

COMS 400 – Critical Theory Seminar W-5 Arts Building



General information

Fall 2023

Thursdays, 11:35 am-2:25 pm

Instructor information

Gustavo Ferreira, PhD. (he/him). You can call me Gustavo.

gustavo.ferreira@mcgill.ca

Office location / office hours: Arts W-233 / Thursday 3:00 - 4:30 pm – in-person or zoom (right after class or by appointment)

Communication plan: All course updates and official information will be posted on myCourses. You should check it for updates at least once a week. To book appointments, we will use a Calendly link available on myCourses. You can direct other private inquiries by email, and I will try to respond within 2 business days.

Course overview

This course builds on the foundations of critical social thought to engage students in intensive study of emerging and contemporary themes in social and cultural theory related to media and communication studies. We will give special emphasis to a historical overview of critical theories in communication and cultural studies from Latin America, while adding an exploration of current texts and debates on digital media, globalization, development, imperialism, colonialism, feminism and gender studies, and environmentalism.

The questions we will raise in this course relate to this wide overview of diverse sources on critical theory and communication studies. What kind of theoretical work we can develop when in contact with different histories of critical thought? What elements of Latin-American social thought can be employed to specific research interests in a global setting? To what kinds of new or refreshed concepts the media histories and analyses from the region contribute to a critical thinking that questions settler colonialism and other forms of oppression? How horizontal, participatory, and dialogical communication theories can contribute to environmental and social challenges?

Our goal is to add pluriversal perspectives to students' current interests and problematize communication studies in a mainly western(ized) setting.

Learning outcomes

- **Get familiarized** with the political economy and critical cultural studies developed in Latin America
- **Compare** elements of critical social thought of the western tradition to a Latin-American perspective
- **Reflect** and **Write** about the political economy of culture and across global, and in particular, American (the whole continent) regional dynamics.
- **Engage** with philosophical and theoretical social concepts through multimodal academic productions such as podcasts, video essays, group discussions, cultural and discursive analysis.

Instructional methods

- Student presentations
- Class discussions
- Short Lectures
- Small group discussions

Expectations for student participation

As a seminar, the course is built on the students' discussions. You need to read the material for each week and be prepared for talking in every class about the thoughts you have about the reading. So, the expectation is that you can engage in conversations, raise questions, and associate the readings to any topics of your interest when in class.

Class Conduct

When interacting with others, you should always be attentive to their well-being, use polite and non-aggressive language, justify your positions, and give sources of information.

When expressing opinions, always reflect on how your thoughts align with different realities and perspectives. In this course we value solidarity as a learning practice: Try to think and take your positions from a solidary position. Acknowledge how your context is affected and affects others. We are allowed to disagree, and we should understand that more than one thing can be true.

Required course materials

All required readings will be available online through McGill services: myCourses, Course Readings and Library or open access links.

Other materials such as videos and podcasts will be linked or referenced on myCourses.

Full information on materials can be found on the schedule below.

Optional course materials

Recommended Readings and other materials are listed alongside required materials on the schedule below.

Evaluation

Name of assignment or exam	Due date	% of final grade
1. Questions/Participation	5, 12, 26 Oct / 09 Nov	20%
1. Frameworks	28 Sep / 19 Oct / 2 Nov	30%
2. Presentation	16 Nov	20%
3. Theorizing	V1: 16 Nov / V2: 30 Nov	30%

Description of assignments

1. Questions/Participation

These assignments refer to comprehension and critical thinking about the readings. For a few weeks, you will have to post a few notes about the readings on myCourses that you intend to discuss with the group. These can be general thoughts you had during the reading, questions for us to discuss or clarify, examples you would like to share and so on. Beyond just posting them, the 20% grade will refer also to other modes of participation like:

- Being present and on time
- Contributing your thoughts in class
- Coming to office hours to discuss ideas and assignments.

