

COMM 596: Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture

“The unconscious is the true psychical reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs.”

— Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900

“The Freudian view of fear, desire, and pleasure accords affect a strong and volatile position, given that the unconscious usually slyly outwits conscious awareness and its rationalism. In regard to politics and communication, this means we need to analytically pay attention to not just information and formal argument but also to symbols, imagery, rhetoric, allegory, emotional pleas, ideology, and all the other communicative modes beyond the rational; it is through these that the civic subject takes on agency.”

— Peter Dahlgren, *The Political Web*, 2013

“The human body is itself an interface. As I am in the world, my body is always in relation to someone or something. Even when I am alone in a room, I am still in relation to the matter around me. The body establishes a connection with the world, and vice versa.”

— Jacob Johannsen, *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture*, 2019

Course Description

“Isn’t psychoanalysis a clinical discipline? How can it be taken outside the clinic and ‘applied’ to media?” Psychoanalytic explorations of culture have at times sounded overtly pathological. Psychoanalysis is sometimes at risk of becoming a master discourse, conveying an ultimate truth about subjects and their cultural investments. Applied psychoanalytical studies have not only informed such allied social sciences and disciplines as anthropology and sociology but also contributed mightily to programs as diverse as rhetoric, literary criticism, women’s studies, and film. From the outset, the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, viewed culture and its diverse expressions as a compromise-formation between forces emanating from the Id (associated with the Primary Process, and the Pleasure Principle) and the regulatory functions associated with the Ego (associated with the Secondary Process and the Reality Principle). Therefore, all expressions of human activity, including the highest cultural achievements, are, in a sense, derivative communications that can be examined with regards to more latent, unconscious motivations and meanings.

This independent study brings psychoanalytic theory into conversation with digital media studies in general and audience research in particular. As the continuum of COMMS 500 (Communications and Cultural Theory) and COMM 457 (Media Audiences and Contexts) in Fall 2019, this course aims to connect media and communication studies with psychoanalysis on theoretical and methodological levels. This work focuses on answering how individuals are (un)consciously shaped by and, in turn, shape digital media as well as shedding light on the relationship between contemporary subjectivities and digital media in a more exploratory manner.

Learning Outcomes

- Explore a broad spectrum of perspectives on the digital culture and psychoanalytic theory of communication.
- Develop familiarity with a range of psychoanalytic methods and advance the ability to evaluate the application of psychanalysis involved in media and communication studies.
- Demonstrate the practicality of psychoanalysis on theoretical and methodological levels to new situations and practices relevant to your everyday experience.

Research Expectations & Evaluation Dimension

- Critical Literature Review Paper (x2/The quantity of this assignment is subject to change under the supervision of the paired independent director.) Approximately 1,500 words for each on a psychoanalysis-related topic in relation to various forms of media use: watching reality television, using social media, as well as the role of big data mining and its implications for users' subjectivities online. This assignment will help to define a research question that will be pursued in assignments 2 and 3. (40%)
- Research Proposal (x1) Produce a formal proposal of at least 1,200 words describing the research project you intend to pursue for the rest of the semester. (25%)
- Research Paper (x1) Produce a formal Conference Paper or a full-fledged research article following the chosen CFP or journal submission guidelines (e.g. *Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*). (35%)

Communication Plan

Bi-weekly meeting with the director is required while weekly meeting is recommended.

Preliminary Bibliography

- Aragno, A. (2016). *Forms of Knowledge: A Psychoanalytic Study of Human Communication*. IPBooks. ISBN: 978-0996548168
- Balick, A. (2018). *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking: Connected-up Instantaneous Culture and the Self*. Routledge. ISBN: 978-1780490922
- Billig, M. (1999). *Freudian repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-0521659567
- Blackman, L. (2017). *Mass hysteria: Critical psychology and media studies*. ISBN: 978-0333647820
- Burnham, C. (2018). *Does the Internet Have an Unconscious? Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA. ISBN: 1501341294
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- Freud, S. (1977). *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN: 978-0393008470
- Hammond, M., & Thonemann, P. (Eds.). (2020). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0198797951
- Johannsen, J. (2019). *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture: Audiences, Social Media, and Big Data*. Routledge. ISBN: 978-1138484443
- Lemma, A. (2017). *The Digital Age on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Practice and New Media*. Taylor & Francis. ISBN: 9780415791137
- Moscovici, S. (2008). *Psychoanalysis: Its image and its public*. Polity. ISBN: 978-0745632698
- Ott, B. L., & Mack, R. L. (2020). *Critical media studies*. John Wiley & Sons. ISBN: 978-1118553978
- Payne, M., & Barbera, J. R. (Eds.). (2013). *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. John Wiley & Sons. ISBN: 978-1118438817
- Showalter, E. (1997). *Hystories: Hysterical epidemics and modern media (Vol. 2)*. Columbia University Press. ISBN: 978-0231104593
- Andrejevic, M., Hearn, A., & Kennedy, H. (2015). Cultural studies of data mining: Introduction.
- Bainbridge, C., & Yates, C. (2012). Introduction to special issue on media and the inner world: New perspectives on psychoanalysis and popular culture. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 17(2), 113-119.
- Biesecker, B. A. (1998). Rhetorical studies and the “new” psychoanalysis: What's the real problem? Or framing the problem of the real. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84(2), 222-240.

