

SM2706: CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICES

Effective Term

Semester A 2025/26

Part I Course Overview

Course Title

Critical Theory and Socially Engaged Practices

Subject Code

SM - School of Creative Media

Course Number

2706

Academic Unit

School of Creative Media (SM)

College/School

School of Creative Media (SM)

Course Duration

One Semester

Credit Units

3

Level

B1, B2, B3, B4 - Bachelor's Degree

Medium of Instruction

English

Medium of Assessment

English

Prerequisites

Nil

Precursors

Nil

Equivalent Courses

Nil

Exclusive Courses

Nil

Part II Course Details

Abstract

This course integrates critical theory, cultural studies and artistic practice. Students will learn to describe, analyze, and compare the various traditions of political and social engagement in contemporary art, from the Situationist International to new media activism, focusing on the artists' own theories, their social context, and their creative practices/projects. Students will reflect critically on the relationship between art and society in Hong Kong, thus challenging and expanding their sense of what it means to be a creative artist. The relationship between art and society will be viewed in relation to the development of critical social theory, including the Frankfurt School, structuralism, semiotics, post-modernism, direct action, participatory economics, and so on. This course is not only essential for documentary making, visual ethnography, action art and activist projects, but also seeks to nourish culturally entrenched and socially engaged media artists. Students will produce creative projects in parallel with theoretical analyses that explain their motivation and implications. The course is a pre-requisite for other advanced electives on cultural/social research and its role in art-making.

Upon completion of the class, students should understand the basis of various theories for sociological and cultural inquiry, and to explore the use of these theories to analyze their lived experiences, their social worlds, and the larger cultural, political, and economic contexts they inhabit.

Class activities will be designed to address the following:

- a. To identify a variety of influential theoretical orientations to the understanding of society;
- b. To compare different theoretical traditions, their strengths and weaknesses;
- c. To analyze how the social context helped mold the theory, what the theorist's contributions are, and what the theory's strengths and weaknesses are; and
- d. To apply theory to contemporary research and problems and to analyze the implications of each theory.

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs)

CILOs		Weighting (if DEC-A1 DEC-A2 DEC-A3 app.)			
1	Describe various theoretical perspectives and traditions in the study of society and culture			x	
2	Describe and compare several influential social and cultural theories			x	
3	Evaluate the usefulness of these theories in analyzing contemporary social and cultural issues		x	x	
4	Assert students' own voices: conceive a critical research problem and write their research paper		x		x
5	Conduct extra research on the subject in relation to one's own experience as a self-reflective process		x	x	x

A1: Attitude

Develop an attitude of discovery/innovation/creativity, as demonstrated by students possessing a strong sense of curiosity, asking questions actively, challenging assumptions or engaging in inquiry together with teachers.

A2: Ability

Develop the ability/skill needed to discover/innovate/create, as demonstrated by students possessing critical thinking skills to assess ideas, acquiring research skills, synthesizing knowledge across disciplines or applying academic knowledge to real-life problems.

A3: Accomplishments

Demonstrate accomplishment of discovery/innovation/creativity through producing /constructing creative works/new artefacts, effective solutions to real-life problems or new processes.

Learning and Teaching Activities (LTAs)

LTAs		Brief Description	CILO No.	Hours/week (if applicable)
1	Lectures (with optional tutorials)	Students will learn to explain theories, including Marxism, structuralism, semiotics etc.	1	8 weeks
2	Lectures (with optional tutorials)	Student will learn case studies / watch screenings + participate in discussion:	2	4 weeks
3	Lectures (with optional tutorials)	Students will present on various cultural topics	4, 5	4 weeks (tutorial)
4	Lectures (with optional tutorials)	Students will take in-class quizzes on assigned readings	1, 2, 3	2 weeks (tutorial)
5	Lectures (with optional tutorials)	Students will participate in in-class discussion on response papers	1, 2, 3	2 week (tutorial)
6	Take-home research	Students will participate in group discussion on assigned readings	3	4 weeks (tutorial)
7	Take-home projects for integration and experiment	Students will conduct a self-produced art project on participation (events, happenings, theatre) with documentation and short thesis	3, 4, 5	
8	Take-home projects for integration and experiment	Students will write a group report on the summary analysis of a chosen academic essay with prototype design for a potential art project	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	

Assessment Tasks / Activities (ATs)

ATs		CILO No.	Weighting (%)	Remarks ("- " for nil entry)	Allow Use of GenAI?
1	1 student presentation on various cultural topics	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	15	-	Yes
2	Group report to document summary and debated issues	1, 2, 3	35	-	Yes
3	Short response papers on a particular theoretical concept	1	10	-	Yes

4	Art project with thesis	1, 2, 3, 4	20	-	Yes
5	In-class participation & discussion	1, 2, 3, 4	20	-	Yes

Continuous Assessment (%)

