"Postmodernism ... indicate[s] a specific moment in history. It is a moment in which in-depth transformations of the system of economic production are also altering traditional social and symbolic structures. In the West, the shift away from manufacturing toward a service and information-based structures entails a global redistribution of labor, with the rest of the world and especially the developing countries providing most of the underpaid, offshore production. This shift entails the decline of traditional sociosymbolic systems ... [as] postmodernity corresponds to reorganization of capital accumulation in a transnational mobile manner. Given this new historical trend toward 'trans'-national mobility, it is imperative for critical theorists and cultural critics to rethink their situation and their practices within this scheme."— Rosi Braidotti

"Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of the 'real' America which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety; in its banal omnipresence which is carceral)."— Jean Baudrillard.

This graduate/advanced undergraduate seminar involves a critical sociological exploration of the historical emergence of postmodern and/or ultramodern forms of culture, power, and subjectivity. This involves a story of cybernetic feedback loops between people and machines. In particular, the seminar will focus on the relationship between new global capitalist technologies of power and the ritual organization of everyday life—materially and in the imaginary realm.

Over the course of the semester participants will be asked to meditate theoretically upon the historical transformation of modern/colonial forms of power into new ultramodern social formations and processes. Key to such inquiry is a critical examination of high-speed global technological networks of power. Such networks are today producing new types of subjective experience as well as objective mutations in human participation within nature. In what ways do cybernetic technologies extend and strengthen the power of modern/colonial social hierarchies of gender, race, sexuality, and class? In what ways might such new information technologies also challenge or subvert modern/colonial hierarchies, opening history to potentially more just forms of social life? What, moreover, is the relationship between postmodern (or ultramodern) practices of power and the production of social science knowledge? How adequate are the methods of contemporary sociology for making sense of the fascinating (if often fearful) forms of cybernetic power in which we today find ourselves in history? What innovations in theoretical methods and political strategies might be necessary to both interpret and intervene within new global formations of power? And in what ways, if any, are such new methods of knowledge and strategies of action capable of contributing to the construction of a more just and life affirming social order? Examining these and related questions will be a key aspect of the work of the seminar.
1. (Sept. 8) **Introduction: Death at the Parasite Cafe.**

"I am burning with desire to tell a story of the postmodern, of the society in which I find myself (k)notted in a complex network of informationally mediated relations to others. This is a story to counter-memorize or countermand what I take to be an emerging terroristic formation in HIStory—the postmodern—a new American Empire of the Senseless. Although this story passes through my body breathless, it is not mine alone. Nor am I entirely by myself in the re(w)ritings that become this text. No parasite is. Repeatedly."

"Come on, then." She took his hand. We'll get you a coffee and something to eat. Take you home. Its good to see you, man." She squeezed his hand. He smiled,
Something cracked.
Something at the core of things. The arcade froze, vibrated—
She was gone. The weight of memory came down, an entire body of knowledge was driven into his head like a microsoft into a socket. Gone. He smelled burning meat." — Stephen Pfohl, *Death and the Parasite Cafe* and William Gibson, *Neuromancer.*

2. (Sept. 15) **New Global Technologies of Capitalist Power.**

“Streamed culture [is] when capitalism has suddenly and irreversibly speeded up beyond necessary production, beyond definite consumption, achieving for the first time in financial history that long-sought state of economic … equilibrium: zero-time circulation of value in a new economy typified by the circulation of pure capital…. Here, just as Marx had prophesied in the *Communist Manifesto*, the unfettered movement of the commodity-form breaks beyond the strictly economic sphere to involve the market penetration of every dimension of human experience, from electronically mediated human subjectivity and processed (social) relations to the biogenetic engineering of human reproduction…. [With this] streamed capitalism announces … the global consolidation of multinational corporations into branded electronic networks, not domiciled in a fixed geographic location, but representative only of a strategic node in the circulation of digital capital.”

— Arthur Kroeker, *The Will to Technology*


supplementary reading:


3. (Sept. 22) Setting the Stage in History.

"In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searched through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not at all had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies.'—Don DeLillo, *White Noise*.


supplementary reading:


4. (Sept. 29) **Moving Subjects and Objects: Flows of Power, War, and Desire.**

"The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image."—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

“Postmodernism...is not just another word for the description of a particular style. It is also a periodicizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life of a new economic order—what is euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial, or consumer society, the society of the media or spectacle, or multinational capital."—Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society"


**supplementary reading:**


Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society," in *Selected Writings,* pp. 29-56.

5. (Oct. 6) From Modern (Gendered) Subjects to Postmodern Cyborgs.

"Our cyborg worlds extend from the military... to video games, to advertising, to home appliances, to the work-place, to 'defence' debates. In all those realms, the military information society not only defines the ruling order but also sets the terms for what counts as an effective opposition."—Les Levidow and Kevin Robins, *Cyborg Worlds*


supplementary reading:

[www.ctheory.net](http://www.ctheory.net) (explore this website)


Rosi Braidotti, "Organs Without Bodies," in *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 41-56.*


Scott Lash and John Urry, "Reflexive Subjects," in *Economies of Signs and Space*, pp. 31-59.

6. (Oct. 13) **Eating the Racialized Other of Modernity**

"The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling.... The 'real fun' is to be had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (and not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy."— bell hooks


**supplementary reading:**


7. (Oct. 20) **From the Haunts of Production to the Ecstasies of Consumption.**

"The logic of representation—of the duplication of its object—haunts all rational discursiveness. Every critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious religion, this desire bound up with the object, this negativity subtly haunted by the very form it negates."— Jean Baudrillard.


