

Studies in digital media & culture

Oct 18, 2026



Joshua Citarella and Caroline Busta, *The Online Marketplace of Ideas* (2026)

🔗 VM303-01 ▾

School of Film, Television, & Media Arts

Emerson College

Fall Semester 2026

Tues/Thur 3 Sept-17 Dec 2026

18:00-19:45

Ansin Building 605

Dr. Martin Roberts

Office: 916D

Hours: Tues 16:00-17:00

PDF syllabus Web syllabus

YouTube playlist

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Overview

The theme of this semester is **Lost Futures**. Rather than speculating *about* the future of digital media culture in the usual futurist fashion, we will look instead at contemporary writings *from* the future of digital media about its history over the past thirty years, the unexpected and even unlikely directions that it has taken, the failure of its expected futures to arrive, and the reasons for this. This historical perspective should serve as a corrective to both the utopian and dystopian futures predicted in our present, and the limited horizons of speculative futurism itself. The course is thus intended as a kind of letter to the future, a digital time capsule: it's designed so that five, ten, or fifteen years from now, we can look at the syllabus and ask ourselves: what did the future mean to us, back then? Not the future that we **could have had**, but the future that we **will have had**.

A key component of the course this semester is the Open Source software movement and Open Education Resources (OER). These are online academic and other resources that are not behind paywalls, have Creative Commons licenses, and/or are free to use. We will examine what these licenses are and how to use them in your own workflows for publishing your work

online. We will also consider how the open-source model works (if at all) for the current generation of commercial AI agents such as Claude Code, Hermes, etc., and explore open-source, local (i.e. running on a local server on your own machine, not cloud-based) alternatives to them. A series of workshops will show you how to set up such a system on your own computer using OpenCode that uses either a local or cloud-based model.

Format

This is primarily a critical-thinking course, although it includes a practical and production component. This means that it encourages you to think reflexively and analytically about the digitally-mediated cultural practices that the course considers, as well as to participate in them; for example, you will be invited to experiment with image-synthesis and text-generating software and analyze the results using key concepts and theoretical frameworks.

Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will:

- have acquired a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of digital technologies and networked communication;
- be able to apply critical thinking to contemporary developments in digital culture using relevant analytical concepts and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies such as cultural analytics;
- understand basic principles of algorithmic image synthesis on a variety of platforms;
- have reflected upon and discussed the larger significance of machine learning systems within global networked societies.

- have acquired an understanding of the history of the Open Source software movement, peer-to-peer networking alternatives to commercial providers and platforms, the use of Creative Commons licenses and Open Education Resources (OER).

Course Texts

Selected chapters from the texts below will be made available as PDFs; you are nevertheless encouraged to purchase at least several of texts that are of interest and read more of them.

Note on formats: A number of texts listed in the Bibliography are available as e-books and/or audiobooks. You are encouraged to make use not only of print media but also of these screen-based and audio formats.

A: Audiobook

E: Ebook

- Benedikt Gross, Hartmut Bohnacker, Julia Laub, and Claudius Lazzeroni, Generative Design. New York: PA Press, 2018.
- A/E: Freya India, GIRLS®: Generation Z and the Commodification of Everything. New York: MacMillan Books, 2026.
- A/E: Kazuo Ishiguro, Klara and the Sun. London: Penguin Random House, 2021.
- Christopher Kelty, The Internet We Could Have Had. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2026)
- E: Bogna Konior, The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2026. This text is available as an e-book on the Polity Press website.
- ---, The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet. Pittsburg and New York: Flugschriften, 2020.
- E: Trevor Paglen, How To See Like A Machine. New York: Verso, 2026.
- E: Hito Steyerl, Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat. London: Verso, 2026.

Assignments & Evaluation

Commentary (weekly discussion posts) (20%)

Two Commentary posts on Canvas each week, commenting on or asking questions about reading and/or screening assignments. A minimum of twenty weekly posts (minimum two per week over ten weeks) is required.

Your first post should engage directly with reading and/or screening assignments for the week in question: what topics or points did you find particularly intriguing? What is the author's argument as you understand it? Do you need clarification on the meaning of particular terms? What other sources are relevant to the reading or media in question?