- Donald, J. (1991). On the threshold: Psychoanalysis and cultural studies. In *Psychoanalysis and cultural theory: Thresholds* (pp. 1-10). Palgrave, London.
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of communication*, 26(2), 172-199.
- Glynos, J., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2008). Lacan and political subjectivity: Fantasy and enjoyment in psychoanalysis and political theory. *Subjectivity*, 24(1), 256-274.
- Goldman, I. (1980). Mass Communication and Cultural Theory: A Psychoanalytic Perspective. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 6(1), 31-40.
- Johannsen, J. (2016). Media research and psychoanalysis: A suggestion. *International Communication Gazette*, 78(7), 688-693.
- Johannsen, J., & Krüger, S. CFP: Digital Media, Psychoanalysis and the Subject.
- Layton, L. (2007). What psychoanalysis, culture and society mean to me. *Mens sana monographs*, 5(1), 146.
- Kramer, J., & Viol, C. U. (2017). Introduction: Psychoanalysis in cultural studies— Positions, perspectives and proposals. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 22(3), 237-242.
- Saper, C. (1991). A nervous theory: The troubling gaze of psychoanalysis in media studies. *Diacritics*, 21(4), 33-52.
- Yates, C. (2018). Psychoanalysis and television: notes towards a psycho-cultural approach. In *Television and Psychoanalysis* (pp. 1-28). Routledge.
- Young, R. M. (1996). Psychoanalysis and/of the Internet. *Rivista Telematica Psychomedia, Area: "Memory and Telecommunication"*. <http://www.psychomedia.it/pm/telecomm/telematic/young2.htm>.

Tentative Reading Schedule & Assignment Deadlines

Week One (Aug. 24) - Audiences, Affect, and The Unconscious

Johannsen, ix-93; Goldman "Mass Communication and Cultural Theory: A Psychoanalytic Perspective"; Johannsen "Media research and psychoanalysis: A Suggestion"

Week Two (Aug. 31) - Affective Labor and The Body: Theoretical Developments

Johannsen, 94-181; Gerbner and Gross "Living with Television: The Violence Profile"; Biesecker "Rhetorical studies and the "new" psychoanalysis: What's the real problem? Or framing the problem of the real"

Week Three (Sep. 7, Labor Day) - The Practice of Psychoanalysis in Cyberspace

Burnham, 1-189; Saper "A nervous theory: The troubling gaze of psychoanalysis in media studies"; Young et al. "Psychoanalysis and/of the Internet"

Week Four (Sep. 14) - New Media Create New Audience

Lemma, ix-140; Ott et al. "Critical Media Studies" - Psychoanalysis chapter; Johannsen "Digital Media, Psychoanalysis and the Subject"; Kramer and Viol "Introduction: Psychoanalysis in cultural studies – Positions, perspectives and proposals"

Week Five (Sep. 21) - Matters of Mind

Aragno, 7-153; Moscovici, xi-194

*Due: Critical Literature Review #1

Week Six (Sep. 28) - The Morphogenesis of Communicative Modes

Aragno, 154-319; Moscovici, 195-359; Yates "Psychoanalysis and television: notes towards a psycho-cultural approach"

Week Seven (Oct. 5) - Artistry in Psychoanalytic Dialogues & The Interpretation of Dreams I

Aragno, 320-391; Hammond and Thonemann, xi-69

Week Eight (Oct. 12) - The Interpretation of Dreams II

Hammond and Thonemann, 70-164; Blackman, 1-196; Bainbridge and Yates, "Introduction to special issue on media and the inner world: New perspectives on psychoanalysis and popular culture"

Week Nine (Oct. 19) - The Interpretation of Dreams III

Hammond and Thonemann, 165-230; Burnham, 1-196; Glynos and Stavarakakis "Lacan and Political Subjectivity: Fantasy and Enjoyment in Psychoanalysis and Political Theory"

*Due: Critical Literature Review #2

Week Ten (Oct. 26) - Psychodynamics and On Searching and Being Sought

Freud, First and Second Lectures; Balick, xi-100

Week Eleven (Nov. 1) - Identities Are Not Virtual

Freud, Third and Fourth Lectures; Balick, 101-158

Week Twelve (Nov. 9) - Politics and Participation on the Web

Freud, Fifth Lecture; Dahlgren, 1-66

*Due: Critical Literature Review #2

Week Thirteen (Nov. 16) - The Civic Subject and Media-Based Agency

Dahlgren, 67-177; Donald "On the threshold: Psychoanalysis and cultural studies"

Week Fourteen (Nov. 23, Thanksgiving Holiday)

Week Fifteen (Nov. 30) - Thinking, Speaking, and Repressing

Billig, 1-140; Showalter, ix-208; Abidin "Affective Economies"; Layton "What Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society Mean to Me"

Week Sixteen (Dec. 7) - Remembering to Forget

Billig, 141-261; Andrejevic et al. "Cultural studies of data mining: Introduction"

Week Seventeen (Dec. 14) - Research Project Presentation

*Due: Final Research Paper