100

Examination (%)

0

Minimum Continuous Assessment Passing Requirement (%)

0

Minimum Examination Passing Requirement (%)

0

Assessment Rubrics (AR)**Assessment Task**

1. Presentation

Criterion

This assessment will grade on content and fluency of presentation. Students should show their co-operation to conduct a well-organized presentation with their own argument and evidence from readings and notes. The threshold of 'discovery' lied in a student's self initiatives to conduct additional research and to personalize theories for her/his personal daily experience.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Rich, informative content, excellent grasp of the material with in-depth and extensive knowledge of the subject matter
- Rigorous organization, coherent structure, and systematic exposition with a strong sense of narrative
- Superior presentation skills: distinct pronunciation, fluent expression and appropriate diction, exact time-management
- Critical analysis with insightful comments opening up new issues, or suggesting the ability to theorize

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Adequate content with firm grasp of the material that informs the audience on a subject matter
- Reasonable organization, balanced structure and composition
- Good verbal communication: comprehensible pronunciation, fluent expression and diction, fair time-management

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Adequate content with comprehensive grasp of the material demonstrating basic knowledge of the subject matter
- Fair organization, weak structure and composition
- Fair presentation skills: acceptable pronunciation, expression and diction, fair time-management

Marginal (D)

- Weak content, loose grasp of the general ideas with some knowledge of the subject matter
- Poor organization, structure and composition
- Poor presentation skills: marginal pronunciation, expression and diction, poor time-management

Failure (F)

- Inadequate content, fail to identify the general ideas with knowledge of the subject matter
 - No organization, structure or/and composition
 - Poor presentation skills: marginal pronunciation, expression and diction, minimal time-management
-

Assessment Task

2. Response Paper

Criterion

This assessment will grade on rationality, clarity and fluency of argument and comment. The threshold of ‘discovery’ lied in a student’ s self initiatives to conduct additional research and to personalize theories for her/his personal daily experience.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Rich content, excellent ability to interpret and integrate various resources
- Rigorous organization, coherent structure, systematic composition
- Precision in argument, well defined and reasoned points of view grounded in insightful interpretation of existing literature
- Readiness to respond to peer opinion and other views initiated in class discussion
- Discussion shed light on new dimensions of the issue

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Adequate content, sufficient ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Reasonable organization with balanced structure and composition
- Clear elaboration of ideas that sticks to the point, with clearly differentiated issues, ability to interpret opinions independently
- Sufficient responses to peer comments to sustain a discussion

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Adequate content, fair ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Fair organization with adequate structure and composition
- Relevant points made to the subject matter in question
- Ability to respond to other statements and engage in class discussion

Marginal (D)

- Weak content, limited use of resources
- Poor organization, structure and composition
- Relevant points to the subject matter, marginal ability to interpret opinions
- Ability to respond to other comments in simple terms

Failure (F)

- Inadequate content, no/ irrelevant use of resources
- No organization, structure or/and composition
- Irrelevant points to the subject matter, no ability to interpret opinions
- Fail to respond to other comments

Assessment Task

3. Final Paper

Criterion

Students should demonstrate ability to utilize primary and secondary sources, build up argument and analysis. The threshold of ‘discovery’ lied in a student’ s self initiatives to conduct additional research and to personalize theories for her/his personal daily experience.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Excellent grasp of research material, able to explain key concepts, assumptions and debates
- Rigorous organization, coherent structure, distinct thesis, properly argued with strong narrative
- Insightful interpretation of the subject matter with distinct themes and thesis
- Critical analysis with insightful comments opening up new issues, or suggesting the ability to theorize

- Ability to approach a text or a theme using a variety of theories and analytical tools
- Strong bibliography suggesting breadth and depth of coverage and informed insights

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Firm grasp of materials, able to explain key concepts and assumptions
- Reasonable organization, balanced structure, adequate content, sufficient ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Clear ideas which keep to the point, clear-cut subject, ability to interpret opinions independently
- Organized bibliography which can be utilized in accordance with the topic

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Comprehensive grasp of materials, able to explain key concepts
- Fair organization, weak structure, adequate content, fair ability to integrate various resources based on demand
- Relevant points to the subject matter, fair ability to interpret opinions
- Unorganized bibliography which can be utilized in accordance with the topic

Marginal (D)

- Loose grasp of materials, cannot explain key concepts
- Poor organization and structure, weak content, limited use of resources
- Relevant points to the subject matter, marginal ability to interpret opinions
- Insufficient and/or unorganized bibliography

Failure (F)

- Poor grasp of materials
- No organization and structure, inadequate content, no/ irrelevant use of resources
- Irrelevant points to the subject matter, minimal ability to interpret opinions
- Irrelevant bibliography

Assessment Task

4. In-Class Participation and Discussion

Criterion

This assessment task reviews students' participation and performance in discussions, debates and peer critique during the tutorial sessions. The evidence of 'negotiation', the sign of discovery, lies in students' pre-class preparation and interpersonal sensitivity to his/her peer members.