2. Frameworks

These will be exercises in contextualizing, articulating theory and problematizing an object of study. The assignment consists of a 3-page, single space, 12-pt font document presenting a phenomenon to critically analyse, presenting a research/analysis question, and developing a theoretical framework (previous authors' ideas) with which you will perform your analysis. You will describe the phenomenon, present your goals with the study and how previous theories help you approach it or give you insight to frame your question. You should cite authors from the course, but you can also combine it with your own references. You will write one of these at each end of Parts 1, 2 and 3 and submit it on MyCourses. I will give brief feedback and we will have time to discuss it in class.

3. Presentation

Students will present one reading to the class and we are going to discuss how they reflect on current developments of critical theory and digital media today. You will read the material assigned to you, summarize it, and give details of how the authors engage with their topic. This is a short 10-15min presentation. The goal is to reflect on current issues and extract insights for your critical thinking and assignment. Criteria: quality of summary – relevance of details ability to present the central idea of the material; creativity or originality of the reflection about this central idea.

4. Theorizing

The final work will consist of a complete short essay, formatted as a conference paper, combining **one** of the previous framework and critical analysis of the media studies object. This step answers to your problematization by arguing an explanation for the phenomenon. As a critical theory analysis, our goal is to consistently theorize such media studies object's consequences, or goals, or power relations, based on the

data and previous theories. The full paper will have around 7 pages, single space, 12-pt, depending on style choices.

Course content

The course content is divided in 4 parts. Parts 1 and 2 are discussions on critical theoretical approaches to media and communication: Political Economy of global communication and Dialogical communication. The third part is a broader debate on society, epistemology and the environment based on the notion of decolonization. Finally, Part 4, provides a brief look into a specific object of study: digitalization and datafication. This organization relies on some fundamental concepts, but the topics relate to each other in various ways.

Part 1 – Development and Cultural Imperialism

Part 2 – Communication and Culture

- Communication as Dialogue
- Mediations
- Hybrid Cultures

Part 3 – Decolonization

- Decoloniality and Critique
- Indigenous and Feminist ecologies
- Buen Vivir vs. Development

Part 4 – Data and Algorithms

- Data Colonization
- Digital Media landscapes

Class Schedule and readings:

31-Aug-23

Week 1

Part 1 – Development and Cultural Imperialism

We will talk about critical theory, the course, and set up assignments.

Course Outline (this document)

Dorfman, Ariel and Mattelart, Armand (1975) *How to Read Donald Duck*. International General New York. p. 9-47

In class: Furtado, Jorge (1989) *Isle of Flowers*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQcdXh9v0pA> (Accessed 5 Aug 2023). **Short film.**

7-Sep-23

Week 2 – **(ONLINE)**

Part 1 – Development and Cultural Imperialism

A classic critique of cultural imperialism. I will be away for a conference. We will use our time to finish the first reading and watch Disney movies.

Dorfman, Ariel and Mattelart, Armand (1975) *How to Read Donald Duck*. International General New York. p. 49 to end

Jackson, Wilfred et al. (1942) *Saludos Amigos*. Available at: Disney + (Accessed 5 Aug 2023). **Film. 42m.**

Ferguson, Norman et al. (1944) *The three caballeros*. Available at: Disney + (Accessed 5 Aug 2023). **Film 71min.**

14-Sep-23

Week 3 - **(ONLINE)**

Part 1 – Diffusionism and Cultural Imperialism

Having read the whole Dorfman and Matterlart book and watched the movies. I will be away, but we will meet on zoom. We will meet to discuss the concepts of Cultural Imperialism and Diffusionism, their insights, and shortcomings.

Beltran, Luis Ramiro (1976) Alien Premises, Objects, and Methods in Latin American Communication Research. *Communication Research*, 3(2), 107-134.

21-Sep-23

Week 4 – **CANCELLED**

Part 1 – Development and Cultural Imperialism

Class is cancelled. We will make up for this week in parallel, autonomous work.

28-Sep-23

Week 5

Part 1 – Development and Cultural Imperialism

Modernization and Dependency on TV.

Straubhaar, Joseph; Santillana, Melissa; de Macedo Higgins Joyce, Vanessa; Duarte, Luiz Guilherme (2021) *From Telenovelas to Netflix: Transnational, Transverse Television in Latin America*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Chapter 4 – The persistence of the Popularity of US Television

Beltran, Luis Ramiro (1978) Tv Etchings in the Minds of Latin Americans: Conservatism, Materialism and Conformism. *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands)* 24(1): 61-85.