NB: Engage with the assigned source. That is, avoid simply using it as a jumping-off point for something else that it reminded you of, unless this is directly relevant to it.

The weekly posting schedule runs for one week from Tuesday to the following Tuesday. Please make your first post before the Tuesday class if possible, and no later than Thursday of the week in question. The second follow-up post should respond either to someone else's comment or should engage with topics and issues raised during class meetings.

Keywords (20%)

250-500-word contribution to Glossary of Key Terms in contemporary digital media culture. Due mid-semester.

Generative Art (20%)

Using one of the generative art platforms focused on in the course, submit one work that was generated using one of these systems. Images may be still or moving (e.g. animations, GIF loops, etc.). Due week after Thanksgiving

Open Education Resources (OER)/OpenCode Research Assignment (25%)

Further details will be provided. 1,250-1,500 words. Due last week of classes.

Engagement (15%)

Includes attendance, punctuality

Schedule of Classes

Week 1

09-02_Thur

Introduction: Remembering The Future

Week 2

Remembering the Internet

09-08_Tues

09-10_Thur

- Mark Fisher, "The slow cancellation of the future" in (*Ghosts of My Life*)
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Week 3

Hidden Agendas

09-15_Tues

Bogna Konior, *The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet* (read at least this short version; chapters from the longer book will also be provided)

09-17_Thur

Week 4

Hidden Agendas (cont.)

09-22_Tues

Bogna Konior, *The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet*:

- "Introduction"
- "The Dark Forest Theory of Information" (ch. 1)
- "The Dark Forest Theory of Intelligence" (ch. 2) (optional)

Ann Elias et al, "Introduction

" (*Camouflage Cultures: Beyond the Art of Disappearance*)

Trevor Paglen, "Invisible Images: Your Pictures Are Looking At You" (*The New Inquiry*), 8 December 2016)

09-24_Thur

Kari Paul, "How to Disappear: The Rise of Anti-Surveillance Fashion" (*Mozilla Foundation*, 24 November 2025)

See also: Torin Monahan, "The Right to Hide? Anti-Surveillance Camouflage and the Aestheticization of Resistance"

Week 5

Talking to Algorithms

09-29_Tues

- Taylor Lorenz, "Internet 'algospeak' is changing our language in real time, from 'nip nops' to 'le dollar bean'" (*Washington Post*, 8 April 2022)
- Emma Madden, "More Typos, Fewer Em Dashes: Writers Are Creating an Anti-AI 'Literary Counterculture'" (*WIRED*, 29 July 2026) [pdf]

10-01_Thur

Adam Aleksic, *Algospeak* (read Intro and chs. 1-2)

- "Introduction"
 - "How to Play Linguistic Whac-A-Mole" (ch. 1)
 - "Sticking Out Your Gyat For The Rizzler" (ch. 2) (NB: chapters 1-2 are a single PDF)
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Week 6

Retro-Futurism

10-06_Tues

- F.T. Marinetti, Futurist Manifesto
- Valentine de Saint Point, Manifesto of the Futurist Woman
- Simon Denny, "Epic Fury: The Dark Art of Defence Tech" (*Artforum*, 20 April 2026)

10-08_Thur

- Mark Andreessen, "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto" (2023)
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Week 7

Model Collapse

10-13_Tues

- Ted Chiang, "ChatGPT Is A Blurry JPEG of the Web" (*The New Yorker*, 9 February 2023)

10-15_Thur

Week 8

Sinofuturism

10-20_Tues

- Lawrence Lek, Sinofuturism website
- Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai*
- Jeroen de Kloet and Yiu Fai Chow, "Shanzhai Culture, Dafen Art, and Copyrights"

10-22_Thur

Artificial Companions

- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (read at least the first section)
 - Screening: *After Yang* (kogonada, 2021)
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Week 9

Generative Art: Creative Coding

10-27_Tues

- Benedikt Gross, Hartmut Bohnacker, Julia Laub, and Claudius Lazzeroni, Generative Design

