
Philosophical Arguments in Traditional vs Non-Traditional Media

Coordinators: Daniel Munro & Konstantin Prodanovic

Sponsor: Christina Hendricks

Course Overview

This course's content will be situated between two disciplines: Philosophy and English. In particular within these disciplines, readings will explore contemporary issues in analytic metaphysics, and in media theory. We would like to investigate how the medium through which philosophical arguments are presented impacts how they are received and understood. To do this, we will study a range of philosophical arguments presented in traditional academic media, to ensure students have a depth of understanding of these arguments. We will then study arguments on the same philosophical topics but presented in other, less traditional media. Throughout, these will be combined with readings in media theory, to allow students to analyze the form in which the philosophical content is presented, both traditional and non-traditional. We thus hope to study traditional academic formats as foundational, fundamental ways of delivering content, while investigating how these can be transformed, and what is gained and lost in these transformations.

We chose to focus on contemporary analytic philosophy for several reasons. First of all, analytic philosophy is a field in which students are trained to craft logical, unambiguous arguments. Because of this attention to argument form, we are interested in critically investigating how alternative presentations of arguments affects their reception by readers. We also chose this area of Philosophy to fill what we feel is an existing gap in UBC courses: it is easier to find courses that study representations of other ideas from areas of Philosophy (e.g. Continental Philosophy, Political Philosophy) in formats other than traditional essays (e.g. in literature), but less so in the case of analytic Philosophy.

We also believe it is important to use media theory as critical lens in virtually all areas of contemporary academia. This is because, more and more often, scholars are presenting arguments in formats other than just the essay and lecture: in particular, a move towards a "digital" society means that students and scholars in the humanities are maneuvering between different disciplines in order to produce material that is relevant and accessible to wider audiences. It is thus important both for students to learn in a hands-on way how to work within these various types of media, as well as to critically engage with how these impact our understanding of scholarly work.

We would like this course to take on the nature of a collaboration between peers to investigate this topic. Since this is not touched on very much in the context of current Philosophy courses at UBC, we hope it will be a novel experience for all students in the course, including the coordinators. More detail about how we hope to facilitate peer collaboration can be found in the draft syllabus below.

While this course is interdisciplinary between Philosophy and Media Theory, it can be seen as mainly a course in "Metaphilosophy" since it is ultimately focused on methods of delivering philosophical content. We have therefore submitted our proposal to the Philosophy department in order to obtain a "PHIL" course code, and it has received the department's approval for this.

Targeting Students

We hope to draw students mainly from Philosophy and English, but the course will also be accessible to students interested in interdisciplinary approaches to the humanities. The course intends to give students an opportunity to delve more into whatever side of the material they are interested in through the flexible final project. We also hope for high demand from both the department of Philosophy and English to ensure we have a rich range of perspectives. The course is geared towards people interested in study of interdisciplinarity within these departments. The Prerequisites will be 6 credits of Philosophy at 200 level OR 6 credits of English at 200 level and a minimum 3rd year standing. These prerequisites ensure that we have a mix of people with a sufficient background/level of expertise in both areas of the course. In order to ensure we find the most interested students, we hope to “market” this course in various ways: by advertising it through means like classroom announcements in Philosophy and English classes, especially to students in each Honours program; as well as through our personal connections to the Philosophy and English Students Associations.

About the Coordinators

Kosta: Within the classroom I have focused on taking an interdisciplinary approach to my Honours English degree. I have taken many classes with multimedia elements and larger final projects similar to the one listed in this proposal. My leadership experience directing CiTR radio’s news department has made me an effective communicator. I intend to bring these skills to my role as coordinator.

I hope to build on my leadership experience and explore potential research pathways for post-graduate studies. This seminar will allow me the opportunity to experiment with academic points of interest which I hope to engage with further as I go on in my academic career.

Daniel: As an Honours Philosophy major, I have a wide range of experience in Philosophy at UBC, and I am particularly interested in topics like those proposed for this course. I also have various leadership experience at UBC, which has helped me develop skills like project management, student engagement, and team coordination; I hope these will be of use in my role as an SDS facilitator.

I hope to further develop my academic research skills by engaging in an investigative project with peer collaborators over the course of a term. I am also very interested generally in critical examination of innovative methods for delivering content in the classroom. This seminar will allow me to explore that interest in the context of my own academic program.

As seminar coordinators the biggest challenge will be balancing our role as course directors with our place as peers and contributors. We intend to maneuver this by focusing on encouraging open discussion and engaging the rest of the class in the structure and makeup of the course itself, as described in the syllabus below. One specific difficulty we predict may arise is in the case that students are unhappy with grades and marking on peer-graded components of the course. If such cases arise, we plan to work closely under our faculty sponsor’s guidance to mediate them. To pre-empt this, we will also ask our faculty sponsor to give the class an overview on effective grading practices, giving constructive feedback, etc.

The key to sharing responsibility will be communicating openly with one another. Because the seminar is divided into two academic streams (philosophy and media theory) we will each be in charge of managing one of those streams. The intersections between the two will be analyzed during open discussions, which we will take equal

responsibility guiding. We have worked together on multiple occasions in the past, including within classroom settings and professionally as research assistants.

