

Periodic report for MEVIT3520 Mediated Faces and Identities

Semester: Fall 2019

Course content (from course description)

In today's media-saturated societies, face-to-face human interaction is steadily losing ground to mediated communication, primarily through networked computers. The course explores the social implications of this shift, zooming in on questions relating to faces and identity formation. The face is approached as a screen mediating our relations to other people: as a sign of individual identity, vehicle of expression and marker of social identity and character. Broadcast and online media substantially add to the complexity of social processes, notably those related to group membership (large scale and subcultural), affecting the perception of others as well as our sense of self and belonging.

The course introduces key theoretical perspectives relating to the natural history, the cultural history and the politics of the face, all of which are intimately intertwined with the history of media. In addition, the course revisits a selection of classical concepts (the global village, imagined communities, the male gaze) that the students are invited to modify and update, making the concepts more suitable for analysing today's digital media landscape and current social realities.

These perspectives and concepts will be brought to bear on contemporary topics that centre around mediated faces and identities: from everyday self-representation and attempts to read other people's faces, via cultural stereotypes and changing norms of beauty and fitness, to prejudice, hate speech and aggression.

Learning outcome (from course description)

When you have completed the course, you are expected to be able to:

- Analyse the relationship between media, faces and identities in different settings and from different perspectives.
- Have an in-depth understanding of how and why media participate in processes of identity formation both at the individual and group level, including some of the social implications of this involvement.
- Review academic literature and communicate, analyse critically and assimilate theoretical concepts.

About the syllabus

The syllabus consisted of two books and a selection of articles. The books were Hans Belting's *Face and Mask: A Double History* (Princeton, 2017) and Jenny Edkins' *Face Politics* (Routledge, 2015). The students reported that the books were easy to read but that Belting's book especially had a lot of historical material that did not always feel relevant. I tend to agree, and will suggest that this book is replaced by another one. The 20 articles worked well for the most part, and all in all, the article part of the syllabus turned out to be more useful than the books.

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Teaching

The course was taught over an 8-week period. The teaching consisted of lectures, occasional film screenings and a series of six work-intensive workshops on the following topics:

- Reading faces, natural, cultural and social
- Mediated faces, icons and celebrities
- The global village, imagined communities
- The male gaze, gendered representations
- Self-representation, ideals of beauty and fitness
- Toxic online communities, hate speech and aggression

The students were required to come prepared and to participate fully in all workshop activities, which included discussions, various exercises and small presentations. They also had to pay attention to assigned readings prior to the workshops. The students generally fulfilled their requirements, came prepared, and overall the workshop format worked very well, allowing the student to participate in the teaching in an active way. The student reported that they liked the workshop format, which served to make them more engaged in the course topics.

One thing that worked particularly well, was the revisiting of a selection of classical theoretical concepts (McLuhan's "global village," Anderson's "imagined communities," and Mulvey's "male gaze"), which the students were invited to critically discuss and transform so as to make the concepts more suitable for analyzing today's digital media situation. The students appreciated this opportunity to participate in theory development and use concepts more actively than they have been used to in their previous studies on the bachelor's level.

The teaching was in English, and a large number of the students were visiting from other countries. The teaching took place in an ordinary seminar room. No special equipment was used. There were occasional group work sessions, but these took place in the seminar room, or in the common areas outside the seminar room. All teaching was conducted by the course supervisor, except a small presentation undertaken by a PhD student.

Examination

Take home exam over three days. The students could choose between two different assignments. The examination results came out very well: eight As, twelve Bs, six Cs, two Ds and one E.

Course description and goals

The description of the course (including the teaching goals) is accurate and works well.

Suggestions for changes

Parts of the syllabus need to be revised. I would suggest less focus on the face as such and more focus on the social identity, online community and gender topics, which seemed to

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engage the students the most. We touched on many dark topics that require careful treatment (eating disorders, suicide, online hate). Perhaps supplement with some lighter topics?

Things that worked

The workshop format and the students being asked to critically update classical concepts. Overall, the students were satisfied with the course, giving it a high rating in an informal student evaluation completed at the end of the course.