10-29_Thur

Datamoshing & Diffusion

Week 10

11-03_Tues

Operational Images: Sensing and Object Detection

- Jussi Parikka, *Operational Images*
- Trevor Paglen, "Invisible Images" (*How To See Like A Machine*, ch. 1)

11-05_Thur

The Online Marketplace of Art: Cryptoart



NFT art: Humdrum, "praying in the wrong language" (22 July 2025)

Current price: \$62.18 (100.00 ₺)

Week 11

Poor Images: Post-Internet Aesthetics

11-10_Tues

- Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of Poor Images"
- Hito Steyerl, *Medium Hot* (chs. TBA)

11-12_Thur

- Hadi Afif, "Cross-Sectioning the slop: Notes on Internet cinema" (DAZED Middle East, 20 April 2026)
- Anika Meier, "The AI Slop of Pierre Huyghe" (Substack, 23 January 2026)

- "Will AI Slop and Deep Fakes Kill Culture?" (panel discussion with Caroline Busta)
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Week 12

Playable Worlds: Spatial Intelligence

11-17_Tues

- Fei Fei Li, "From Words to Worlds: Spatial Intelligence is AI's Next Frontier" (World Labs, 10 November 2025)
- "Atlas: A World Model for Spatial Intelligence" (World Labs, 1 September 2026)
- "Marble: A Multimodal World Model" (World Labs, 12 November 2025)

11-19_Thur

- "3D As Code" (World Labs, 3 March 2026)
 - "A Functional Taxonomy of World Models" (World Labs, 3 June 2026)
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Week 13

11-24_Tues

Marble/Atlas workshop

11-26_Thur: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

Week 14

12-01_Tues

Presentations: OER Resarch Projects

12-03_Thur

Presentations: OER Research Projects

Week 15

12-08_Tues

Presentations: Creative Projects

12-10_Thur

Presentations: Creative Projects

Week 16

12-15_Tues

Conclusion

12-17_Thur

Last day of classes

Policies

Academic Honesty

It is the responsibility of all Emerson students to know and adhere to the College's policy on plagiarism, which can be found at emerson.edu/policies/plagiarism. If you have any question concerning the Emerson plagiarism policy or about documentation of sources in work you produce in this course, speak to your instructor.

Diversity

Every student in this class will be honored and respected as an individual with distinct experiences, talents, and backgrounds. Issues

of diversity may be a part of class discussion, assigned material, and projects. The instructor will make every effort to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with the course instructor or to contact the Social Justice Center at 617-824-8528 or by email at sjc@emerson.edu.

Discrimination, Harassment, or Sexual Violence

If you have been impacted by discrimination, harassment, or sexual violence, I am available to support you, and help direct you to available resources on and off campus. Additionally, the Office of Equal Opportunity (oeo@emerson.edu; 617-824-8999) is available to meet with you and discuss options to address concerns and to provide you with support resources. Please note that because I am an Emerson employee, any information shared with me related to discrimination, harassment, or sexual violence will also be shared with the Office of Equal Opportunity. If you would like to speak with someone confidentially, please contact the Healing & Advocacy Collective, the Emerson Wellness Center, or the Center for Spiritual Life.

Accessibility

Emerson is committed to providing equal access and support to all students who qualify through the provision of reasonable accommodations, so that each student may fully participate in the Emerson experience. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at SAS@emerson.edu or 617-824-8592 to make an appointment with an SAS staff member.

Students are encouraged to contact SAS early in the semester. Please be aware that accommodations are not applied retroactively.

Writing & Academic Resource Center

Students are encouraged to visit and utilize the staff and resources of Emerson's Writing Center, particularly if they are struggling with

written assignments. The Writing Center is located at 216 Tremont Street on the 5th floor (tel. 617-824-7874).

In-Class Recording

Regardless of modality or whether this course is being recorded by the College with the permission of the students for classroom purposes, this class is considered a private environment and it is a setting in which copyrighted materials, creative works and educational records may be displayed. Audio or video recording, filming, photographing, viewing, transmitting, producing or publishing the image or voice of another person or that person's materials, creative works or educational records without the person's knowledge and expressed consent is strictly prohibited.