

Fall 2022 Hurford Center Student Seminar

Audience Reacts! An Exploration of Power and Audience Reception

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Art reflects reality; often, reality reflects art right back. This seminar will investigate how, as texts enter mainstream culture, their reception often reflects the systems of power that the works themselves are analyzing. Texts across genres, from dystopia, to romanticism, to mythology, have been warped to suit the ideologies of the groups that they are attempting to critique. A primary goal of this seminar is to explore the importance of art and literature on society at large, outside of the space of academia. As such, the focus of the seminar will extend beyond academic criticism of texts and explore how they become living documents that serve as tools for unveiling the harsh truths of society in real time. During this seminar, participants will explore the relationship between primary texts and their adaptations through film and graphic novels. They will also analyze secondary documents, such as tabloids, Tik-Toks, fan art, and opinion pieces through a theoretical framework in order to explore the complex interactions between the text and the audience it is critiquing. This seminar will explore questions such as:

- What makes a text appealing to a mainstream audience?
- Do popular adaptations have to cater to dominant ideologies? Is resistance possible?
- How does mainstream media promote the reduction of critical investigation of a text's commentary?
- How is meaning created? How is it distorted?
- How do emotions and psychology influence audience reception of media?
- Can authors anticipate audience reactions? How does this influence their work?
- How has social media impacted audience reception?
- How does power reproduce itself through art and literature?

This seminar would benefit from having a variety of perspectives that engage with the artistic, psychological, cultural, and political aspects of audience reactions. Students engage with and react to popular media regardless of their particular major or minor, and as such, anyone can contribute meaningfully to the seminar. This seminar may be particularly interesting to people whose studies or personal interests involve interacting with media in fields such as English, creative writing, film studies, comparative literature, philosophy, and art history, and those who are interested in the social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science.

Topic One: Power and Revolution

Reading Material:

"Of Songbirds and Snakes," by Suzanne Collins

"The Hunger Games," Book I, by Suzanne Collins

"The Hunger Games" (2011)

"The Hunger Games" Magazine (Selections)

Pop Remix of "The Hanging Tree"

One (Selected) Tik Tok of an audience reaction to the Hunger Games prequel.

"The Order of Discourse," Michel Foucault "

A Postcolonial Appraisal of Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games in the Light of Bhabha's Ideas," Roya Ghaffarpour

Topic One Description: "The Hunger Games" is set in a dystopian future, where twelve districts are governed by an excessively wealthy capitol that forces each district to sacrifice two children to fight to the death annually. While the people in the districts starve to death, the capitol citizens eat lavishly, wear luxurious clothes and make up, and make a reality TV show out of the deaths of district born children. In the book, The Capitol occupies a very similar global position to the one that America hold in real life. The book's reception by American audiences closely mirrored the way capitol audiences received the actual hunger games. When "The Hunger Games" was turned into a movie, it was an immediate hit. Conversations about the love triangles it contained, the costumes, and the attractiveness of the actors playing contestants dominated the media: the commentary on colonialism, hegemony, and poverty was neglected. The reading material for this session will allow for a discussion about the first Hunger Games book and its movie adaptation. It also contains the series' prequel, which tells the story of how the Capitol president transformed the hunger games into a popular reality show. The prequel will set the stage for a conversation about the secondary readings, which include selections from Entertainment magazines that contain Maybelline advertisements for "capitol inspired makeup looks" and debates about which male protagonist would wind up dating Katniss Everdeen. The selected Tik Tok is encouraging Suzanne Collins to write a prequel about past hunger games so that readers can watch other characters fall in love through the brutality of the games. The theoretical readings by Ghaffarpour and Foucault discuss the postcolonial commentary of the novel and the connection between discourse and power, which will frame the conversation about why the American audience of Collins' books replicate the capitol audience of the hunger games.