Proposed Syllabus

Syllabus subject to change based on discussion in class at beginning of the term

Course Meets: Once a week for 3hrs

Preferred Meeting Place: Buchanan Buildings

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignments, Approximate Weighting, and Method of Evaluation

- Participation: 15%; Peer-Evaluated (evaluated by all classmates)
- Presentation on topic of the week + leading class discussion (1 per student): 30%; Peer Evaluated (evaluated by all classmates)
- Proposal for Final Project or Paper: 15%; Evaluated by Faculty Sponsor
- Final Project or Paper (including presentation on last day of class): 40%; Peer-Evaluated (evaluated by classmates in smaller groups)

Rationale for Assignments and Evaluations

This course plan is meant to capture the peer-led, collaborative nature of the Student Directed Seminar in several ways. While the weighting of assignments above is suggested by the coordinators, all students will have a chance to weigh in on this at the beginning of the term, as well as in determining assignment due dates. There is also a range of peer-led components in this course, including formal presentations by each student on a week's topic, and leading discussion based on that presentation. We have also included peer evaluation components for almost all aspects of evaluation, save for the project or paper proposal (see below).

Final Project or Paper

This project is meant to give students self-directed flexibility in pursuing aspects of the course in which they are most interested. It can take the form of either a more hands-on, multimedia project or a final paper. Students more interested in practicing hands-on, multimedia experience can choose a final project in which they represent a philosophical argument in a medium besides the traditional academic paper (much like some of the representations we will be studying in the course). If students opt for this, they should ensure their project is informed by research in both philosophy and media theory. It should be accompanied by a short paper demonstrating this research, as well as self-reflecting on the way the chosen medium of expression is meant to impact the way the argument is received. Students who are more interested in theory and research than in creating a hands-on project can opt to work on a final paper instead. This should be a longer, research-based term paper like one would typically encounter in upper-level Arts courses. Papers should make an argument that incorporates both major themes of this course.

Students will submit proposals (approx. 2 pages) for final projects or papers approximately one month before the end of the term, to ensure students are engaging in this process throughout the term and that their final projects

reflect this in rigour and quality. We will also ensure this quality is present early on and that students are on the right track by having these proposals evaluated by our faculty sponsor.

Reading Schedule

On an individual level, readings from both Philosophy and Media Theory have been selected to be interesting and accessible to students without a large depth of background knowledge, but also because the issues they pose then lend themselves to deeper, more technical exploration at an upper year level once a basic grasp has been achieved. There will be opportunities for this deeper exploration in class once students have together worked out a basic understanding, and students can choose to explore select issues even further on their own through their presentations and final projects.

Besides Week 1 (introductory discussion) and Weeks 2-3 (examining traditional academic formats), the reading schedule will proceed in two week cycles. Each two week cycle will have approximately three readings: one Philosophical, one Media Theory, and one “combined” that draws from the previous two. The first of the two weeks will be mainly focused on familiarizing students with a philosophical argument, presented in a traditional essay format; the next week will investigate how the same philosophical argument is received when represented in a non-traditional format. These two week cycles are also grouped into broader “themes.”

Proposed Class and Reading Schedule

Week 1

Introduction: discussion on and finalization of course structure, evaluation scheme, etc.

Weeks 2-3

Philosophical Theme: Philosophy of Time Travel

Media Theory Theme: Traditional Academic Genres

Combined Investigation: How do the forms of “traditional” academic genres of the essay and lecture function to present philosophical arguments?

Week 2: Possibility of Time Travel + the Essay

- Media Theory Reading: Marshal McLuhan “The Medium is the Message”
- Combined Philosophy + Media Reading: David Lewis’ “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”:

Week 3: Possibility of Time Travel + the Lecture

- Media Theory Reading: Walter Ong “Orality and Literacy”
- Combined Philosophy + Media Reading: Ned Markosian Lecture “Theories of Time: Is Time Travel Possible?” (Youtube)

Weeks 4-7

Philosophical Theme: Nature of the Mind

Media Theory Theme: Digital Media

Combined Investigation: How does presenting philosophical arguments in online media formats impact the way an audience receives them, as compared to the essay and lecture?

- Media Theory Reading: Michael Harris “The End of Absence” (selections)

Weeks 4-5: Intro to issues in Philosophy of Mind + Collective Blogging

- Philosophy Reading: Frank Jackson’s “Epiphenomenal Qualia”
- Media Theory Reading: Michael Harris “The End of Absence” (Cont.)
- Combined Philosophy + Media Theory Reading: Wikipedia entry, “Knowledge Argument”

Weeks 6-7: Artificial Intelligence + Podcasts

- Philosophy reading: John Searle’s “Minds, Brains, and Programs”
- Media Theory Reading: Robert MacDougall’s “Our New Aural Ecologies; Podcasting, Publicity and Secondary Orality”
- Combined Philosophy + Media Theory Reading: *Philosophy Bites* Podcast, “Daniel Dennett on the Chinese Room”

Weeks 8-11

Philosophical Theme: Ontology

Media Theory Theme: Fiction

Combined Investigation: How do representations of philosophical ideas in works of fiction help or hinder the way they are received and understood? How do these representations in these media differ than other, more traditional media we’ve considered, in which arguments are presented in a more straightforward manner?

Weeks 8-9: Nature of External World + Film

- Philosophy reading: David Chalmers’ “The Matrix as Metaphysics”
- Media Theory Reading: Linda Hutcheon “A Theory of Adaption” (Chapters 1 & 2)
- Combined Philosophy + Media Reading: *The Matrix*

Weeks 10-11: Reality of Fictional Characters + Literary Fiction

- Philosophy Reading: Amie Thomasson’s “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices”
- Media Theory Reading: Peter Lamarque “Truth, Fiction and Literature” (Selections)
- Combined Philosophy + Media Reading: Amie Thomasson’s “I’m Glad I’m Not Real”

Weeks 12-13

Final Projects

Week 12: Class time to work on and workshop final projects with classmates

Weeks 13: In-class presentation of final projects

- (if number of students does not permit scheduling all presentations during this day, an additional meeting may have to be scheduled)