, subjectivity and cultural theory. By examining technological, political, and cultural change, we will consider how 20th and 21st century theory has interpreted the relationship between the human and the technologically saturated contemporary world. This interdisciplinary module forms links with history, science, and philosophy while maintaining a firm focus on cultural theory. The diverse range of topics will encourage students over the five-week course to debate and explore increasingly poignant ontological and epistemic issues of the present and future world.

Week 1/7: Mathematics, Technology, Philosophy, and Subjectivity
It may be easy to forget, but all contemporary digital and electronic technology is predicated upon applied mathematics. Without mathematics, there could be no computers, no satellites, and no mobile phones. The nature of mathematics, though, is a constant refrain throughout the history of Western philosophy from Plato to the present. In this first week, we will examine the thought of two philosophers of the previous century and their contrasting views on mathematics: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Quentin Meillassoux. Wittgenstein’s Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics is a controversial constructivist view of mathematics, especially for a philosopher whose career began with a phase of logical positivism. By contrast, Meillassoux’s recent speculative realism proposes that, while we might revert to a type of realist thinking in contradiction to Kant’s critical-idealistic philosophy, mathematics stands apart as a self-regulating system of coherent internal rules. Indeed, this history of the philosophy of mathematics, this week will suggest, offers us a way into an examination of contemporary subjectivity in relation to technology.

A note on the reading. Although students may wish to read Wittgenstein’s Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics in its entirety, we will focus on the following sections:

Circa 1937-1938
• 3 (pp. 36-37)
• 11 (pp. 41-42)
• 21 (p. 45)
• 38 (p. 52)
• 72 (p. 64)
• 110-111 (p. 78)
• 114 (p. 80)
• 131 (p. 89)
• 133 (p. 90)
• 135 (p. 90)
• 154 (p. 95)
• 156 (p. 96)
A basic understanding of Kantian phenomenology will help with the Meillassoux.

Primary reading:

Secondary reading:

**Week 2/8: Subjectivity Beyond the Human**

If the arguments that raged about mathematics oscillated between the centrality or decentredness of human subjectivity in its practice, then posthumanism represents a fusion of such ideas. For posthumanity partly concerns our anxieties and enthusiasm for both technological and human evolution. The word ‘post’ suggests the death of the former biological template through the superseding of another. The notion that technological progression is moving towards a revolutionary event is widely articulated in the ‘Technological Singularity’ – a concept fixed by Vernor Vinge in the 1990s. The Singularity could manifest through one of the following breakthroughs: artificial intelligence, intelligent networks, the merging of organic and artificial
‘interfaces’, and biological engineering. How does cultural theory deal with the convergence of biological and technological evolution? How does cultural theory help us examine contemporary issues within cultural experience? When did the posthuman happen? Will the term ‘human’ be relevant in the future?

**Primary Reading:**

**Secondary Reading:**

**Week 3/8: Biopolitics, Neoliberal Subjectivity, and Regulation**
Even as we struggle to understand contemporary subjectivity and its evolving relationship to technological augmentation, governmental strategies have emerged to regulate the human life: biopolitics. This session will centre on a consideration of life under neoliberal conditions while exploring the mode of governmental practice known as “biopolitics”. First, we will examine the histories of the economic practices that fall under the rubric of “neoliberalism”, from both the proponents on the right and the critiques on the left, in an attempt to come to a more rigorous definition of the phenomenon. Second, we will explore how the historical origins of the concept of biopolitics, or the politization of life, sit in relation to developments in economics since 1968. This will culminate in reflections on the new conditions of subjection derived from a biopolitical interpretation of life and on how they impact on our understanding of culture as a space of critique and as a technology to administer power.

**Primary reading:**

**Secondary reading:**
Week 4/8: Culture and Computation

When thinking about subjectivity and technology, one cannot avoid the implications for culture of the digital transformation of society in recent years. For the creation of many contemporary artworks now contains a digital component. In this section of the course, we will examine what it means to believe that a computer might “write” or what suppositions lie behind our assertions that text could be “plain”. In this week we will extend our thinking on technologically augmented subjectivities, the role of human selfhood in creative practice, and neoliberal economics to consider the role of neural networks and other advanced computational techniques in the generation of cultural artforms.

Primary reading:


Secondary reading:


Week 5/8: Algorithm and Control

Given the conjunction of feminist new materialist thought, subjectivities, economics, and technologies in this block, the final section here turns to the most recent thinking on algorithmic control of society and its ingrained biases. Examining the histories of computer programming and the development of algorithms, we turn to two recent feminist and postcolonial thinkers who point to the ways in which we have become blinded to the essential replications of society within supposedly objective and neutral algorithmic processes.

Primary reading:

- Hicks, Marie, Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2018) [at least chapter one, “War Machines”]

Week 6/8: Reading Week