2. Stephen Pfohl, "A Story of the Eye/I" in *Death at the Parasite Cafe: Social Science (Fictions) and the Postmodern*, 59-103.**


supplementary reading:

Jean Baudrillard, "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign," in Selected Writings, pp. 57-97.


8. (Oct. 27) From Doubled Consciousness to Cybernetic Feedback.

"[The] most oppressive systems of power, including classical Western colonialism and proponents of globalization, all use the idea of social harmony as a control mechanism…. The drive for harmony … always lends itself to covert censorship and self-censorship. The tyranny of harmony, when pushed to the extreme, leads to a life of fantasy that shuts out reality… Positive psychology is only the latest incarnation of this assault on community and individualism.” — Chris Hedges, Empire of Illusions.


supplementary reading:


No class on Nov. 3 (Boston College classes canceled after 4 PM.)

9. (Nov. 10) Flexible Reconfigurations of Power and Catastrophe.

"Who can now speak with confidence of the future of a postmodern scene when what is truly fascinating is the thrill of catastrophe, and where what drives onward economy, politics, culture, sex, and even eating is not the will to accumulation or the search for lost coherencies, but just the opposite—the ecstatic implosion of modern culture into excess, waste, and disaccumulation. When technology of quantum order produces human beings who are part-metal and part-flesh, when robo-beings constitute the growing majority of a western culture which fulfills then exceeds, Weber's grim prophecy of the coming of an age of 'specialists without spirit', and when chip technology finally makes possible the fateful fusion of molecular biology and technique: then ours is genuinely a postmodern condition marked by the deepest and most pathological symptoms of nihilism."—Arthur Kroker and David Cook, The Postmodern Scene

1. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," October 59 (Winter 1994), pp. 3-7.**


suplementary reading:


10. (Nov. 17) The Fate of Whose Bodies in Ultramodernity?

"They see death everywhere.... They think solely of the fact that they live surrounded by vipers, tigers and cannibals. Their imaginations are constantly struck by the idea of death as figured by these images of the wild and the only way they could live in such a world...was by themselves inspiring terror."—Michael Taussig


supplementary reading:

Sadie Plant, "Victory will be for those who create disorder without loving it," in The Most Radical Gesture, pp. 111-149


"Jean Baudrillard is the theorist of nihilism as the fate of postmodernity.... a theorist of the
cynical commodity. What makes Baudrillard so dangerous, allowing him to put Nietzsche
into play as the doppelganger of Marx's Capital, is that he writes from that point where the
commodity-form, abandoning its historical association with the simulacra of concrete labor,
reveals itself for what it always was: a transparent sign-system that traces out in the curved
space of political economy (and of consumer culture) the implosive, disaccumulative, and
seductive cycle of postmodern power."— Arthur Kroker, "Baudrillard's Marx."


2. Teresa Brennan, “Production and Real Value,” in Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New
Economy, pp. 105-117.

3. Marshall Berman, “Chapter 5: Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics,” pp. 133-152; and


5. Tricia Rose, "Voices from the Margins," and "'All Aboard the Night Train: Flow, Layering
and Rupture in Postindustrial New York," in Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in


Supplementary Reading:

Arthur Kroker, "Baudrillard's Marx," in Arthur Kroker and David Cook, The Postmodern Scene,

Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker and David Cook, "Panic USA," Social Problems, Vol. 37, No. 4
(November 1990), pp. 443-459.

Stephen Pfohl, "Welcome to the Parasite Cafe: Postmodernity as a Social Problem," Social

(November 1990), pp. 460-484.

Rosi Braidotti, "Re-figuring the Subject," in Nomadic Subjects, pp. 95-110.

12. (Dec. 8) Resituating Postmodern Knowledges.

"'Our' problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency
for all claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic
technologies' for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faith accounts of a
'real' world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite
freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited
happiness."— Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."


**Supplementary Reading:**


13. (Dec. 10) **Countering the Cold Passions of Ultramodern Power.**

"Developing a style nobody can deal with—a style that cannot be easily understood or erased, a style that has the reflexivity to create counter-dominant narratives against a mobile and shifting enemy—may be one of the most effective ways to fortify communities of resistance and simultaneously receive the right to communicate pleasure."— Tricia Rose, *Black Noise.*


Supplementary Reading:

Sadie Plant, "Flee, but while fleeing, pick up a weapon,” in The Most Radical Gesture, pp. 150-187.


Course Requirements:
This is an advanced reading and writing seminar. Participants taking the course for credit will be asked to read and actively discuss assigned course materials, serve as periodic leaders of seminar discussion, and to complete the following assignments. (10% of course grade) Auditors are welcome.

(1) Each participant is to produce two short 4-5 double-spaced page essays addressing issues raised by particular sets of assigned readings and seminar themes. First essay is due no later than October 27. (Each essay is 20% of course grade.) The second essay must be submitted no later than December 10th.

(2) Each participant is to produce one approximately 20 double-spaced page term paper involving a theoretical investigation of a particular aspect of postmodern society. Papers must engage explicitly with materials assigned for this particular seminar. Short (1-2 page) paper proposals are due in class on October 13. A working draft of this text is to be presented as part of the collective work of the seminar. (Term paper is 50% of course grade.) Due: Monday, December 19th, 5 PM.