

Senior Seminar Topics 2024-2025

Juliette Dube

Abstract: Film criticism is a powerful art form that has been a staple of American culture for over a century. Transforming their opinions into riveting works of writing, critics subtly shape film culture and history with their authority. The scorn or praise of a talented critic can make or break a movie. Additionally, engaging with criticism fosters the ability to think critically, not just about art, but about our lives and our world—a skill that is absolutely crucial to our democracy. It seems only natural that in a society dominated by digital interaction, film criticism has largely shifted to online spaces as opposed to print newspapers and magazines. In the past few years, the loudest voices in film criticism have become those of TikTok influencers, X users, YouTubers, Reddit posters, and the infamous Rotten Tomatoes' Tomatometer. Seldom do moviegoers, even self-proclaimed cinephiles, consult the work of trained, professional critics at traditional publications. This is cause for concern. Social media and the internet promote simplistic, reactionary, and biased movie reviews, which has negatively impacted the artistic production of film criticism, and the way moviegoers interact with it. These trends also reflect our country's broader contemporary culture, which promotes prejudice and ignorance while rejecting intellectualism and expertise.

Jacob Mejia Levy

Thesis Abstract: I completed my thesis in the fall of 2024. It centered on Marvel movies as I am big fan of anything relating to superheroes. Since the early 2000s, superhero movies have had a large presence in the film industry. The MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) has made more money than any other franchise.

Not everyone likes Marvel movies, but it can't be denied that these films have a massive cultural impact, especially in terms of diversity. The company has made a lot of mistakes when it comes to diversity, but it has had some successes, too. This thesis includes the history of Marvel Studios since its inception. Through the use of case studies on Black Panther (2018), Captain Marvel (2019), and Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018), I argue that racial and gender representation in Marvel films matters because the entertainment company (no matter what studio makes the films) has a responsibility to make projects that appeal to and include people besides white men. Marvel needs to be held accountable for this, especially with its popularity and as the highest-grossing franchise of all time. These characters don't have to be only white men. The films' themes, their box office revenue, and critical reviews are just some of the evidence I use to support my thesis. I conclude with how it is incredible that many young girls and boys of color get to see themselves in these superheroes. They get to learn that they should be proud of what makes them different.

Anna Paul

Thesis abstract: "Critics of higher education often point to the growing transactional and credentialist approach to educational attainment, which prioritizes high grade, degrees and credentials over intellectual growth and critical inquiry. This trend, exacerbated by the rising cost of college, has coincided with a broader cultural shift toward anti-intellectualism. How are people working within higher education to improve these systemic flaws and cultural skepticism? This project reviews literature on critical pedagogy, which serves as a theoretical basis for its argument. Then, it examines how higher education is portrayed in American media through discourse analysis. Finally, the project details existing pedagogical partnerships, analyzing how these programs encourage intellectual engagement, growth and questioning. By outlining the problems frequently raised about the system of higher education, along with the methods of pedagogical partnership programs, such as Allies in Learning and Teaching (ALT), the project argues that higher education is not broken but in need of meaningful, localized, student-led reform."

Ezra Shamy

Abstract: In the past twenty years, newspapers across the country have been vanishing, creating "news deserts," which are vast regions that do not receive any consistent news coverage. The necessity for localized news can only be understood by looking at what happens to a community that does not have access to news of its own. In this thesis, Georgia, Vermont, is used as a case study to observe community members' response to a local political scandal in a news desert. The town Facebook group, which became a sounding board for all opinions on the issue, reveals much about the quality and abilities of untrained citizens to fill the role of journalists in a town that has none. I define the necessity for journalism through two key arguments: the authority of facts and the authentication of facts, and then analyze the situation in Georgia through the presence (or lack thereof) of these factors. This thesis argues that the scrutinizing role news has over the governments it covers, along with the strong voice of a newspaper's positionality, has a strong effect on a community's sense of trust in their elected officials and local government.

Catie Hamilton

Thesis: The HIV-AIDS epidemic erupted in the United States in the early 1980s, devastating gay communities in places like New York and California. Initially, the American public panicked while the United States government stayed mostly silent in response to the mounting crisis, contributing to intense stigma surrounding the virus. Early on, AIDS activist groups publicly mobilized, conducting public demonstrations with a focus on ending the epidemic through scientific research and the discovery of new medications. Today, HIV overwhelmingly infects gay Black and Latino men in the Southeastern United States. This is due to social inequalities such as America's flawed healthcare system, institutionalized racism, and poverty. In this paper, I argue that we must look to the past and examine our present society to understand why gay men

of color in the Southeastern United States continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV while other populations are not.

A'Myilah Wright

Thesis, titled “Black Women’s User Experience of Artificial Intelligence,” explores how algorithmic systems, especially in areas like online dating, facial recognition, and predictive policing, negatively impact Black women due to embedded biases and systemic discrimination in AI design and data. A'Myilah investigates how these technologies reproduce structural inequalities and calls for more inclusive AI development. Her favorite American Studies course has been Black Feminist Thought, which deeply shaped her critical lens. Outside of class, she has contributed to the Black Panther archives in the Black studies department.

Cory Derzon-Supplee

Thesis abstract: The legacy of exploration narratives in America is the demonstration of how wilderness travel can push people to develop leadership and analytical skills, an appreciation of nature, humility, adaptability, perseverance, and the ability to form meaningful relationships.

Grace O'Keefe

Thesis abstract: I wrote about how popular musical critiques of American violence are actually criticizing the capitalistic system that is ingrained into American society. I chose to examine songs from the 1980s, as this was an age of cultural excess and simultaneously saw the emergence of global charity rock.

Kayla Moody

Thesis abstract: The Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937) was and remains a beacon of creative liberation for Black people in America. This period demonstrates the importance of artistic creation and curation as liberatory practices during the Black community’s plight in the Jim Crow Era. Its successes and eventual end inform the importance of reviving collective creativity within the African American community today. Through an analysis of the New Negro Movement and two exhibitions on visual culture of the Harlem Renaissance, Black creative expression is revealed to combat racial injustice, and present-day practices of exclusion within art museums.