Topic Two: The Portrayal of "The Other"

Reading Material:

"Frankenstein," Mary Shelley

"Alive, Alive," Book I, Steve Niles

"Frankenstein" (1931)

"Colonialism/ Post-colonialism "(Selections from Pages 35-50), Ania Loomba

"A Feminist Critique of Science," Anne Mellor

"The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes

Topic Two Description: The primary themes of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" circulate around the gradual corruption of The Creature, who is by nature a compassionate, multilingual, deeply intelligent being, who learns to be violent through the prejudice inflicted upon him by the people he encounters. Shelley is critiquing the human tendency to reduce others through our perception of them, and in effect, force them to act out the violence that we are groundlessly anticipating. In adaptations of the text, such as the graphic novel "Alive, Alive," and the film "Frankenstein," the creature is consistently portrayed as a brutal, illiterate beast. This demonization of his character forces the audience to assume the same stance that Shelley was critiquing, since the audience, like the characters in the novel, reduce The Creature through their portrayals of him. Loomba and Mellor's theoretical texts will help frame The Creature's experiences through a feminist criticism of Shelley's novel and by looking at the concept of "othering" through a postcolonial lens. Barthes' essay will introduce important concepts about how textual meaning can be derived.

Topic Three: Privilege and Intellectualism

Reading Material:

"The Secret History," Donna Tartt

"Kill Your Darlings" (2013)

Selected Tik Toks

"Academia life- on Tik Tok," New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/style/dark-academia-tiktok.html>

"The Race For Theory," Barbara Christian

"Encoding and Decoding," Stuart Hall

Topic Three Description: "The Secret History" and "Kill Your Darlings" both unveil the wealth, hypocrisy, and elitism that exists in private universities. The stories contain violent, racist, homophobic, privileged characters who perpetuate and embody systems of power that exist in prestigious educational institutions. Recently, a trend called "Dark Academia" that centered these works gained popularity among college age students. Dark academia romanticized the characters and lifestyles portrayed in the works,

focusing on their fashion and aesthetic, with a complete disregard for the repeated classism and abuse that are the central commentary of the works. The NYT article and selected Tik Toks both give examples of this romanticization of dark academia. Christian's essay discusses the flaws with the production of theory and knowledge in academia, which ties into both the conversation about the misrepresentation inherent to the dark academia trend and a discussion about the reception of texts in general. This conversation will be further framed by Hall's essay, which is one of the founding texts in the theoretical field of audience reception.

Topic Four: Masculinity and Capitalism

Reading Material:

"American Psycho," Bret Easton Ellis

"American Psycho" (2000)

Selected Tik Toks

"What's Attracting Young Men To Patrick Bateman," Washington Examiner

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/whats-attracting-young-men-to-patrick-bateman>

"American Psycho at 20 and the Idolization of Patrick Bateman,"

<https://crookedmarquee.com/american-psycho-20th-anniversary/>

"Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture," Chapter Five, by Tom Pendergast

Topic Four Description: "American Psycho" was written as a critique of consumer culture, and was adapted into film by Mary Harron, who added a feminist lens to the movie, through the satirization of the film's disillusioned, materialistic, and brutally violent protagonist, Patrick Bateman. Bateman serves as a caricature of toxic masculinity, but there is still a phenomenon of men in the audience idolizing him. The Pendergast chapter frames the commentary being made by Harron and Ellis. The other articles and the Tik Toks will explain and exemplify the idolization of Bateman.

Topic Five: Myth and Misogyny

Reading Material:

"Hesiod, Homeric Hymns and Homeric Hymn to Demeter" and Selections

"The Metamorphoses, The Rape of Persephone," Ovid

"Court of Asphodels," Eliza E. Enzo OR "The Dark Wife," Sarah Diemar

Google Search "Hades and Persephone Art"

"Laughing With Medusa, Chapter Five

"Putting the Women Back into the Hesiodic Catalog of Women," Lillian Doherty

Ancient Greece was extremely hostile to women. Women had no autonomy and were the property of men. The myth of Persephone's abduction is one of the only instances of female comradery in Ovid's "Metamorphoses," as Persephone's mother, Demeter, throws the whole world into famine in order to save her daughter from Hades, her rapist. Modern retellings of the text paint this tale almost as a Romeo and Juliet romance, where Persephone evades her overbearing mother to find love with the dark and brooding Hades. Coincidentally, this framing of the texts is a modern replication of the ideology that founded the consistent objectification of and violence against women in Greece. This session's reading will include two ancient versions of Persephone's abduction, then a modern romantic retelling of the story (I will choose between either Enzo or Diemar's text for this) and Doherty's theoretical chapter on how to create a productive feminist lens through which one can read Greek Myth.