Modernity and Technology: The Cultural-Technical Turn in Social Theory

Level: 400-level

Class Size: 15-30

Course Description

Modernity, broadly understood as the ongoing cultural, intellectual, and historical processes beginning with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, industrialization, and the rise of nation-states, continues through contemporary developments in globalization, digital technology, and the age of information. This period profoundly shapes and is shaped by technological advancements, including tools, devices, and systems developed for productive purposes. Despite their interrelated nature, technology and modernity are often studied as separate fields, mainly due to two reasons: the need to professionalize enforced by rigid disciplinary divides between STEM and the humanities/social science, and the contrast between the abstract, often totalizing, trends of modernity theories and the empirical, detail-oriented focus in technology studies.

This course aims to bridge these divides by exploring how technologies are affected by societies and histories and vice versa. Starting with Kant's account of modernity and the various critiques of its universal and optimistic portrayal, students will examine various historical manifestations of modernity—modern, postmodern, and contemporary—each characterized by distinct interactive patterns with dominant technologies such as the steam engine, the internet, and the artificial intelligence. The course draws on both Western and non-Western scholars and literary figures, whose works are both empirically rich and theoretically attentive to heterogeneity and difference. A special focus is placed on the recent turn to cultural technics—the ways cultural practices, symbols, and meanings are intertwined with technological developments—exploring non-Western forms of technological modernity through theoretical texts and cultural productions such as science fiction literature and films.

Learning Goals: During the semester, expect to learn how:

1. To identify and describe some of the ways technologies have been understood by humanities and social science.

2. To critically engage and assess technological artifacts and objects from a critical theoretical perspective.

3. To develop skills to peruse, evaluate, and generate different forms of theoretical discourse.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Canvas discussion posts – 20%: Four times during the course, you will sign up in advance to post a critical question about the day's assigned reading on the course's Canvas site by no later than 7 a.m. on the discussion dates. This question should be clear, succinct, and interpretative, aimed at

opening up points of discussion or debate. For example, you might interrogate particular features of structure, style, narrative, plot, character, or imagery in the reading. For a critical/theoretical text, consider raising questions about rhetorical style, argumentative structure, methodology, or its connections with the broader world. Identify moments of ambiguity or contradiction, or relate the primary text to our secondary readings. Be prepared to elaborate on your question and potential responses in class. All students are expected to read these questions and come to class ready to respond to at least one.

Infrastructure project – 25%: For this project, you will study a particular technology and compare its manifestations in two different national or cultural contexts. This will involve pulling a small thread of inquiry and exploring where it leads you in each context. You might, for example, compare the implementation and impact of 5G networks in the United States and South Korea, or examine the use of AI in healthcare in Japan and Germany. Your research should delve into how the technology is adapted, regulated, and perceived in each context, highlighting both similarities and differences. Your report should be approximately 3 pages long and include visual aids such as images, diagrams, or maps to support your analysis. Additional examples and further guidance will be provided after we study the infrastructure module of our class.

Close reading paper - 10%: Your first written assignment for the course will be a short close reading of a passage from one of our literary texts or an episode from one of our films. This assignment is designed to help you hone the skills necessary for developing persuasive critical arguments in subsequent papers. Your short paper should seamlessly integrate close reading techniques with critical argumentation.

Final research paper - 35%: The research paper will be an extended analysis incorporating relevant criticism alongside the literary text or film in question. You need to incorporate at least one primary material (a literary text or a film) and three critical texts from the course readings. Your task is to critically analyze key moments in the text or film by putting them in dialogue with critical theoretical perspectives. Ensure your essay is well-structured, with a clear thesis, coherent arguments, and appropriate citations.

To prepare for this assignment, you will write a proposal, have an individual consultation with me, and workshop a complete draft in class.

Attendance/Participation - 10%: Attendance is mandatory and will be noted at the beginning of each class. Active and meaningful participation in discussions about the readings and films is expected. Throughout the semester, you will also be required to complete group assignments, participate in in-class activities, and take in-class quizzes.

Schedules

Week 1: The Technological Unconscious of Modernity

Philip Brey, “Theorizing Modernity and Technology” in *Modernity and Technology*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2003.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Cultural techniques: Preliminary remarks.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30.6 (2013): 3-19.

I. Modernity and its Discontent

Week 2: Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment” in *On History*, edited and translated by Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1963:3-10.

Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment” in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault*, 1954-1984, Volume 1, edited by Paul Rabinow. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: The New Press, 1994: 303-320.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Introduction in *The Dark Side of Modernity*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Week 3:

Walter Mignolo, Introduction in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Sandra G. Harding, Introduction in *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.

“District 9” directed by Neill Blomkamp (2009)

II. The Becoming Techno-Conscious of Modernity

Week 4: Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology.”

Georges Canguilhem, “Machine and Organism.” In *Knowledge of Life*, translated by Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg, 75-97. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

E. M. Forster, “The Machine Stops” (1909)

Week 5:

Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Introduction, Preface, pp. 1-120.

Jürgen Habermas, “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology.’”

Aldous Huxley, “Brave New World” (1932)

III. Postmodern Technologies

Week 6:

Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Gille Deleuze. “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”

William Gibson. *Neuromancer*. Ace Books, 2014. (the first half)

Week 7:

Donna J Haraway, Selections from “Syntactics: The Grammar of Feminism and Technoscience.” In *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.

Jean Baudrillard, “Precession of Simulacra,” Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994)

Neuromancer (the second half)

IV. The Cultural-Technical Turn in the Age of Planetary Computation

Week 8:

Gilbert Simondon, “Culture and Technics” (1965), in: *Radical Philosophy* 189 (Jan/Feb 2015), pp. 17–23.

Benjamin H. Bratton. Introduction and “The Nomos of the Cloud” in *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*.

Bruno Latour, “Third Source of Uncertainty: Objects too Have Agency” and “First Move: Localizing the Global,” in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford UP, 2005)

Week 9:

Bernard Stiegler, Introduction in *Technics and Time*.

Yuk Hui, Introduction in *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*.

Qiaoyu Cai. “The Cultural Politics of Artificial Intelligence in China.” *Theory, Culture & Society*.

“The Wandering Earth” I/II directed by Frant Gwo (2019)

Week 10:

Yasunari Kawabata (1996), *The Master of Go: A Novel*, Vintage.

Andrew Feenberg. 1994. “Alternative Modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 29, 107.

Keiji Nishitani, “Śūnyatā and Time” in *Religion and Nothingness*. 1st paperback print. Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture 2. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Press. 1983.

Week 11:

Ziauddin Sardar, “Islamic Science: The Contemporary Debate”

Arturo Escobar, “The Earth-Form of Life: Nasa Thought and the Limits to the Episteme of Modernity.”

David J. Hess. *Science in an Era of Globalization: Alternative Pathways*. The MIT Press, 2007.

Week 12: Student Presentation I

Week 13: Student Presentation II