Due date: Frameworks 1

5-Oct-23

Week 6

Part 2 – Communication and Culture

Alternative to modernization and diffusionism: Dialogical Communication

Freire, Paulo (2015) *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London and New York: Continuum. Chapter: Extension or Communication (p. 83 to end)

Fernández-Aballí Altamirano, Ana (2020) The Importance of Paulo Freire to Communication for Development and Social Change. In: (ed) *Handbook of Communication for Development and Social Change*. Singapore: Springer Singapore: 309-327.

Post your notes and questions before class.

12-Oct-23

Week 7

Part 2 – Communication and Culture

Challenging Media centrism in the analysis of communication, culture, and hegemony

Martín-Barbero, Jesus (1993) *Communication, culture and Hegemony: from media to mediations*. London: SAGE Publications. Chapter 9 – The Methods: From Media to Mediations

Post your notes and questions before class.

19-Oct-23

Week 8

Part 2 – Communication and Culture

Challenging the divide “modernity / tradition” in Latin American culture.

Canclini, Néstor García (2001) *Hybrid cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Chapter 7 – Hybrid Cultures, Oblique Powers

Due date: Frameworks 2

26-Oct-23

Week 9

Part 3 – Decolonization

Decoloniality, epistemology, perspectives and critiques

Cusicanqui, Silvia Rivera (2012) *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization*. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(1): 95-109.

Potiguara, Eliane (1997) The Earth Is the Indian's Mother, Nhandecy. In: Warren, Karen J. (ed) *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 140-152.

Post your notes and questions before class.

2-Nov-23

Week 10

Part 3 – Decolonization

A Krenak critique of capitalist modernity

Krenak, Ailton (2023) *Life is not useful*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Due date: Frameworks 3

9-Nov-23

Week 11

Part 3 – Decolonization

Circling back on development, a decolonial proposal

Tanco, Eva González and Calderón, Carlos Arcila (2022) Buen Vivir as a Critique of Communication for Development. In: Miike, Yoshitaka and Yin, Jing (eds) *The Handbook of Global Interventions in Communication Theory*. New York: Routledge:

Baspineiro, Adalid Contreras (2021) Communication and Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir: In the Care of Our Common Home. In: Suzina, Ana Cristina (ed) *The Evolution of Popular Communication in Latin America*. Cham: Springer International Publishing: 209-228.

Post your notes and questions before class.

16-Nov-23

Week 12

Part 4 – Data and Algorithms

Our digital times, questions of imperialism, colonialism, and technologies

Presentations (tentative):

Tait, Márcia M., dos Reis Peron, Alcides Eduardo and Suárez, Marcela (2022) Terrestrial politics and body-territory: two concepts to make sense of digital colonialism in Latin America. *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 5(1):

Couldry, Nick and Mejias, Ulises A. (2019) Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject. *Television & New Media* 20(4): 336-349.

Sued, Gabriela Elisa; Castillo-González, María Concepción; Pedraza, Claudia; Flores-Márquez, Dorismilda; Álamo, Sofía; Ortiz, María; Lugo, Nohemí; Arroyo, Rosa Elba (2022) Vernacular Visibility and Algorithmic Resistance in the Public Expression of Latin American Feminism. *Media International Australia* 183(1): 60-76.

Treré, Emiliano and Milan, Stefania (2021) Latin American perspectives on datafication and artificial intelligence: Traditions, interventions and possibilities. *Palabra Clave* 24(3): 1-10.

Due date: Theorization Version 1

23-Nov-23

Week 13

Peer feedback

In groups, you will provide feedback on your classmates' essays.

30-Nov-23

Week 14

Due Date: Theorization Version 2

Language of submission of assignments

“In accord with McGill University’s [Charter of Students’ Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.” (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

« Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#) de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue. » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 21 janvier 2009)

Academic integrity

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#)” (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See [McGill's guide to academic honesty](#) for more information).

« L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon [le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et procédures disciplinaires](#) » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 29 janvier 2003) (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#).)