Excellent (A+, A, A-)

- Active in-class participation, positive listening, strong ability to stimulate class discussion and comment on other points
- In-depth pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Interpret others' views with an open mind and ready to negotiate
- Readiness to share personal insight via analysis and synthesis with informed views
- Constructively critical, thus facilitating the discovery of new issues

Good (B+, B, B-)

- Active in-class participation, positive listening, ability to initiate class discussion and comment on other points
- Adequate pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Interpret opinions effectively

Fair (C+, C, C-)

- Attentive in in-class participation, listening with comprehension, but only infrequently contributing
- Adequate pre-class preparation but little familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Fair ability in interpreting opinions

Marginal (D)

- Unmotivated to participate in class discussion or comment on other people' s views
- Little pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Poor ability in interpreting opinions

Failure (F)

- Unwilling to participate in class discussion and comment on other points, even when requested by the teacher
- No pre-class preparation and familiarity with peer reports and other materials
- Minimal ability in interpreting opinions

Additional Information for AR

All A+/A/A- grade assignment should comply with the highest performance of Discovery-oriented learning.

Part III Other Information

Keyword Syllabus

Marxism, ideology, representation, authorship, hegemony, detournement, production of space, structuralism, semiotics, Marx, Althusser, Brecht, Godard, Lefebvre, Saussure, Barthes, Foucault, The Situationist International, reflexivity, postmodernism, feminism, performativity, appropriation, action-research, audience and reception

Reading List

Compulsory Readings

	Title
1	Stinchcombe, Arthur L. 1968. Constructing Social Theories. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1-3 (pp.3-130)
2	McIntosh, Ian. 1997. Classical Sociological Theory. New York: NYU Press. Section one
3	Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation.)" Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. New York: Monthly Review Press
4	Giddens, Anthony; David Held. eds. 1982. Classes, Power, and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates. University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles
5	MacKinnon, Catherine A. 1989. "Feminist Critique of Marx and Engels" pp.13-36 and "A Marxist Critique of Feminism" pp. 37-59. In Towards a Feminist Theory of the State. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, UK.
6	Dorothy Smith. 1990. The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge. Boston: Northeastern U Press. Pages 11-28; pages 31-57.
7	Haraway, Donna. 1991. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge. 183-201
8	O'Connor, James. 1998. Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism.
9	Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. "The Modern Prince" pp. 135-188; "The Formation of Intellectuals" pp.118-125. in The Modern Prince and Other Writings. International Publishers, New York.
10	Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. Excerpt from "State and Civil Society" pages 242-276. In Selections from the Prison Notebooks. International Publishers, New York.
11	Morley, David and Kuan-Hoing Clan. eds. 1996. Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, London and NY. "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees", pp. 25-46. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity", pp. 411-440
12	Mouffe, Chantale. 1979. "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in Mouffe (ed.) Gramsci and Marxist Theory. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 168-204
13	Holdcroft, D. 1991. Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14	Barthes, R. 1981. Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography. New York: Hill and Wang.

15	Barthes, R. 1977. <i>Image, Music, Text</i> . New York: Hill and Wang.
16	Barthes, R. 1982. <i>A Barthes Reader</i> . New York: Hill and Wang.
17	Willett, John (1992). <i>Brecht on Theatre, The Development of an Aesthetic</i> . New York: Hill and Wang.
18	Thomson, Peter; Glendyr Sacks eds. 1994. <i>The Cambridge Companion to Brecht</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
19	Lefebvre, H., 1991a <i>The Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1</i> , John Moore trans., London: Verso. Originally published 1947
20	Lefebvre, H., 1991c <i>The Production of Space</i> , D. Nicholson-Smith trans., Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Originally published 1974.
21	E.g.: <i>Weekend</i> (1967, Jean-Luc Godard), <i>Chronicle of a Summer</i> (Paris 1960) (1961, Jean Rouch), <i>The Titicut Follies</i> (1967, Frederick Wiseman), <i>Murder and MURDER</i> (1997, Yvonne Rainer), <i>Virginia Monologue</i> (performer: Cheng See Ling) etc.

Additional Readings

Title	
1	Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century." <i>The Cyber Cultures Reader</i> ; Bell and Kennedy (eds.). Routledge, 2000.
2	Nato Thompson, <i>Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011</i> . MIT Press.
3	Rosemarie Tong. <i>Feminist Thought: a more Comprehensive Introduction</i> (3rd edition). Westview, 2009.
4	Claire Bishop. <i>Artificial Hells: the Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship</i> . Verso Books, 2012.